

A Very Brief History of the 1950s

- The end of WWII was a time of great pride in America at the victories achieved in both Europe and the Pacific.
- Internationally the U.S. entered into a cold war with the Soviet Union as Winston Churchill proclaimed an **Iron Curtain** had descended upon Europe.
- China turned to communism and internationally the U.S. took the position of containment trying to prevent the further spread of communism.
- President Truman proclaimed the **Truman Doctrine** and America looked to help nations with aid in fighting communism

- In June of 1950, the Korean War erupted as the U.S. looked to fight to contain communism.
- At home, a Red Scare took hold of America as **Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee** investigated what was believed to be communist subversion in the country.
- Several high profile spies were captured including **Alger Hiss, and Julius and Ethel Rosenberg** that later two were accused of passing along the secret of the nuclear bomb to the Soviet Union.

- The Nation Expanded with the passage of the **Federal Highway Act** that created the interstate highway system.
- **Alaska and Hawaii** were added to the U.S. as states.
- The U.S. entered into an **arms race and a space race** with the Soviet Union.
- The **French** suffered defeats in the Southeast Asian country of **Vietnam**
- A growing revolutionary movement took hold in Latin America including **Cuba**.

- African Americans returned from the fight for democracy to a country in which they still not have equal rights and the civil rights movement took hold.
- The economy boomed at home, as Americans became optimistic and incomes rose, as Americans standard of living became the greatest in the world.
- Suburbs expanded (**Levittown**)
- The nation experienced a **baby boom** brought on by government policies of tax breaks for homes and children and a call by leaders like J. Edgar Hoover for a strong nuclear family that America needed to combat communism.
- America started a love affair with the **car and jet airline** travel creating a nation with even greater mobility.
- A consumer culture grew as well as an expanded American culture nurtured by the new media of television.
- The teenager, a strange creature made its first appearance and the beginnings of a new generation, with different tastes and attitudes than their parents and grand parents, emerged and their choice of music was **Rock and Roll**.
- Unaffected by either the great depression or the two world wars this generation challenged conventional morals and values.
- **The Beats**, a group that espoused freedom, the appreciation of Jazz music, art, poetry, literature, a fundamental belief in non-commitment in relationships, promiscuity, homosexuality and the use of drugs, laid the initial groundwork for what will be the sixties generation.



The 1950s at Home



The 1950s in the United States of America were marked with a sharp rise in the economy for the first time in almost 30 years and return to the 1920s-type consumer society built on credit and boom-times, as well as the **baby boom** from returning GIs who went to college under the **G.I. Bill** and settled in **suburban America**. Most of the internal conflicts that had developed in earlier decades like women's rights, civil rights, imperialism, and war were relatively suppressed or neglected during this time as America, returning from the brink of destruction, and hoped to see a more consistent way of life

The Baby Boom

As is often the case with a large war, the elation of victory and large numbers of males returning to their country triggered a baby boom after the end of World War II in many countries around the globe, notably those of Europe, Asia, The United States, and Australia.

In the United States, demographers have differed on the exact years of birth that make up the baby boom generation with most agreeing upon the years from 1943 to 1960. The war years saw many women in the U.S. take on various jobs in the nations factories. These Rosie the Riveters, helped lead the war effort in the nations factories but when the men came home many of those jobs left and marriage became again a cultural and career norm for most women — and one result was babies. This boom in the birthrate led to increased economic growth in the U.S. during much of the 1950s.

The Baby Boom was brought to public attention in 1960, with the publication of Landon Y. Jones' *Great Expectations: America and the Baby Boom Generation*. That there was a boom is not denied. Live births in the United States surged from 222,721 in January 1946 to 233,452 that May. In October, 339,499 babies were born. By the end of the decade, about 32 million babies had been born, compared with 24 millions in the lean 30s. In 1954, annual births first topped four million and did not drop below that figure until 1965, when four out of ten Americans were under the age of twenty.

It is jokingly said that, whatever year they were born, boomers were coming of age at the same time across the world; so that Britain was undergoing Beatlemania while people in the United States were driving over to Woodstock, organizing against the Vietnam War, or fighting and dying in the same war; boomers in Italy were dressing in mod clothes and "buying the world a Coke"; boomers in India were seeking new philosophical discoveries; American boomers in Canada had just found a new home after escaping the draft south of the border.



The G.I. Bill

The **G. I. Bill of Rights** or **Servicemen's Readjustment Act** of 1944 provided for college or vocational education for returning World War II veterans as well as one-year of unemployment compensation. It also provided loans for returning veterans to buy homes and start businesses.

The G. I. Bill is considered to be the last piece of New Deal legislation. However, the bill which President Franklin D. Roosevelt initially proposed was not as far reaching. The G. I. Bill was created to prevent a repeat of the Bonus March of 1932 and a relapse into the Great Depression after World War II ended. The American Legion (a veterans group) is essentially responsible for many of the bill's provisions. The Legion managed to have the bill apply to all who served in the armed services, including African-Americans and women.



The fact that the G. I. Bill paid for a G. I.'s entire education had encouraged many universities across the country to expand enrollment. For example, the University of Michigan had under 10,000 students prior to the war. In 1948 their enrollment was well over 30,000. Syracuse University also embraced the spirit of the Bill and saw their enrollment skyrocket from approx. 6,000 before war to 19,000 students in 1947.

Another provision was known as the 52–20 clause. This enabled all former servicemen to receive \$20 once a week for 52 weeks a year while they were looking for work. Less than 20 percent of the money set aside for the 52–20 Club (as it was known) was distributed. Rather, most returning servicemen quickly found jobs or pursued higher education.

An important provision of the G. I. Bill was low interest home loans for servicemen. This enabled millions of American families to move out of urban apartments and into suburban homes. Prior to the war the suburbs tended to be the homes of the wealthy and upper class. Although black servicemen were eligible for these loans they tended to remain in the inner cities or in rural areas because many suburban communities using racial segregation did not sell homes to African-Americans and other minorities.

As a whole the bill helped to democratize the "American Dream." The G. I. Bill of Rights has since been modified but still remains on the books