Section 2

The Affluent Society

For many Americans, the 1950s was a time of affluence, with many new technological breakthroughs. In addition, new forms of entertainment created a generational divide between young people and adults.

American Abundance

MAIN Idea America entered a period of postwar abundance, with expanding suburbs, growing families, and more white-collar jobs.

HISTORY AND YOU Have you ever noticed that every restaurant in a pizza chain looks alike? Read on to learn about the rise of franchises.

The 1950s was a decade of incredible prosperity. Between 1940 and 1955, the average income of American families roughly tripled. Americans in all income brackets—poor, middle-class, and wealthy—experienced this rapid rise in income. In 1958 economist John Kenneth Galbraith published *The Affluent Society*, in which he claimed that the nation’s postwar prosperity was a new phenomenon. In the past, Galbraith said, all societies had an “economy of scarcity,” meaning that a lack of resources and overpopulation had limited economic productivity. Now, the United States had created what Galbraith called an “economy of abundance.” New business techniques and improved technology enabled the nation to produce an abundance of goods and services, thereby dramatically raising the standard of living for Americans.

The economic boom of the 1950s provided most Americans with more disposable income than ever before and, as in the 1920s, they began to spend it on new consumer goods, including refrigerators, washing machines, televisions, and air conditioners. Advertising helped fuel the nation’s spending spree. Advertising became the fastest-growing industry in the United States, as manufacturers employed new marketing techniques to sell their products. These techniques were carefully planned to whet the consumer’s appetite. A second car became a symbol of status, a freezer became a promise of plenty, and mouthwash was portrayed as the key to immediate success.

The Growth of Suburbia

Advertisers targeted consumers who had money to spend. Many of these consumers lived in new mass-produced suburbs that grew up around cities in the 1950s. **Levittown**, New York, was one of the earliest of the mass-produced suburbs. The driving force behind this planned residential community was Bill Levitt, who mass-produced hundreds of simple and similar-looking homes in a potato field 10 miles east of New York City. Between 1947 and 1951, thousands of
families rushed to buy the inexpensive homes. These new suburbs multiplied throughout the United States. Suburbs became increasingly popular during the 1950s, accounting for about 85 percent of new home construction. The number of suburban dwellers doubled, while the population of cities rose only 10 percent.

Reasons for the rapid growth of suburbia varied. Some people wanted to escape the crime and congestion of city neighborhoods. Others believed the suburbs would provide a better life for themselves and their children. For millions of Americans, the suburbs came to symbolize the American dream.

Affordability was a key reason that home buyers moved to the suburbs. With the GI Bill providing low-interest loans to veterans, buying a new house was more affordable than at any previous time in American history. The government’s decision to give income tax deductions for home-mortgage interest payments and property taxes made owning a home even more attractive. Between 1940 and 1960, the number of Americans who owned their own homes rose from about 41 percent to about 61 percent.

**The Baby Boom**

The American birthrate exploded after World War II. From 1945 to 1961, a period known as the baby boom, more than 65 million children were born in the United States. At the height of the baby boom, a child was born every seven seconds.

Several factors contributed to the baby boom. First, young couples who had delayed marriage during World War II and the Korean War could now marry, buy homes, and begin their families. In addition, the government encouraged the growth of families by offering generous GI benefits for home purchases. Finally, on television and in magazines, popular culture celebrated pregnancy, parenthood, and large families.
The Changing Workplace

Dramatic changes in the workplace accompanied the country’s economic growth. The ongoing mechanization of farms and factories accelerated in the 1950s. As a result, more Americans began working in offices. These jobs came to be referred to as **white-collar jobs**, because employees typically wore a white shirt and tie to work, instead of the blue denim of factory workers and laborers. In 1956, for the first time, white-collar workers outnumbered **blue-collar workers**.

Many white-collar employees worked for large corporations. As these businesses competed with each other, some expanded overseas. These **multinational corporations** located themselves closer to important raw materials and benefited from a cheaper labor pool, which made them more competitive.

The 1950s also witnessed the rise of **franchises**, in which a person owns and runs one or several stores of a chain operation. Because many business leaders believed that consumers valued dependability and familiarity, the owners of chain operations often demanded that their franchises present a uniform look and style.

Like franchise owners, many corporate leaders expected their employees to **conform** to company standards. In general, they did not want free-thinking individuals or people who might speak out or criticize the company. Some observers criticized this trend. In his 1950 book *The Lonely Crowd*, sociologist David Riesman argued that this conformity was changing people. Formerly, he claimed, people were “inner-directed,” judging themselves on the basis of their own values and the esteem of their families. Now, however, people were becoming “other-directed”—concerned with winning the approval of the corporation or community.

In his 1956 book, *The Organization Man*, William H. Whyte, Jr., attacked the similarity many business organizations cultivated to keep any individual from dominating. “In group doctrine,” Whyte wrote, “the strong personality is viewed with overwhelming suspicion,” and the person with ideas is considered “a threat.”

Scientific Advances

**MAIN Idea** Computers began a business revolution, and doctors discovered new ways to fight disease.

**HISTORY AND YOU** Do you own a computer? Read on to learn about the earliest computers.

As the United States experienced many social changes during the postwar era, the nation also witnessed several important scientific advances. In electronics and medicine, American scientists broke new ground during the 1950s.

**Advances in Electronics**

The electronics industry made rapid advances after World War II. In 1947 three American physicists—John Bardeen, Walter H. Brattain, and William Shockley—developed the transistor, a tiny device that generated electric signals and made it possible to miniaturize radios and calculators. Radios, once a large piece of furniture, became portable and could be easily carried to the beach or other places.

The age of computers also dawned in the postwar era. In 1946 scientists working under a U.S. Army contract developed one of the nation’s earliest computers—known as ENIAC (Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer)—to make military calculations. Several years later, a newer model called UNIVAC (Universal Automatic Computer) would process business data and launch the computer revolution. The computer, along with changes and improvements in communication and transportation systems, allowed many Americans to work more quickly and efficiently.

**Medical Miracles**

The medical breakthroughs of the 1950s included the development of new, powerful antibiotics and vaccines to fight infection and the introduction of new techniques to fight cancer and heart disease.

Prior to the 1950s, cancer had been thought to be untreatable. The development of radiation treatments and chemotherapy in the 1950s helped many cancer patients survive. Similarly, treatments for heart disease had eluded...
scientists for decades, and when someone suffered a heart attack, nothing could be done. In 1950, however, doctors developed cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), a technique that has saved many lives. Doctors also began replacing worn-out heart valves with mechanical valves and implanted the first pacemakers in 1952.

A third disease that had frightened Americans for decades was tuberculosis, a lung disease also known as the white plague. The disease was both highly infectious and contagious, so patients lived in isolation in sanatoriums. In 1956 for the first time, tuberculosis fell from the list of the top ten fatal diseases. New antibiotics and a blood test for the disease finally put an end to fear of tuberculosis.

Polio, too, finally yielded to science. Polio epidemics had been occurring in the United States since 1916. The viral disease had struck Franklin Roosevelt as a young man and forced him to use a wheelchair and wear steel braces on his legs. In the 1940s and 1950s, widespread polio epidemics terrorized the nation. Every summer, polio broke out somewhere in the country. Many died; those who did not were often confined to iron lungs—large metal tanks with pumps that helped patients breathe. Even if they eventually recovered, they were often paralyzed for life.

Each summer, parents searched for ways to safeguard their families from the dreaded disease. Some sent their children to the country to avoid excessive contact with others. Public swimming pools and beaches were closed. Parks and playgrounds across the country stood deserted. Nevertheless, the disease continued to strike. In 1952 a record 58,000 new cases were reported.

Finally, research scientist Jonas Salk developed an injectable vaccine to prevent polio. Salk first tested the vaccine on himself, his wife, and his three sons, and then on 2 million schoolchildren. In 1955 the vaccine became available to the general public. American scientist Albert Sabin then developed an oral vaccine for polio. Safer and more convenient than Salk’s injection vaccine, the Sabin vaccine became the most common method for preventing the disease. The threat of polio nearly disappeared.

Examining What medical and technological advances met specific needs in the late 1940s and 1950s?
The New Mass Media

**MAIN Idea** The rise of television led to changes in the movie and radio industries.

**HISTORY AND YOU** How many hours of television do you watch weekly? Read to find out about the early days of television broadcasting.

Although regular television broadcasts had begun in the early 1940s, there were few stations, and sets were expensive. There were estimated to be no more than 8,000 sets in use in the entire United States in 1946. By the late 1950s, however, small black-and-white-screened televisions sat in living rooms across the country. Nearly 40 million televisions had been sold by 1957, and more than 80 percent of families had at least one television.

### The Rise of Television

Early television programs fell into several main categories, including comedy, action and adventure, and variety entertainment. In 1953 Lucille Ball and her real-life husband, Desi Arnaz, starred in one of the most popular shows ever to air on American television, a situation comedy (sitcom) called *I Love Lucy*. The episode in which Lucy gave birth (which paralleled Lucille Ball’s actual pregnancy) had an audience of 44 million viewers. Fewer people tuned in to watch the presidential inauguration the following day.

Comedy proved popular in other formats. Many early comedy shows, such as those starring Bob Hope and Jack Benny, were adapted from radio programs. Variety shows, such as Ed Sullivan’s *Toast of the Town*, provided a mix of comedy, music, dance, acrobatics, and juggling. Quiz shows also drew large audiences after the 1955 debut of *The $64,000 Question*. In this show and its many imitators, two contestants tried to answer questions from separate, soundproof booths.

Television viewers also enjoyed action shows. Westerns such as *Hopalong Cassidy, The Lone Ranger, and Gunsmoke* grew quickly in popularity. Viewers also enjoyed police shows...

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**Analyzing VISUALS**

1. **Explaining** How did *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* reflect an idealized American family?

2. **Making Generalizations** To what type of audience were most of these television programs designed to appeal?
such as Dragnet, a hugely successful show featuring Detective Joe Friday and his partner hunting down a new criminal each week. By the late 1950s, television news had also become an important vehicle for information, and televised athletic events had made professional and college sports a popular choice for entertainment.

Hollywood Responds

As the popularity of television grew, movies lost viewers. Weekly movie attendance dropped from 82 million in 1946 to 36 million by 1950. By 1960, when some 50 million Americans owned televisions, one-fifth of the nation’s movie theaters had closed.

Throughout the 1950s, Hollywood struggled to recapture its audience. When contests, door prizes, and advertising failed to lure people back, Hollywood tried 3-D films that required the audience to wear special glasses. Viewers soon tired of the glasses and the often ridiculous plots of 3-D movies.

Cinemascope—a process that showed movies on large, panoramic screens—finally gave Hollywood something television could not match. Wide-screen, full-color spectacles like The Robe, The Ten Commandments, and Around the World in 80 Days cost a great deal of money to produce. These blockbusters, however, made up for their cost by attracting huge audiences and netting large profits.

Radio Draws Them In

Television also forced the radio industry to change in order to keep its audience. Television made radio comedies, dramas, and soap operas obsolete. Radio stations responded by broadcasting recorded music, news, weather, sports, and talk shows.

Radio also had one audience that television could not reach—people traveling in their cars. In some ways, the automobile saved the radio industry. People commuting to and from work, running errands, or traveling on long road trips relied on radio for information and entertainment. As a result, radio stations survived and even flourished. The number of radio stations more than doubled between 1948 and 1957.

Identifying How did the television industry affect the U.S. economy?

New Music and Poetry

MAIN Idea Young people developed their own popular culture based largely on rock ‘n’ roll music and literature of the beat movement.

HISTORY AND YOU How do the adults you know feel about your favorite music? Read on to learn of the conflicts over musical taste that began during the 1950s.

Many teens in every generation seek to separate themselves from their parents. One way of creating that separation is by embracing different music. In that respect, the 1950s were no different from earlier decades, but the results were different for two reasons.

For the first time, teens had large amounts of disposable income that could be spent on entertainment designed specifically for them. In addition, the new mass media meant that teens across the country could hear the same music broadcast or watch the same television shows. The result was the rise of an independent youth culture separate from adult culture. The new youth culture became an independent market for the entertainment and advertising industries.

Rock ‘n’ Roll

In 1951 at a record store in downtown Cleveland, Ohio, radio disc jockey Alan Freed noticed white teenagers buying African American rhythm-and-blues records and dancing to the music in the store. Freed convinced his station manager to play the music on the air. Just as the disc jockey had suspected, the listeners went crazy for it. Soon, white artists began making music that stemmed from these African American rhythms and sounds, and a new form of music, rock ‘n’ roll, was born.

With a loud and heavy beat that made it ideal for dancing, along with lyrics about romance, cars, and other themes that appealed to young people, rock ‘n’ roll became wildly popular with the nation’s teens. Before long, teenagers around the country were rushing out to buy recordings from such artists as Buddy Holly, Chuck Berry, and Bill Haley and the Comets. In 1956 teenagers found their first rock ‘n’ roll hero in Elvis Presley, who became known as the “King of Rock ‘n’ Roll.”
Elvis Presley was born in rural Mississippi and grew up poor in Memphis, Tennessee. While in high school, Presley learned to play guitar and sing by imitating the rhythm-and-blues music he heard on the radio. By 1956, the handsome young Elvis had a record deal with RCA Victor, a movie contract, and had made public appearances on several television shows. At first, the popular television variety show host Ed Sullivan refused to invite Presley to appear, insisting that rock ‘n’ roll music was not fit for a family-oriented show. When a competing show featuring Presley upset Sullivan’s high ratings, however, he relented. He ended up paying Presley $50,000 per performance for three appearances, more than triple the amount he had paid any other performer.

Presley owed his wild popularity as much to his moves as to his music. During his performances he would gyrate his hips and dance in ways that shocked many in the audience. Not surprisingly, parents—many of whom listened to Frank Sinatra and other more mellow, mainstream artists—condemned rock ‘n’ roll as loud, mindless, and dangerous. The city council of San Antonio, Texas, actually banned rock ‘n’ roll from the jukeboxes at public swimming pools.

The rock ‘n’ roll hits that teens bought in record numbers united them in a world their parents did not share. Thus, in the 1950s,
rock ‘n’ roll helped to create what became known as the generation gap, or the cultural separation between children and their parents.

### The Beat Movement

If rock ‘n’ roll helped to create a generation gap, a group of mostly white writers and artists who called themselves beats, or beatniks, highlighted a values gap in 1950s America. The term “beat” may have come from the feeling among group members of being “beaten down” by American culture, or from jazz musicians who would say, “I’m beat right down to my socks.”

Beat poets, writers, and artists harshly criticized what they considered the sterility and conformity of American life, the meaninglessness of American politics, and the emptiness of popular culture. In 1956, 29-year-old beat poet Allen Ginsberg published a long poem titled “Howl,” which blasted modern American life. Another beat member, Jack Kerouac, published On the Road in 1957. Although Kerouac’s book about his freewheeling adventures with a car thief and con artist shocked some readers, the book went on to become a classic in modern American literature. Although the beat movement remained relatively small, it laid the foundations for the more widespread youth cultural rebellion of the 1960s.

### African American Entertainers

African American entertainers struggled to find acceptance in a country that often treated them as second-class citizens. With a few notable exceptions, television tended to shut out African Americans. In 1956 NBC gave a popular African American singer named Nat King Cole his own 15-minute musical variety show. In 1958, after 64 episodes, NBC canceled the show after failing to secure a national sponsor for a show hosted by an African American.

African American rock ‘n’ roll singers faced fewer obstacles. The talented African Americans who recorded hit songs in the 1950s included Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Fats Domino, and Ray Charles. The late 1950s and early 1960s also saw the rise of several female African American groups, including the Crystals, the Shirelles, and the Ronettes. With their catchy, popular sound, these groups were the musical predecessors of the famous late 1960s groups Martha and the Vandellas and the Supremes.

Over time, the music of the early rock ‘n’ roll artists had a profound influence on popular music throughout the world. Little Richard and Chuck Berry, for example, provided inspiration for the Beatles, whose music swept Britain and the world in the 1960s. Elvis Presley’s music transformed generations of rock ‘n’ roll bands that followed him and other pioneers of rock.

Despite the innovations in music and the economic boom of the 1950s, not all Americans were part of the affluent society. For many of the country’s minorities and rural poor, the American dream remained well out of reach.

**Summarizing** How did rock ‘n’ roll help create the generation gap?
Profile

James Dean had a brief but spectacular career as a film star. His role in Rebel Without a Cause made him an icon for American youth in the mid-50s. In 1955 Dean was killed in a car crash. He was 24.

“I guess I have as good an insight into this rising generation as any other young man my age. Therefore, when I do play a youth, I try to imitate life. Rebel Without a Cause deals with the problems of modern youth. . . . If you want the kids to come and see the picture, you’ve got to try to reach them on their own grounds. If a picture is psychologically motivated, if there is truth in the relationships in it, then I think that picture will do good.”

—from an interview for Rebel Without a Cause

Winners & Losers

**POODLE CUTS**
Short, curly hairstyle gains wide popularity and acceptance

**TV GUIDE**
New weekly magazine achieves circulation of 6.5 million by 1959

**PALMER PAINT COMPANY OF DETROIT**
Sells 12 million paint-by-number kits ranging from simple landscapes and portraits to Leonardo da Vinci’s The Last Supper

**THE DUCKTAIL**
Banned in several Massachusetts schools in 1957

**COLLIER’S**
The respected magazine loses circulation, publishes its final edition on January 4, 1957

**LEONARDO DA VINCI’S THE LAST SUPPER**
Now everyone can paint their own copy to hang in their homes

Verbatim

“‘It will make a wonderful place for the children to play in, and it will be a good storehouse, too.’”

MRS. RUTH CALHOUN,
mother of three, on her backyard fallout shelter, 1951

“‘Riddle: What’s college? That’s where girls who are above cooking and sewing go to meet a man they can spend their lives cooking and sewing for.’”

ad for Gimbel’s department store campus clothes, 1952

“Radioactive poisoning of the atmosphere and hence annihilation of any life on Earth has been brought within the range of technical possibilities.”

ALBERT EINSTEIN, physicist, 1950

“If the television craze continues with the present level of programs, we are destined to have a nation of morons.”

DANIEL MARSH, President of Boston University, 1950

“Every time the Russians throw an American in jail, the House Un-American Activities Committee throws an American in jail to get even.”

MORT SAHL, comedian, 1950s
**1950s Word Play**

**Translation, Please!**

*Match the word to its meaning.*

**Teen-Age Lingo**

1. cool — a. a dull person, an outsider
2. hang loose — b. worthy of approval
3. hairy — c. formidable
4. yo-yo — d. don’t worry

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**American Scene, 1950–1960**

*(Millions)*

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**Be Prepared**

“*Know the Bomb’s True Dangers. Know the Steps You Can Take to Escape Them!—You Can Survive.*”

*Government pamphlet, 1950*

**DIGGING YOUR OWN BOMB SHELTER?**

Better go shopping. Below is a list of items included with the $3,000 Mark I Kidde Kokoon, designed to accommodate a family of five for a three-to-five-day underground stay.

- air blower
- radiation detector
- protective apparel suit
- face respirator
- radiation charts (4)
- hand shovel (for digging out after the blast)
- gasoline driven generator
- gasoline (10 gallons)
- chemical toilet
- toilet chemicals (2 gallons)
- bunks (5)
- mattresses and blankets (5)
- air pump (blowing up mattresses)
- incandescent bulbs (2) 40 watts
- fuses (2) 5 amperes
- clock—non-electric
- first aid kit
- waterless hand cleaner
- sterno stove
- canned water (10 gallons)
- canned food (meat, powdered milk, cereal, sugar, etc.)
- paper products

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**Numbers 1957**

- **3¢** Cost of first-class postage stamp
- **19¢** Cost of loaf of bread
- **25¢** Cost of issue of Sports Illustrated
- **35¢** Cost of movie ticket
- **50¢** Cost of gallon of milk (delivered)
- **$2.05** Average hourly wage
- **$2,845** Cost of new car
- **$5,234** Median income for a family of four
- **$19,500** Median price of a home

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**Critical Thinking**

1. **Predicting** If the number of American children continued to grow, how would that affect bicycle production and Scout membership? How could that growth affect the American economy?

2. **Hypothesizing** How have attitudes towards women changed since the 1952 department store ad for campus clothes? What do you think are some reasons for the change in attitude?