

1950's

Major Themes:

The Cold War
Modern Civil Rights
Economy and Society

Presidencies:

Harry S. Truman (D) – 1945 – 53
Dwight D. Eisenhower (R) – 1953-61

Overview:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. OK, I didn't come up with that line, but it was true of the 1950's in America. Economically, the 1950's were great – almost full employment, good middle class wages, rising home ownership, low inflation. Best it had ever been actually. Americans came home from the war and went to school on the GI Bill, then got married, bought a house in the suburbs, and started a family. It was the beginning of the baby boom generation. It was the first time we saw large numbers of two car families. Televisions became common in households across the country. In all of these ways, it was a good decade to be alive.

It was also dominated by the Cold War, continuing right where it left off in the 1940's. In the late 1940's, George F. Kennan had written his Long Telegram, advising a foreign policy of containment against Soviet communist expansion. We took that to heart in the 1950's, as the decade started off with communist North Korea invading non-communist US ally South Korea. Truman went to the United Nations (the Soviets were gone that day) and secured an international resolution to defend South Korea. While a small force of American troops was being pushed down the peninsula, a large army under General Douglas MacArthur left the US bound for Korea. As soon as it landed at Inchon in September of 1950, the North Koreans were surrounded and forced to give up in large numbers. Going a bit beyond containment, he continued across the 38th parallel, into North Korea, determined to liberate it from communism. The country directly north of North Korea is China, whose communist government was only a year old. What would you think if you were them? They believed we were coming to invade them, and sent 300,000 Chinese troops across the border to engage our army. Thus, the war shifted again, and MacArthur withdrew back into South Korea. Now the war stabilized into a stalemate, as American technology held off Chinese numbers, and would stay this way until a cease fire was arranged in 1953. It felt strange to Americans, who successfully "contained" communism, but didn't feel like they had actually won the war.

Other technologies were advancing as well. We invented the Hydrogen Bomb in 1952, which was much more powerful, and both sides developed ICBMs, or nuclear missiles. After Eisenhower's election, we continually spent a large part of our national budget on national defense, preparing for World War III. As if Americans weren't scared enough, Senator Joseph McCarthy, trying himself to get to the White House someday, stood up in front of the Senate and declared that he had a black notebook with 500 names of known communists working in the United States government. This opened the Second Red Scare, from 1950 – 54, where he held public hearings where accused communists were called to testify before the Senate. It was a witch hunt that destroyed nearly 15,000 careers before the public and the Senate clued in to the fact that McCarthy was full of hot air and censured him.

The Cold War marched merrily on, though, as Guatemala in 1954 had elected a socialist reformer named Jakobo Arbenz. He wasn't really a communist, but had native roots, and wanted to distribute the land in the country to poor farmers, taking it from American companies like United

Fruit. Add all of this together, and the US government, along with the CIA, assassinated Arbenz and helped to install a pro-American dictatorship.

Very soon after this, an anti-communist, anti-Soviet uprising took place in Hungary in 1956. Hungary was a member of the Warsaw Pact. As it wasn't truly containment, and didn't fit our foreign policy, America did nothing to help, and the rebellion was crushed by Soviet tanks, a warning to any other communist state that chose to resist their domination.

The Soviets then took the Cold War to another level – space. The first man-made satellite, Sputnik, was launched in 1957, and safe to say, Americans freaked. I mean, we were frightened enough as it was, so the idea that the Soviets were able to potentially place nuclear missiles in space, where they could not be detected terrified our people and our government. Quickly the government reacted by passing the National Defense Education Act, allocating billions of dollars towards universities and research facilities, providing scholarships for engineers and scientists and raising all high school math and science requirements. They also created the AP program, and NASA.

In 1958, the first legitimate communist revolution in the hemisphere took place – in Cuba. Fidel Castro, a 33 year old revolutionary we had supported at first, announced he was allying himself with the Soviet Union. Now there were many options and policies for us to consider. The Monroe Doctrine, the Roosevelt Corollary, or containment would all be justification in our minds for invading Cuba or toppling Castro. What Eisenhower decided on was an invasion by Cuban exiles, 1500 of them, who the CIA would train, and we would transport to the Bay of Pigs. Though the invasion wouldn't happen until Kennedy's administration, at least some of the blame for its failure would have to lie with Ike. As Ike finished out his second term as President, he gave his famous Military-Industrial speech as a warning to Americans against becoming too economically dependent on military spending for jobs. He would turn out to be completely right in later generations.

We haven't even talked about the Civil Rights movement, which really got moving in the 1950's. In 1954, the Supreme Court issued a revolutionary ruling, *Brown v. Board of Education*, which declared all Jim Crow segregation laws unconstitutional, and specifically the "separate but equal" doctrine practiced in American schools. The South would, of course resist. A young African-American from Chicago, Emmitt Till, was lynched by two white men in early 1955, then were found innocent of the crime. His very public funeral in Chicago was widely publicized, and sympathy for civil rights grew in other parts of the country. That same year, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King and the SCLC started the Montgomery Bus Boycott, motivating thousands of blacks in Alabama not to take public buses until they were desegregated. This type of non-violent civil disobedience was very effective, and with help from the Supreme Court once again, the buses were integrated by 1956. In 1957, Arkansas Governor Orval "I'm a geek" Faubus tried to get re-elected by refusing the admission of black students to Little Rock's Central High School, despite *Brown v. Board* three years earlier. It would take the occupation of Little Rock by the 101st Airborne, ordered by Eisenhower, to enforce integration. The Civil Rights movement was just getting started, really, and the 1960's were much more decisive in accomplishing some equality for blacks.

The 1950's were all about conformity, and the people who criticized it. Books like *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* and movies like James' dean's *Rebel Without a Cause* promoted rebellion against the expectations set down by the World War II generation. This was the roots of what would later become the Counterculture.