

# The Fifties: Tranquility in Turmoil

Even today Americans tend to remember the 1950s as a placid, antiseptic decade—a rather boring time of suburban puttering, backyard barbecues, and plastic smiles. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, most of what we associate with the 1960s—the struggle with the Soviets, war in Southeast Asia, television, youth culture, drug culture, rock and roll, the civil rights movement, space travel and exploration, even the anti-nuke movement—had its roots in the previous decade. Worthy of study in their own right, not simply as a prelude to the 1960s, the 1950s is one of the most dynamic decades in US history—a puzzling, paradoxical period of swift transformation, swathed in conformity and consensus.

How the 1950s garnered a reputation for sterility relates mainly to television, a new medium that rose to the fore of American culture and consciousness. Television expanded rapidly between the end of World War II and the end of the Korean War. Americans bought an average of 250,000 television sets per month between 1949 and 1952, and millions more saved their money to buy the magic box, a device that transformed the nation as no invention had done since the automobile. Purchasing a TV was a major event for any family, many of whom had scrimped and saved until the proud day that neighbors gathered to watch delivery and installation of the new “TV” by the local retailer. Television had instant appeal, bringing inexpensive, convenient, and passive entertainment right into the home for the enjoyment of the entire family. Critics worried that it leveled high culture and dulled taste, an opiate of the masses.

Sales of new sets averaged in excess of 5 million per year in the 1950s and in some years reached the 7.5-million mark; by the early 1960s, 90 percent



**Figure 1.1** A family watching television in 1958 (Source: © Courtesy National Archives, photo no. 306-PS-58-9015).

of all American homes had at least one TV. The invention of coaxial cable and videotape in 1951 and 1956, respectively, further improved the device, which, by projecting the same formulaic programming into homes across the nation, encouraged homogeneity of interests, tastes, and opinions. In just over a decade, television had not only nationalized cultural expression and shared experience in new ways but also democratized news and entertainment—becoming an essential piece of electronics owned by rich and poor, urban and rural, white and black, illiterate and intellectual. Through advertisements, it also fed the growing appetite for consumer consumption. As historian J. Ronald Oakley has observed, no other invention—motion pictures, cars, or radio—brought so much change to so many people in so short a time.

The images television projected were happily reassuring. On westerns such as *Gunsmoke*, *The Rifleman*, *Wagon Train*, and *The Lone Ranger*, justice always prevailed; the good guys enforced law and order with cold steel and hammer fists; talented sleuths on *Dragnet* and *Perry Mason* always solved the crime du jour. Comic relief was furnished by shows starring

famous comedians of the day, *You Bet Your Life* with Groucho Marx, the self-titled *The Jackie Gleason Show*, and shows featuring Milton Berle and Steve Allen. Dinah Shore and Donna Reed—multitalented actresses who hosted eponymous variety shows—and Lucille Ball, whose handsome Cuban-born co-star and real-life husband Desi Arnaz joined her on the #1 hit *I Love Lucy*, provided strong but non-threatening female role models. Clean-cut, white teenagers danced on *American Bandstand*, a local Philadelphia television program, which grew from its 1952 debut into a nationally broadcast show by 1957. Quiz shows like *The \$64,000 Question* and *What's My Line?* tempted viewers with quick riches, and variety shows like *The Ed Sullivan Show* offered a kaleidoscopic array of entertainers and musicians. Programming was generally entertaining, soothing, and—due to careful producing and censorship—safe.

Most importantly, situation comedies (or “sitcoms”) such as *Leave it to Beaver*, *The Adventures of Ozzie & Harriet*, and *Father Knows Best* idealized the new suburban life, purveying a gee-whiz world of narcotic consumerism and suburban euphoria. Dads ruled their households sternly but benevolently; moms catered to the needs of their husbands and children. Pot roasts browned in convection ovens; children played on cul-de-sacs. Whatever problems arose, usually small ones, were resolved in a 30-minute format. So closely did “Ozzie & Harriet” mirror its cast’s lives—with real-life husband Ozzie, wife Harriet, and sons David and Ricky portraying themselves, with Ricky crooning his own songs and Ozzie editing them into early music videos—that the show’s “adventures” were more prototype reality show than sitcom (the house shown in exterior shots on the show was the family’s actual house in the Hollywood Hills). Theodore “the Beaver” Cleaver and his brother Wally got themselves into some real pickles on *Leave it to Beaver*—mostly due to the instigation of their rascal friend Eddie Haskell—but Ward and June Cleaver were always ready to guide their sons back onto the right path. By the conclusion of each episode, all was forgiven. It was the golden age of television and television projected a golden age: 1950s America, TV-style, was pleasant, saccharine, even bland, but almost always comforting.

And why not? In the wake of the biggest challenges the nation had ever faced, the Great Depression and World War II, times were good in America. Unprecedented military spending during the war—close to \$300 billion—had brought a massive stimulus to industrial and agricultural production, ushering in a new era of economic expansion and prosperity. By the mid-1950s, the United States—with 6 percent of the world’s population and

7 percent of its landmass—was producing almost half of the world's manufactured products. It contained within its borders most of the world's cars and telephones, and a sizable portion of its televisions and radios (and, not surprisingly, consumed almost half of the world's annual energy production). Over the course of the 1950s, the Gross National Product (GNP) rose from \$285 billion to \$500 billion, per capita income rose by 48 percent, the median family income rose from \$3083 to \$5657, real wages rose by almost 30 percent, and the number of millionaires rose from roughly 27,000 to almost 80,000. The expanding economy created jobs in record numbers; by 1960, the number of working Americans had risen to a record 66.5 million.

Young couples who had delayed marriage during wartime now got married and had children in record numbers, and at younger ages. By 1953, almost one-third of married American women had "tied the knot" by age nineteen; by 1960, almost 75 percent of all women aged 20–24 were married. And in the 1950s couples tended to stay married, as divorce remained a social stigma, a badge of personal and even moral failure. Those who were married had kids—lots of them. From 1946 to 1950, an average in excess of 3.6 million children were born each year (in 1940 the number had stood at 2.6 million), and from 1950 on there was a steady rise past 4 million in 1954 to an all-time high of 4.3 million in 1957, an average of one newborn every seven seconds. It was, as everyone recognized, a baby boom, one fed by prosperity. Naturally, the boom in babies fed the nation's increasingly growing and powerful economy, as sales of maternity clothing, baby furniture, diapers, baby food, formula, clothing, toys, trikes, bikes, washing machines, clothes dryers, and televisions spiked, so did new school construction. Dr. Benjamin Spock's bestselling *Book of Baby and Child Care*, which sold a million copies per year in the 1950s, offered an informal, commonsense approach to caring for this surge of children, one that emphasized love and positivity rather than discipline and punishment. The advice was well tolerated and much appreciated: after all, the 76.4 million children born between 1946 and 1964 became the single largest generation in the nation's history, the generation that largely came of age in the 1960s.

Much of the postwar growth occurred in previously undeveloped hinterlands, neither urban nor rural; in fact, 83 percent of the total population growth occurred in so-called "suburbs," a new feature of the American landscape. A severe housing shortage had developed after World War II and developers met the crisis with ingenious new solutions—and did so quickly.



**Figure 1.2** The ideal 1950s housewife: working, smiling, and pleasing (Source: © George Marks/Retrofile/Getty Images).

Between 1947 and 1951, the construction company Levitt & Sons built the first suburban development in history at Hempstead, New York, where crews followed a precise, 27-step process using prefabricated materials to produce new single-family homes, more than 30 per day at the peak of production. As Henry Ford had done to the automobile industry, the Levitts brought assembly-line production to housing: bulldozing the land and covering it with standardized units with uniform floor plans. Cost-cutting techniques meant that the American dream of owning one's own home had suddenly become much more affordable. Other so-called "Levittowns" followed, changing the American landscape in their sprawl, as middle-class, and mostly white families moved out of the nation's cities and into the new "collar" or "bedroom" communities, with many of the men of the family commuting to their jobs in the city each morning and back home again come five o'clock. One and a half million New Yorkers moved to the city's

surrounding suburbs in the 1950s; right outside Los Angeles, Orange County more than tripled in population. With the suburbs came shopping centers and supermarkets, offering a cornucopia of consumer items and foods. By mid-decade there were more than 1800 shopping centers in the United States (with hundreds more being planned and built); by 1953 there were more than 17,000 supermarkets, which constituted only 4 percent of all grocery stores but accounted for 44 percent of all food sales.

The uniform building codes, the rules and regulations of homeowner associations, and the common background of suburban residents (white, middle-class) reinforced conformity and stimulated low-grade competition for consumer fulfillment, what critics would come to describe as “keeping up with the Joneses.” The people of suburbia tended to buy similar houses, similar cars, and similar toys for their kids. Constrained not only by pressures to purchase contentment but also by traditional gender roles, the experiences of women were especially constant and unvarying. Expected to shop, cook, clean, and serve their husbands, and with few opportunities for fulfillment beyond housework, women had a limited lot in life. Magazines and books carried stories of happy housewives and few women publicly complained, though many presumably suffered in quiet despair.

As the film *Pleasantville* (1998) would later remind moviegoers, it was the last monochrome decade, gray-rinsed and neutral. The Fifties were captured in black-and-white by television and still photography; the Sixties, in contrast, were caught in living color on videotape and film. On December 20, 1964, the three television networks—ABC, CBS, and NBC—simultaneously broadcast in color for the first time, and color programming became the norm. Not surprisingly, as journalist-historian David Halberstam has observed, the pace of the Fifties in retrospect “seemed slower, almost languid.” On the other side of the Sixties, looking back from the Seventies, the Fifties seemed even more idyllic. The name of that iconic 1970s show, *Happy Days*, said it all: in the nation’s collective memory, the 1950s were a simpler, easier, and happier time.

But television is not real life—even when it purports to be reality—and just beneath the idealized world reflected on the nation’s TV sets lay a nation in ferment: a golden age of apprehension. The overwhelming sense of uneasiness, the conflicts within and beyond the borders of American society, and the splinters of dissent that sometimes worked their way to the surface all belied the era’s apparent tranquility, and it proved difficult to act as if nothing were awry. Black teenagers wanting to participate on *American Bandstand*, for example, found themselves excluded from the

dance crew and studio audience. By the end of the decade, even teen idol Ricky Nelson chafed against his father's authoritarianism, as Ozzie kept his son from appearing on other shows that would have boosted his stardom. Lucy and Desi Arnaz got a real-life divorce in 1960.

Much of the apprehension and conflict of the 1950s can be traced to the nation's post-World War II rivalry with the Soviet Union, which left its imprint not only on foreign affairs but also on domestic life. Perhaps it was inevitable that the two most powerful nations still standing after World War II would emerge as competitors. But the Cold War—not a “hot war” of military fighting but an undeclared conflict characterized by spying, hostile propaganda, sabotage, and economic embargo—became the longest protracted confrontation in US history, lasting four decades and coloring life in the United States more than anything else since the Civil War a century earlier. Covert espionage was the order of the day as the two nations jockeyed for power—in effect battling for world supremacy.

Each side mistrusted the other and misconstrued the other's motives; each side also assumed its own righteousness and the other's evilness. Overestimating Soviet power, the United States saw the Soviet Union as a cancer, spreading communism over the globe and threatening the American way of life; Russia, gravely wounded by the Germans in World War II, became increasingly paranoid in its dealings with the West, while obsessively pursuing its own security. Twice in the twentieth century, German troops had invaded Russia via Poland, which Soviet premier Joseph Stalin recognized as a crucial buffer between Europe and the Soviet Union; he accordingly labored to bring Eastern Europe within the Soviet sphere of influence. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill noted in a speech at Fulton, Missouri, in March 1946, “From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent.” The metaphor of the iron curtain—used to describe the political, military, and ideological barrier erected by the Soviet Union to seal itself and its dependent eastern European allies off from open contact with the West and other noncommunist areas—stuck.

President Harry S. Truman, the nation's first post-WWII president, adopted a policy of “containment” against the Soviet Union and the potential spread of communism. The term, first articulated by leading State Department official George Kennan, emphasized the inevitability of US conflict with the Soviet Union, as different nations with different interests and different economic systems. Truman liked the toughness of Kennan's approach to contain Russian efforts to expand communism and

to meet the Soviets forcefully if necessary. In April 1950, President Truman approved the implementation of a secret National Security Council document, NSC-68, which called for a massive buildup in American military power, in conventional armament as well as atomic weaponry, to guarantee superiority over the Soviets. NSC-68 mapped out the US role in the Cold War by rearticulating the nation's role as global policeman and by channeling more of the nation's gross domestic product toward military use (defense spending increased from 5 to 14.2 percent under President Truman during the Korean War). Containment and military stockpiling became the cornerstones of American foreign policy.

Whatever its causes and merits, fear of the Soviets and of communism led to a staggering American military buildup, the formation of military alliances with democratic *and* dictatorial nations across the globe, US intervention in the sovereign affairs of dozens of countries, and protracted military conflicts in Korea and Vietnam. Most immediately, when North Korean soldiers crossed the 38th Parallel into South Korea in 1950, the United States called for a United Nations sanction against the invasion; the UN declared communist North Korea the aggressor and sent troops, mostly from the United States, to aid the South Korean army. Calling for a "police action," President Truman never asked Congress to pass an official declaration of war (thereby establishing a precedent for President Lyndon Johnson, who later would commit troops to the Vietnam War without ever seeking a congressional mandate for his action). Popular WWII hero General Douglas MacArthur commanded the UN troops, sometimes disagreeing vehemently with his commander-in-chief. The tide turned against North Korea with an amphibious assault at Inchon, where the North Koreans retreated; but reinforcements from the People's Republic of China soon allowed them to regain lost territory. At the same time, and in keeping with the goal of containment, the United States began stepping up its military assistance to South Vietnam by supplying arms and instruction in their use against communist forces in North Vietnam.

Inconclusive and costly, the Korean War dragged on, lasting much longer than anyone had anticipated. In 1953, with neither side having a prospect of victory, a truce was signed. The ceasefire satisfied no one—not the United Nations, not the United States, not South Korea or North Korea—and the Korean peninsula remained tensely divided along more or less the same line. In addition to substantial losses in men and material—54,200 of 1.8 million American servicemen in Korea were killed and 103,300 wounded, with 8200 classified as missing in action—the war had significant

consequences, including: desegregation of the US armed forces, initially decreed by Truman's Executive Order 9981 in 1948 but accomplished in fact in Korea as black and white units, both decimated by casualties, pragmatically combined across the color line to continue fighting; a public falling-out between Truman and MacArthur; the Democrats' loss of the White House to another popular WWII hero, Dwight D. ("Ike") Eisenhower in 1952; dangerous precedents for involvement in what was essentially a civil war in another nation, Vietnam; and heightened panic about the communist menace.

It mattered little who was in the White House when it came to communism. Democrats and Republicans alike ascribed to fervent anti-communist views, as did all "good" Americans. President Eisenhower used the metaphor of tumbling dominos (which gave rise to the phrase "the domino effect") to describe how quickly communism could spread, and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles described the necessity of "brinkmanship" to bring the United States to the edge of war with the Soviet Union. To impose national will, anti-communism took on a kind of religious zeal as large numbers of Americans became caught up in an irrational fear of communist conspiracy orchestrated from the Kremlin—a conspiracy, it was said, that was subverting the United States from within, harming the nation diplomatically, and contributing to the worldwide expansion of communism. In this respect, the early 1950s recalled other periods of hysteria in the nation's past, most notably the Salem witchcraft trials of 1692 and the Red Scare of 1919–20, but the desperate search for internal security at mid-century required a kind of wartime loyalty, enforceable through strict authoritarian measures; accordingly, the 1950s became what might have been the most politically repressive era in US history. Republican Congressman Richard M. Nixon of California resuscitated the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), founded by Congress in 1938 to investigate alleged subversive activities and to hold hearings on fascist, Nazi, communist, or other "un-American" organizations. In the 1950s HUAC sought to root out communists, particularly in Hollywood, whose films presumably poisoned youth, attacked Christian values, and eroded morality. There was also a not-so-subtle anti-Semitism at work as the Jewish producers, directors, and actors who wielded considerable power in Hollywood were blacklisted, smeared, and sometimes incarcerated for supposed communist sympathies.

It was this climate that produced the meteoric rise of the thuggish Senator Joseph R. McCarthy, who became one of the most admired, hated,

and feared men in Washington: a demagogic powerbroker *par excellence*. The Republican Senator from Wisconsin—born in 1908 to poor Irish-American parents, a hard-drinking US Marine and former circuit judge whose early career in the Senate was undistinguished—began a witch-hunt after producing a list of alleged “moles” within the State Department. Waving a sheet of paper before a women’s auxiliary meeting in Wheeling, West Virginia, on February 9, 1950, McCarthy bellowed, “I have here in my hand a list of 205—a list of names that were made known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party and who nevertheless are still working and shaping policy in the State Department.” The members of the Ohio County Women’s Republican Club were stunned—and so, too, was the American public as headlines repeated the accusations. McCarthy’s speech—which came just a few months after Russia detonated its own atomic bomb, just a few weeks before China was “lost” to communism, just three weeks before State Department official Alger Hiss was convicted of perjury after being accused of spying for the Soviets in the 1930s, just ten days before Truman decided to build the hydrogen bomb (the fusion-based “superbomb,” as it was called, five hundred times more powerful than a fission-based atomic bomb), and just six days before British scientist and Los Alamos bomb developer Klaus Fuchs confessed to supplying atomic secrets to the Russians—landed with the force of an H-bomb.

The accusations touched off a wave of anti-communist hysteria that would become known as McCarthyism, in which the senator, an unsavory and unscrupulous alcoholic, fabricated lies and leveled accusations against anyone and everyone, making wild charges of disloyalty against military personnel, politicians, celebrities, and everyday citizens. The American public took him quite seriously; that people listened to McCarthy demonstrates how frightened they were at a time when loyalty to one’s country was measured by the degree of anti-communism one displayed. It was bad enough that the “commies” wanted to conquer the world like comic-book supervillains—with the Russians and the Chinese vying for control of the globe—now double-dealing traitors threatened the United States from within, touting the virtues of communism and selling atomic secrets to enemies. It was time, many believed, to close ranks and purge the nation of the critics, nonconformists, and subversives (like Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, also arrested in 1950 for passing atomic secrets to the Russians) who threatened the United States from within. McCarthy provided one solution: identify the bad guys, sully their reputations, and

clap 'em in irons. Such treatment would prove too good for the Rosenbergs, who died in the electric chair after being convicted on minimal and questionable evidence.

McCarthyism had a chilling effect on the American public, frightened into conformity through fear. Senator McCarthy's wrecking-ball tendencies caught up with him when he began to accuse men such as General George C. Marshall and even President Eisenhower of being tools and dupes of the Soviets. He overreached in early 1954 when he began an investigation of the US Army—a reckless act that led to a series of televised hearings in which, at one point, Army attorney Joseph Welch looked up at the power-crazed McCarthy and asked, “Have you no sense of decency, sir?” as the senator tried to impugn the character of a young lawyer present. The trials, which television brought into the living rooms of Americans across the nation, revealed McCarthy as a bully and a brute. The Senate censured him in 1954; he died in obscurity less than three years later.

McCarthyism was a direct and obvious expression of anti-Communism and Cold-War fear, but living under what people perceived at the time as the very real threat of nuclear annihilation was a different matter, casting a pall over the era that affected life in ways both subtle and profound. Living with the fear of “the Bomb,” as nuclear weapons were generically called, was no easy task. The Russians developed their own nuclear weapons, successfully testing an atomic bomb and a hydrogen bomb in 1949 and 1953, respectively, after which point Americans, too, were daily haunted by the specter of death and the kinds of suffering they had seen in magazine photographs and newsreels of the Hiroshima victims. As those nations in the “nuclear club” rushed to test bigger and better hydrogen bombs (the United States conducted 122 atomic bomb tests in the 1950s, the Soviet Union at least 50, and the UK 21), concern about nuclear warfare continued to grow. Little was known in the 1940s about the dangers of nuclear fallout, but evidence mounted in the 1950s that strontium-90 and other radioactive isotopes that caused leukemia, cancer, birth defects, and genetic mutations in humans and animals could travel far from test sites. It would be wrong to suggest that everyone in the 1950s actively worried about thermonuclear war all the time: they did not. The knowledge, however, that life as they knew it could be snuffed out in one blinding instant was ever-present, nibbling at the foundations of constancy and security like a hungry termite.

As the press unrolled story after story about atomic-bomb tests and radioactive fallout, Cold War worries and nuclear jitters crept into pop culture in weird and interesting ways. Millions of Americans went to theaters

to see films dealing with animal and human monsters created by nuclear war or radiation accidents; these films included B-movie classics such as *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953), *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), *Them!* (1954), *Godzilla* (1956), and *The Blob* (1958). A symbol of the age, the monster movies of the 1950s revealed that Americans were beginning to fear the heralded technological breakthroughs of the modern age. There was also a boom in science fiction literature and sci-fi movies. Many of the sci-fi flicks involved monsters and space battles; some were more thoughtful. In *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), Earth is invaded by aliens of superior intellect who warn humans of the dangers of the atomic bomb and threaten to destroy the planet if war itself is not abolished (a common theme in 1950s sci-fi works). In novels and short stories, an endless variation of basic themes revolved around space exploration, intergalactic adventure, time travel, fear of science gone wrong, monsters and other mutations caused by nuclear radiation, atomic wars, and speculations about humankind's future in an age contemplating no future at all. Authors such as Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, and Arthur C. Clarke raised science fiction to new heights of imagination and popularity. Not unpredictably, there was a rash of reports of "flying saucers" or unidentified flying objects (UFOs)—a number of which coincided with the successful launch into Earth's orbit of Sputnik 1, the first artificial satellite, by the Soviets in October 1957 (an event that spurred a "space race" between the USSR and the United States, which rapidly expanded funding for missile research at home and led swiftly to the creation of NASA, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, in July 1958).

Scientists themselves shuddered at the destructive power they had unleashed. At the instant of the Trinity explosion—the first atomic detonation at White Sands Proving Ground in New Mexico on July 16, 1945—Manhattan Project leader J. Robert Oppenheimer quoted the Hindu scripture *Bhagavad-Gita* (having learned Sanskrit to read it in its original form): "If the radiance of a thousand suns were to burst in the sky, that would be like the splendor of the Mighty One... I am become Death, destroyer of worlds." A growing number of Americans began to argue that the key to national survival was not a civilian defense program or a deterrent nuclear force but, as science fiction suggested, a worldwide ban on nuclear tests, on the manufacture of nuclear weapons, and ultimately on war itself. Dissenters were small in number at first, dismissed by the government and the press as communists, socialists, dupes, and crazies; however, they attracted more and more supporters and attention as bombs grew bigger and the adverse effects of so much nuclear

testing became clearer. They attracted even more attention as the nation's (and the world's) greatest leaders and thinkers gravitated toward a burgeoning peace movement, including: Nobel Prize-winning chemist Linus Pauling, who wrote *No More War!* (1958); philosopher Bertrand Russell, who published anti-war tracts and participated publicly in peace demonstrations; and Nobel Prize-winning physicist Albert Schweitzer, who in a 1957 radio appeal asked 50 nations to terminate all nuclear tests.

In June 1957, Pauling led 11,000 scientists in signing a petition calling for the end of nuclear testing, an act that led the US Senate Internal Security Subcommittee to investigate his patriotism. Peace activists formed the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE), which grew rapidly after its founding in 1957 to 130 chapters and 25,000 members by the summer of 1958; SANE—which included intellectuals, celebrities, Old Left activists, and Quakers—was joined by other groups such as the Student Peace Union, which claimed 5000 members by the end of the decade, and the Committee for Nonviolent Action (CNVA), which, beginning in 1958, engaged in peaceful acts of civil disobedience like trespassing in restricted areas in which tests were being conducted. Protestors were arrested, jailed, and given prison sentences for sailing a ship into the area of the Bikini Atoll in the Pacific, where nuclear tests were scheduled to be held. This movement reached its height in 1960, when a large crowd jammed Madison Square Garden for a SANE rally and 3000 pacifists demonstrated in San Francisco. Pacifists across the nation walked for disarmament, and some public school students refused to participate in civil defense drills; students at Berkeley, Harvard, and other universities formed peace societies, circulated petitions, and demonstrated for peace. The 1950s peace movement failed to alter governmental policies or change public opinion on nuclear tests, but it did reveal the existence of dissent from prevailing Cold War ideology, and showed that not all intellectuals and college students were part of the so-called “Silent Generation,” born between the mid-1920s and early 1940s. Importantly, it also paved the way for antiwar protests of the next decade.

As the decade progressed, adults ingested pharmaceuticals—especially tranquilizers—in record numbers to quiet the mind, numb the dread, silence the protests, and cope with the multitude of children they had birthed. Young people themselves grew increasingly restless. To their parents' horror, many young white kids were buying black rhythm-and-blues records; parental disapproval only added to the records' appeal. Bill Haley, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and especially Elvis Presley pioneered a new kind of

music and a new form of youth rebellion. Whether youth culture drove rock music or vice versa is debatable, but rock and roll—African-American blues blended with country music into what some called rockabilly—spoke to young people like nothing else before or since. Leonard Bernstein, the distinguished American composer and conductor, called Elvis Presley “the greatest cultural force in the twentieth century.” Elvis, he maintained, “changed everything—music, language, clothes, it’s a whole new social revolution—the Sixties comes from it.” As John Lennon of the Beatles, one of Elvis’s many admirers, put it, “Before Elvis there was nothing.”

Young people began to form a new kind of community, one whose authority figures were disc jockeys and rock musicians. Enjoying new spending power, they flexed their economic muscle: a 1956 *Scholastic* magazine article claimed that the average teenager earned \$10.55 a week, a bit less than the post-bill-paying, disposable income of the average American family fifteen years earlier. Becoming a separate, distinct part of the culture for the first time, teenagers broke away from the habits of their parents and defined themselves through the music to which they bopped.

The young people of the time particularly gravitated to nonconformists, those who deliberately flouted the status quo. Brooding, handsome actors like Marlon Brando and James Dean exuded a sense of personal freedom and projected an aura of being misunderstood. Brando’s muscular sexuality and Dean’s hangdog introspection both created an undeniable magnetism: alienated and ruminating, yet attractive and heroic. Wearing blue jeans, T-shirts, and leather jackets, they were silver-screen iconoclasts: flaunting convention, chafing against the oppressive constriction of societal expectations, and protesting nothing in particular. When asked what he was rebelling against in *The Wild One* (1953), Brando (as outlaw biker Johnny Strabler) famously growled, “Whaddya got?”

Other cracks in the consensus and conformity of the Fifties began to appear as well, many of them visible along the intersections of avant-garde literature, visual art, and less popular forms of music, namely jazz. Meeting as students at Columbia University, the original clutch of Beat writers—Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Lucien Carr, John Clellon Holmes—met hangerabouts, Greenwich Village bohemians, and con artists such as Neal Cassady, William Burroughs, and Herbert Huncke, to create a mix of seekers who explored the New York City underground via its bars and nightclubs. They listened to jazz greats Charlie “Bird” Parker and Miles Davis in the same clubs haunted by abstract expressionist painters Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock, both of whom experimented with new forms of

gesture or “action” painting. Like the Beat writers and poets, abstract painters tried to capture the rhythms of jazz in their art; pieces like Pollock’s *Summertime: Number 9A* (1948), featured in the August 1949 issue of *Life* magazine, moved the viewer through syncopated drips and slashes of color. In his fiction Kerouac would immortalize Cassady as Dean Moriarty, the lightly fictionalized hero of *On the Road* (1957), the Beat bible of road trips and freewheeling excess. Of course, what allowed the Beats to ricochet from one coast to the other—foregoing straight jobs, disdaining mainstream culture, and freebasing experience along the way—was the sheer affluence of the United States, so prosperous that it sheltered even those who flaunted its rules and expectations; in this sense, the Beats needed consumer-oriented America as much as—perhaps more than—it needed them. But all of these artists offered arresting counterpoints to the orthodoxy of the day. It was a difficult world for those who could not or did not fit in, and some flamed out prematurely, failing to outlive the decade. Charlie Parker, for example, died in 1955 at the age of 34 after much heroin and alcohol abuse; the following year, Jackson Pollock died in a drunken, single-car accident near his New York home.

The most visible fault line—the greatest crack in the conformity and consensus of the Fifties—came not from artists but from Negroes (the preferred term through the late 1960s for dark-skinned people of African descent in the United States), more than ever dissatisfied with Jim Crow segregation, discrimination, racist intimidation, and second-class citizenship. In 1955—the same year that Bird died; the same year that Ray Kroc opened the first, golden-arched McDonald’s restaurant in Des Plaines, Iowa; the same year that Walt Disney opened Disneyland in Anaheim, California; the same year that the Food and Drug Administration approved Jonas Salk’s polio vaccine for widespread use; the same year that Vladimir Nabokov published *Lolita* and Sloan Wilson published *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*; and the same year that James Dean finished shooting *Rebel Without a Cause*, his third and final film before his death in a car crash on a California desert highway—a brutal killing in a small town in the Mississippi Delta captured national attention. Fourteen-year-old Emmett Till, visiting family from Chicago, was kidnapped and murdered by a band of white men near Money, Mississippi, after allegedly whistling at a white woman while in a convenience store. The local men tortured and shot young Emmett before tying his mutilated body to a broken cotton-gin fan and dumping it in the Tallahatchie River. The woman’s husband and his accomplice, who brazenly admitted killing the boy in an interview with *Look* magazine, were arrested, tried,

and acquitted of murder. The boy's mother, Mamie, insisted on an open-casket funeral; ghastly postmortem images of the badly mutilated teenager, beaten beyond recognition, haunted a nation. Many civil rights activists would later cite these images—viewed pan optically as photographs published in *Jet*, the *Crisis*, the *Chicago Defender*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *New York Amsterdam News*, among other black publications—as the reason they became involved in the struggle for black equality.

One hundred days after Till's murder and one-and-half years after the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) ruling in which the US Supreme Court declared racial segregation in schools illegal, a black seamstress in Montgomery, Alabama, boarded a city bus on December 1, 1955, to return home from her job. Tired from her day's work, Rosa Parks sat in the forward section of the bus, the section traditionally reserved for white passengers. When she refused to give up her seat to a white person, she was arrested and jailed. Calling for Negroes to boycott Montgomery's buses, local activists responded to Parks' arrest by organizing carpools to take boycotters to work; others walked where they needed to go. The boycott lasted more than a year, during which the 26-year-old Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., emerged as a leader. Through his inspiring rhetoric, King helped to elevate the local challenge of citywide segregation ordinances to a transcendent struggle for human dignity. Parks' defiance and King's nonviolent leadership defined a new kind of activism in the struggle for black equality, one organized not around legal challenges in the courtroom but rather around direct action in the streets and public spaces of Southern cities and towns. This mass movement of black Southerners and their supporters against the twin evils of segregation and voter disfranchisement—what is commonly referred to now as the civil rights movement—would become the epicenter for change in the 1960s.

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Mamie Till often commented on the irony that one of the last pictures of her son Emmett was taken as he leaned against a TV set: it was television, after all, that would play such a crucial role in the successes of the civil rights movement. No less ironic was the fact that television itself helped to mask the dynamism of the decade, as the iconic family sitcoms that outlasted the 1950s tended to whitewash (or black-and-whitewash) the complexity of this misunderstood moment in US history. Adjusted for hue and contrast, however, the Fifties were quite colorful indeed, bland only in comparison to the positively psychedelic decade that followed.

### **Further Reading**

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