Slide 1

Chapter 36

American Zenith,
1952–1963
Part II - Culture

THE AMERICAN PAGEANT

DAVID M. KENNEDY • LIZABETH COHEN

SEVENTEENTH EDITION

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Slide 2

I. Affluence and Its Anxieties

- Prosperity boom
  - Housing:
    - Fabulous surge in home construction
      - 1960: 25% of all homes had been built in decade of 1950s
        » 83% of those new houses in suburbia
  - Science and technology:
    - Invention of transistor (1948) sparked revolution in electronics, especially computers
      - First electronic computers were massive machines
      - Computer giant International Business Machine (IBM) prototype of "high-tech" corporation in new "information age"

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THE 1950s:

"Conservatism, Complacency, and Contentment"

OR

"Anxiety, Alienation, and Social Unrest" ??

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Slide 4

1A. Baby Boom

It seems to me that every other young housewife I see is pregnant.
-- British visitor to America, 1958
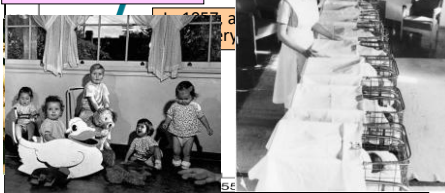

U.S. Birth Rate, 1931-1970

1957 → 1 baby born every 7 seconds

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Slide 5

Americans produced a "baby boom" in the 1950s, leading to the largest generation in U.S. history

The return of soldiers from war led to an increase in marriages & a rise in the birthrate
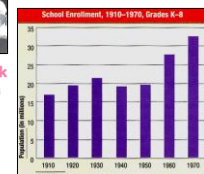

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1B. Baby Boom

More babies born in the 5 years after WWII than the 30 years before

School Enrollment, 1910–1970, Grades K–8

Dr. Benjamin Spock and the Anderson Quintuplets

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2A. Suburban Living

Levittown, L. I.: "The American Dream"

1949 → **William Levitt** produced 150 houses per week.

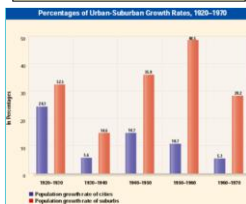$7,990 or $60/month with no down payment.

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Slide 9

Suburbs boomed in the 1950s

The majority of Americans worked in cities but wanted the security of suburbs for their families

Suburbs offered peace of mind, affordable homes, & good schools

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2A. Suburban Living:
The New "American Dream"

- 1 story high
- 12'x19' living room
- 2 bedrooms
- tiled bathroom
- garage
- small backyard
- front lawn

By 1960 → 1/3 of the U. S. population in the suburbs.

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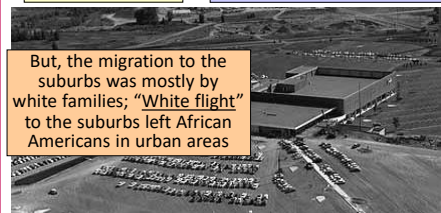## Slide 12

Suburbs changed American life

Suburbs increased America's need for cars & highways

Churches, schools, grocery stores, & shopping centers were build to service the suburbs

But, the migration to the suburbs was mostly by white families; "White flight" to the suburbs left African Americans in urban areas

Southdale Shopping Center (Minnesota) the 1st enclosed, air-conditioned mall

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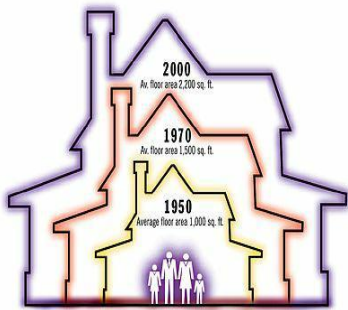
2ʙ. Suburban Living

SHIFTS IN POPULATION DISTRIBUTION, 1940-1970

	1940	1950	1960	1970
Central Cities	31.6%	32.3%	32.6%	32.0%
Suburbs	19.5%	23.8%	30.7%	41.6%
Rural Areas/ Small Towns	48.9%	43.9%	36.7%	26.4%

U. S. Bureau of the Census.

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2c. Suburban Living:
The Typical TV Suburban Families

The Donna Reed Show 1958-1966

Leave It to Beaver 1957-1963

Father Knows Best 1954-1958

The Ozzie & Harriet Show 1952-1966

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3a. Consumerism

1950 → Introduction of the Diner's Card

All babies were potential consumers who spearheaded a brand-new market for food, clothing, and shelter.
-- *Life* Magazine (May, 1958)

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3ʙ. Consumerism

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Consumer Culture in the Fifties

– As 1950s closed:
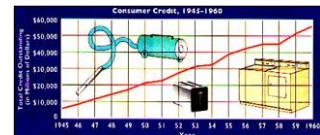- Americans becoming free-spending consumers of mass-produced, standardized products
- Critics lamented implications of new consumerist lifestyle:
  – David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), portrayed postwar generation as pack of conformists
    – As did William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (1956)
    – And Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955)
  – John Kenneth Galbraith bemoaned spectacle of private opulence amidst public squalor in *The Affluent Society* (1958)
    – His call for more investment in public good ignored during affluent 1950s

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4A. A Changing Workplace

Automation:

1947-1957 → factory workers decreased by 4.3%, eliminating 1.5 million blue-collar jobs.

By 1956 → more white-collar than blue-collar jobs in the U. S.

Computers → Mark I (1944). First IBM mainframe computer (1951).

Corporate Consolidation:

By 1960 → 600 corporations (1/2 of all U. S. companies) accounted for 53% of total corporate income.

WHY?? Cold War military buildup.

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4B. A Changing Workplace

New Corporate Culture:
"The Company Man"

1956 → Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*

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5A. The Culture of the Car

Car registrations: 1945 → 25,000,000
                      1960 → 60,000,000

2-family cars doubles from 1951-1958

1958 Pink Cadillac   1959 Chevy Corvette

1956 → Interstate Highway Act → largest public works project in American history!

Â Cost $32 billion.

Â 41,000 miles of new highways built.

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In the 1950s, Americans bought cars in record numbers

The growth of suburbs, creative advertising, easy credit, & cheap gasoline led to a car boom

Automobile companies made big, powerful, flashy cars

Eldorado

the MIGHTY CHRYSLER for 1957

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Watch this video and identify 3 characteristics of life in America in the 1950s

Let's take a look at Lifeguard Design in the '56 FORD

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5ʙ. The Culture of the Car

America became a more homogeneous nation because of the automobile.

First McDonald's (1955)

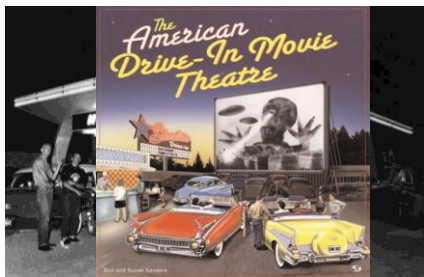Howard Johnson's

Drive-In Movies

Chain Motels

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"Automania" transformed America

Cars led to drive-thru restaurants & drive-in movies

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Think Fredrick Winslow Taylor and the Assembly line!?

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6/5/2025

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"Automania" transformed America

Americans were more mobile, took long-distance vacations, & lived further from their jobs

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5c. The Culture of the Car

The U. S. population was on the move in the 1950s.

NE & Mid-W → S & SW ("Sunbelt" states)

1955 → Disneyland opened in Southern California. (40% of the guests came from outside California, most by car.)

Frontier Land   Main Street   Tomorrow Land

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• 5C. The Culture of the Car for African Americans

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6a. Television

1946 →   7,000 TV sets in the U. S.
1950 →   50,000,000 TV sets in the U. S.

Television is a vast wasteland. → Newton Minnow, Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, 1961

Mass Audience → TV celebrated traditional American values.

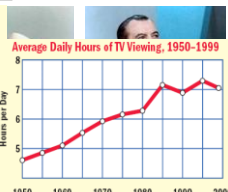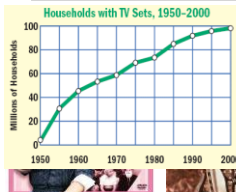*Truth, Justice, and the American way!*

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Americans enjoyed new forms of entertainment

Television boomed as Americans watched comedies, news reports, westerns, & variety shows

TV ownership jumped from 9% in 1950 to 90% by 1960 (45 million)

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Businesses took advantage of TV to advertise goods to buyers

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6B. Television – The Western

Davy Crockett
King of the Wild Frontier

Sheriff Matt
Dillon, *Gunsmoke*

The Lone Ranger
(and his faithful
sidekick, Tonto):
Who is that masked man??

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6C. Television - Family Shows

**Glossy view of mostly
middle-class suburban life.**

But...

I Love Lucy   *The Honeymooners*

Social Winners?...   AND...   Loosers?

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7A. Teen Culture

In the 1950s → the word "teenager" entered the
American language.

By 1956 → 13 mil. teens with $7 bil.to spend a year.

1951 → "race music" → "ROCK 'N ROLL"

Elvis Presley → "The King"

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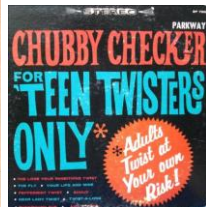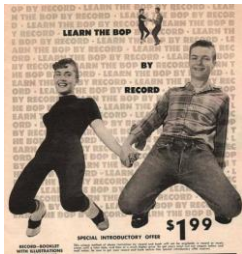Teenagers were an important force in the 1950s

Suburban teens had leisure time & money to spend

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Teenagers were an important force in the 1950s

Businesses targeted teenagers, selling
billions of dollars of "cool" consumer goods

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Music changed in the 1950s

"Doo-wop" music dominated the early 1950s...

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Music changed in the 1950s

…but, was challenged in popularity by rock n' roll

Rock n' roll was inspired by black artists, but Elvis Presley made it popular among the youth

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Rock scared parents who thought the fast beats were immoral

This rock 'n' roll music is a SIN!

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7ʙ. Teen Culture

"Juvenile Delinquency"   ???

1951 → J. D. Salinger's
A Catcher in the Rye

Marlon Brando in
The Wild One
(1953)

James Dean in
Rebel Without a Cause (1955)

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Hollywood movies targeted teens & made films about "juvenile delinquency"

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7c. Teen Culture

The "Beat" Generation:

- ƒ Jack Kerouac → *On The Road*
- ƒ Allen Ginsberg → poem, "Howl"
- ƒ Neal Cassady
- ƒ William S. Burroughs

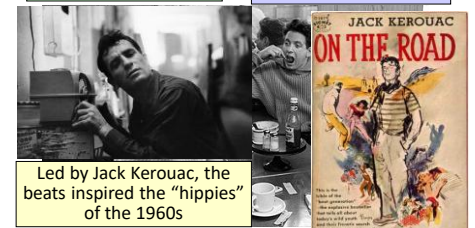"Beatnik"   "Clean" Teen

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The "beat movement" rejected conformity

"Beatniks" were artists & writers who lived non-conformist lives

They rejected the suburbs, consumerism, & "regular jobs"

Led by Jack Kerouac, the beats inspired the "hippies" of the 1960s

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7ᴅ. Teen Culture

Behavioral Rules of the 1950s:
- u **Obey Authority.**
- u **Control Your Emotions.**
- u **Don't Make Waves → Fit in with the Group.**
- u **Don't Even Think About Sex!!!**

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10 Min

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8ᴀ. Religious Revival

Today in the U. S., the Christian faith is back in the center of things. -- Time magazine, 1954

<u>Church membership</u>: 1940 →   64,000,000
1960 → 114,000,000

<u>Television Preachers</u>:
1. Catholic Bishop Fulton J. Sheen → "Life is Worth Living"
2. Methodist Minister Norman Vincent Peale → *The Power of Positive Thinking*
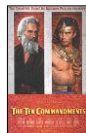3. Reverend Billy Graham → ecumenical message; warned against the evils of Communism.

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8B. Religious Revival

Hollywood: apex of the biblical epics.

The Robe
1953

The Ten Commandments
1956
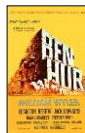
Ben Hur
1959

It's un-American to be un-religious!
-- The Christian Century, 1954

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9ᴀ. Well-Defined Gender Roles

The ideal modern woman married, cooked and cared for her family, and kept herself busy by joining the local PTA and leading a troop of Campfire Girls. She entertained guests in her family's suburban house and worked out on the trampoline to keep her size 12 figure.
-- Life magazine, 1956

Marilyn Monroe

The ideal 1950s man was the provider, protector, and the boss of the house. -- Life magazine, 1955

1956 → William H. Whyte, Jr. → *The Organization Man*
A a middle-class, white suburban male is the ideal.

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TV, movies, & advertising in the 1950s
promoted conformity & stereotypes

The "ideal man" was provider & boss of the house

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Affluence and Its Anxieties

– Women and industry:
- Surge in white-collar employment opened special opportunities for women
- After WWII, many women left paid work
- A "cult of domesticity" emerged in popular culture to celebrate eternal feminine functions of wife and mother
- Quite revolution occurred:
  – Of 40 million new jobs created from 1950-1980,
  – more than 30 million jobs in clerical and service work
- "Pink-collar ghetto" were occupations dominated by women

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TV, movies, & advertising in the 1950s
promoted conformity & stereotypes

The "ideal woman" was a housewife & mother

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The media promoted women as mothers & homemakers, but almost 40% of mothers had jobs

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(Sources: *Historical Statistics of the United States* and *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, relevant years.)

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Affluence and Its Anxieties

- Urban age and women:
  - Women's new dual role: *both* worker *and* homemaker raised urgent questions:
    - About family,
    - And traditional definitions of gender differences
  - Feminist Betty Friedan:
    - *The Feminine Mystique* (1963): a classic of feminist protest literature that launched modern women's movement
    - Criticized stifling boredom of suburban housewifery

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9B. Well-Defined Gender Roles

Changing Sexual Behavior:

Alfred Kinsey:
- 1948 → *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*
- 1953 → *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*

v Premarital sex was common.

v Extramarital affairs were frequent among married couples.

Kinsey's results are an assault on the family as a basic unit of society, a negation of moral law, and a celebration of licentiousness.
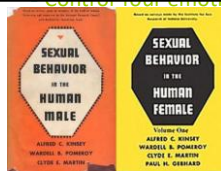   *-- Life magazine, early 1950s*

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But, 1950s stereotypes were not accurate of most Americans

Changing Sexual Behavior: Sexologist Alfred Kinsey revealed that premarital sex & extramarital affairs were common in the 1950s

SEXUAL BEHAVIOR IN THE HUMAN MALE

SEXUAL BEHAVIOR IN THE HUMAN FEMALE

PLAYBOY

Playboy's first publication, 1953

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"The Donna Reed Show"/ABC

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10A. Progress Through Science

- **1951 --** First IBM Mainframe Computer
- **1952 --** Hydrogen Bomb Test
- **1953 --** DNA Structure Discovered
- **1954 --** Salk Vaccine Tested for Polio
- **1957 --** First Commercial U. S. Nuclear Power Plant
- **1958 --** NASA Created
- **1959 --** Press Conference of the First 7 American Astronauts

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10B. Progress Through Science

1957 → Russians launch SPUTNIK I

The New York Times.
SOVIET FIRES EARTH SATELLITE INTO SPACE; IT IS CIRCLING THE GLOBE AT 18,000 M. P. H.; SPHERE TRACKED IN 4 CROSSINGS OVER U. S.

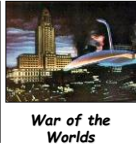**1958 →** National Defense Education Act

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10c. Progress Through Science

UFO Sightings skyrocketed in the 1950s.

War of the Worlds

Hollywood used aliens as a metaphor for whom ??

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10D. Progress Through Science

Atomic Anxieties:
- "Duck-and-Cover Generation"

Atomic Testing:
- 1946-1962 → U. S. exploded 217 nuclear weapons over the Pacific and in Nevada.

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The 50s Come to a Close

1959 → Nixon-Khrushchev "Kitchen Debate"

Cold War ----->   <----- Technology
Tensions   & Affluence

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How does this challenge: OBEY AUTHORITY?

African American civil rights leaders began to challenge segregation laws

In 1947, Jackie Robinson integrated professional baseball

In 1954, in *Brown v Board of Education*, the Supreme Court integrated public schools

In 1955, Martin Luther King, Jr. emerged as the leader of the civil rights movement

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Class Discussion Topic:

The postwar era witnessed tremendous economic growth and rising social contentment and conformity. Yet in the midst of such increasing affluence and comfortable domesticity, social critics expressed a growing sense of unease with American culture in the 1950s.

Assess the validity of the above statement and explain how the decade of the 1950s laid the groundwork for the social and political turbulence of the 1960s.
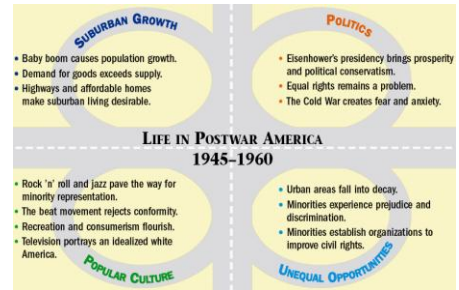
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"That's right sweetheart; dreams and goals are Satan's way of distracting you from making dinner."

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Closure Activity

- Create a chart in your notes that compares America in the 1950s to today

1950s	Today
•	•
•	•
•	•

– What are the biggest similarities between the 1950s & today?
– What are the biggest differences?

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