

Group 4
Conformity
Consumerism

The American Dream in the Fifties

MAIN IDEA

During the 1950s, the economy boomed, and many Americans enjoyed material comfort.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

The “American dream,” a notion that was largely shaped by the 1950s, is still pursued today.

Terms & Names

- conglomerate
- franchise
- baby boom
- Dr. Jonas Salk
- consumerism
- planned obsolescence

One American's Story

Settled into her brand new house near San Diego, California, Carol Freeman felt very fortunate. Her husband Mark had his own law practice, and when their first baby was born, she became a full-time homemaker. She was living the American dream, yet Carol felt dissatisfied—as if there were “something wrong” with her because she was not happy.

A PERSONAL VOICE CAROL FREEMAN

“As dissatisfied as I was, and as restless, I remember so well this feeling [we] had at the time that the world was going to be your oyster. You were going to make money, your kids were going to go to good schools, everything was possible if you just did what you were supposed to do. The future was rosy. There was a tremendous feeling of optimism. . . . Much as I say it was hateful, it was also hopeful. It was an innocent time.”

—quoted in *The Fifties: A Women's Oral History*

After World War II ended, Americans turned their attention to their families and jobs. The economy prospered. New technologies and business ideas created fresh opportunities for many, and by the end of the decade Americans were enjoying the highest standard of living in the world. The American dream of a happy and successful life seemed within the reach of many people.



▲ The dream woman of the 1950s was depicted in advertising and on TV as doing constant housework, but always with a smile.

The Organization and the Organization Man

During the 1950s, businesses expanded rapidly. By 1956, the majority of Americans no longer held blue-collar, or industrial, jobs. Instead, more people worked in higher-paid, white-collar positions—clerical, managerial, or professional occupations. Unlike blue-collar workers, who manufactured goods for sale, white-collar workers tended to perform services in fields like sales, advertising, insurance, and communications.

CONGLOMERATES Many white-collar workers performed their services in large corporations or government agencies. Some of these corporations continued expanding by forming **conglomerates**. (A conglomerate is a major corporation that includes a number of smaller companies in unrelated industries.) For exam-

ple, one conglomerate, International Telephone and Telegraph (ITT), whose original business was communications, bought car-rental companies, insurance companies, and hotel and motel chains. Through this diversification, or investment in various areas of the economy, ITT tried to protect itself from declines in individual industries. Other huge parent companies included American Telephone and Telegraph, Xerox, and General Electric.

FRANCHISES In addition to diversifying, another strategy for business expansion—franchising—developed at this time. A **franchise** is a company that offers similar products or services in many locations. (*Franchise* is also used to refer to the right, sold to an individual, to do business using the parent company's name and the system that the parent company developed.) **A**

Fast-food restaurants developed some of the first and most successful franchises. McDonald's, for example, had its start when the McDonald brothers developed unusually efficient service, based on assembly-line methods, at their small drive-in restaurant in San Bernardino, California. They simplified the menu, featured 15-cent hamburgers, and mechanized their kitchen.

Salesman Ray Kroc paid the McDonalds \$2.7 million for the franchise rights to their hamburger drive-in. In April 1955, he opened his first McDonald's in Des Plaines, Illinois, where he further improved the assembly-line process and introduced the golden arches that are now familiar all over the world.

MAIN IDEA

Comparing

A How were conglomerates and franchises alike and how were they different?

NOW & THEN

FRANCHISES

In the decades since Ray Kroc opened his first McDonald's (shown below), franchising has become all but a way of life in the United States. Today, there are nearly 3,000 franchised companies operating over 500,000 businesses throughout the country. Officials estimate that franchises account for nearly one-third of all U.S. retail sales. American franchises today provide a wide array of goods and services, from car maintenance, to tax services, to hair care.

In an attempt to tap into the international market, hundreds of U.S. companies have established overseas franchises. The franchise with perhaps the greatest global reach is the one that started it all. In addition to its more than 10,000 U.S. franchises, McDonald's now operates over 14,000 franchises in dozens of countries around the world.

A PERSONAL VOICE RAY KROC

"It requires a certain kind of mind to see the beauty in a hamburger bun. Yet is it any more unusual to find grace in the texture and softly curved silhouette of a bun than to reflect lovingly on the . . . arrangements and textures and colors in a butterfly's wings? . . . Not if you view the bun as an essential material in the art of serving a great many meals fast."

—quoted in *The Fifties*



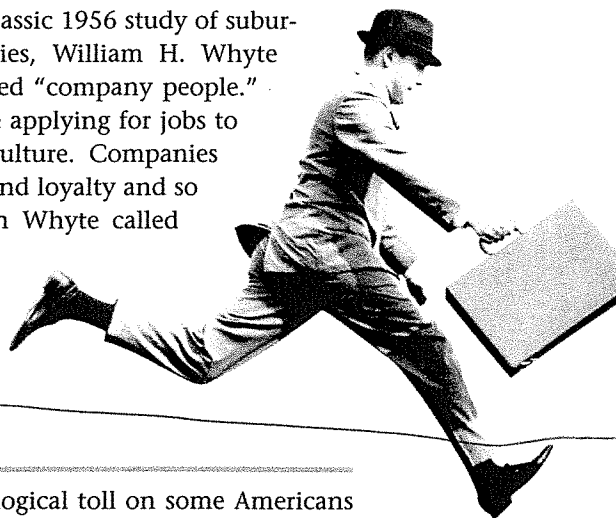
SOCIAL CONFORMITY While franchises like McDonald's helped standardize what people ate, some American workers found themselves becoming standardized as well. Employees who were well paid and held secure jobs in thriving companies sometimes paid a price for economic advancement: a loss of their individuality. In general, businesses did not want creative thinkers, rebels, or anyone who would rock the corporate boat.

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Effects

B What effects did the climate in many corporations have on some workers?

In *The Organization Man*, a book based on a classic 1956 study of suburban Park Forest, Illinois, and other communities, William H. Whyte described how the new, large organizations created “company people.” Companies would give personality tests to people applying for jobs to make sure they would “fit in” the corporate culture. Companies rewarded employees for teamwork, cooperation, and loyalty and so contributed to the growth of conformity, which Whyte called “belongingness.” Despite their success, a number of workers questioned whether pursuing the American dream exacted too high a price, as conformity replaced individuality. B



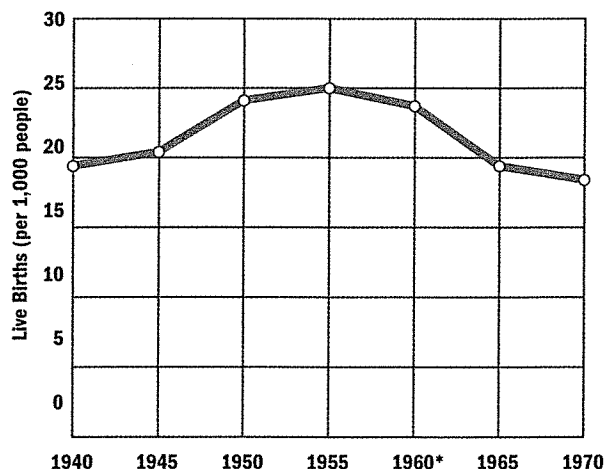
The Suburban Lifestyle

Though achieving job security did take a psychological toll on some Americans who resented having to repress their own personalities, it also enabled people to provide their families with the so-called good things in life. Most Americans worked in cities, but fewer and fewer of them lived there. New highways and the availability and affordability of automobiles and gasoline made commuting possible. By the early 1960s, every large city in the United States was surrounded by suburbs. Of the 13 million new homes built in the 1950s, 85 percent were built in the suburbs. For many people, the suburbs embodied the American dream of an affordable single-family house, good schools, a safe, healthy environment for children, and congenial neighbors just like themselves.

▲ The “organization man” had to step lively to keep up with the Joneses.

THE BABY BOOM As soldiers returned from World War II and settled into family life, they contributed to an unprecedented population explosion known as the **baby boom**. During the late 1940s and through the early 1960s, the birthrate (number of live births per 1,000 people) in the United States soared. At the height of the baby boom, in 1957, one American infant was born every seven seconds—a total of 4,308,000 that year. The result was the largest generation in the nation’s history.

American Birthrate, 1940–1970



*First year for which figures include Alaska and Hawaii.

Source: Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970

SKILLBUILDER Interpreting Graphs

1. What was the overall trend in the birthrate at the start of World War II, and after the war ended?
2. What was the difference in the birthrate between 1960 and 1970?

◀ Some of the 40 million new Americans who were born during the baby boom.

Consumerism Unbound

By the mid-1950s, nearly 60 percent of Americans were members of the middle class, about twice as many as before World War II. They wanted, and had the money to buy, increasing numbers of products. **Consumerism**, buying material goods, came to be equated with success.

NEW PRODUCTS One new product after another appeared in the marketplace, as various industries responded to consumer demand. *Newsweek* magazine reported in 1956 that “hundreds of brand-new goods have become commonplace overnight.” Consumers purchased electric household appliances—such as washing machines, dryers, blenders, freezers, and dishwashers—in record numbers.

With more and more leisure time to fill, people invested in recreational items. They bought televisions, tape recorders, and the new hi-fi (high-fidelity) record players. They bought casual clothing to suit their suburban lifestyles and power lawn mowers, barbecue grills, swimming pools, and lawn decorations for their suburban homes.

PLANNED OBSOLESCENCE In addition to creating new products, manufacturers began using a marketing strategy called **planned obsolescence**. In order to encourage consumers to purchase more goods, manufacturers purposely designed products to become obsolete—that is, to wear out or become outdated—in a short period of time. Carmakers brought out new models every year, urging consumers to stay up-to-date. Because of planned obsolescence, Americans came to expect new and better products, and they began to discard items that were sometimes barely used. Some observers commented that American culture was on its way to becoming a “throwaway society.”

BUY NOW, PAY LATER Many consumers made their purchases on credit and therefore did not have to pay for them right away. The Diner's Club issued the first credit card in 1950, and the American Express card was introduced in 1958. In addition, people bought large items on the installment plan and made regular payments over a fixed time. Home

mortgages (loans for buying a house) and automobile loans worked the same way. During the decade, the total private debt grew from \$73 billion to \$179 billion. Instead of saving money, Americans were spending it, confident that prosperity would continue.

THE ADVERTISING AGE The advertising industry capitalized on this runaway consumerism by encouraging even more spending. Ads were everywhere—in newspapers and magazines, on radio and television, and on billboards along the



▲ In the 1950s, advertisers made “keeping up with the Joneses” a way of life for consumers.

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Causes

Ⓔ How did manufacturers influence Americans to become a “throwaway society”?

highways—prompting people to buy goods that ranged from cars to cereals to cigarettes. Advertisers spent about \$6 billion in 1950; by 1955, the figure was up to \$9 billion. Since most Americans had satisfied their basic needs, advertisers tried to convince them to buy things they really didn't need.

A PERSONAL VOICE VANCE PACKARD

"On May 18, 1956, *The New York Times* printed a remarkable interview with a young man named Gerald Stahl, executive vice-president of the Package Designers Council. He stated: 'Psychiatrists say that people have so much to choose from that they want help—they will like the package that hypnotizes them into picking it.' He urged food packers to put more hypnosis into their package designing, so that the housewife will stick out her hand for it rather than one of many rivals.

Mr. Stahl has found that it takes the average woman exactly twenty seconds to cover an aisle in a supermarket if she doesn't tarry; so a good package design should hypnotize the woman like a flashlight waved in front of her eyes."

—*The Hidden Persuaders*

More and more, ad executives and designers turned to psychology to create new strategies for selling. Advertisers appealed to people's desire for status and "belongingness" and strived to associate their products with those values.

Television became a powerful new advertising tool. The first one-minute TV commercial was produced in 1941 at a cost of \$9. In 1960, advertisers spent a total of \$1.6 billion for television ads. By 2001, a 30-second commercial during the Superbowl cost an advertiser \$2.2 million. Television had become not only the medium for mass transmission of cultural values, but a symbol of popular culture itself.

SECTION 2

ASSESSMENT

1. TERMS & NAMES For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- conglomerate
- franchise

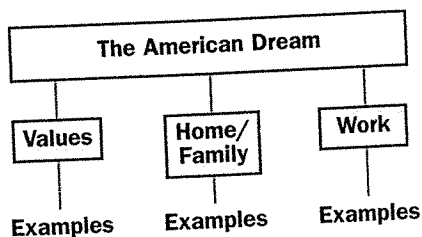
- baby boom
- Dr. Jonas Salk

- consumerism
- planned obsolescence

MAIN IDEA

2. TAKING NOTES

In a graphic organizer like the one below, list examples of specific goals that characterized the American dream for suburbanites in the 1950s.



What do you think the most important goal was?

CRITICAL THINKING

3. ANALYZING EFFECTS

In what ways do you think current environmental consciousness is related to the "throwaway society" of the 1950s? Support your answer.

Think About:

- the purchasing habits of 1950s consumers
- the effects of planned obsolescence
- today's emphasis on recycling

4. EVALUATING

Do you think that the life of a typical suburban homemaker during the 1950s was fulfilling or not? Support your answer.



5. INTERPRETING VISUAL SOURCES

This ad is typical of how the advertising industry portrayed housewives in the 1950s. What message about women is conveyed by this ad?