

USH - American Affluence and the Baby Boom

American Affluence American prospered under Eisenhower. Although he wanted to decrease the size of government, he decided not to reverse the social reforms that Roosevelt and Truman had put in place. He even expanded Social security, increased the minimum wage, and established the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The economy boomed. Americans bought home appliances, cars, clothes, and televisions. They watched programs like *I Love Lucy* and *The Lone Ranger*, where they saw advertisements for more products to buy. The “American Dream” was linked to owning the same things as the families on the television.

The GI Bill and the Baby Boom One reason people could afford to buy so much was the GI Bill – or the GI Bill of Rights or the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act – which President Roosevelt signed into law in 1944. A GI is an American soldier, from the acronym for Government Issue that appeared on their uniforms. The GI Bill provided veterans with loans to get a college education and buy homes. Home sales helped the economy. Many veterans were also ready to start families, leading to a sudden spike in the national birthrate. The baby boom was a prosperous time. However, women often stopped working when the boomer babies were born. Women were also asked to leave the workplace after WWII ended because returning veterans needed jobs.

White Flight The Highway Act created new highways, enabling more people to travel and commute. Families moved to the Suburbs. Builders were eager to keep up with demand and keep homes affordable, so they began creating complexes, where every house looked exactly the same. Built in 1951, Levittown, on Long Island, NY, became the first mass produced suburb. Families moved from the cities to the suburbs and also from the North and East to the South and West, to a region called the Sunbelt because of its warm climate and cheap land. People who couldn’t afford to move had to stay in cities. Because of White flight – the process of affluent, mostly white families moving out of the cities – many inner city areas became ghettos. Taxes went to suburban infrastructures, causing a decline in the quality of public services in areas where only the poor remained. The Latin word root “urbs” means city. Something “urban” is a city, and “suburban” is “sub-” (under or outside of) a city. Conditions deteriorated so much that the federal government had to create Urban renewal initiatives. It wasn’t just city people who missed out on the prosperity. Small farms were hurt by the growth of agribusiness, or large scale corporate farming.

Pop Culture and the Generation Gap In the 1950s, a new kind of American music emerged when African American rhythm and blues (R&B) was picked up by white teenagers. The result was Rock and Roll music. In 1956, teenagers fell in love with Elvis Presley and his music. Rock influenced culture, style, and what it meant to be young American. For the first time, young people were being targeted as a generation with advertisements and fads. No surprise, many adults didn’t understand the attraction.

Backlash and Beatniks While teens rebelled with something like, say, staying out late at a drive in movie, other Americans rebelled against consumerism and conformity by spending their time in coffeehouses and at poetry readings. They were called Beatniks, because they were followers of the Beat literatures movement led by writers like Allen Ginsburg and Jack Kerouac.

Check Your Understanding in complete sentences on lined paper.

1. How did Eisenhower’s social beliefs differ from his predecessors? How did that translate into his domestic policies?
2. How did television influence consumerism?

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3. What did the GI Bill provide for Veterans?
4. How did the baby boom help the American economy?
5. Why were homes mass produced for some suburbs? Which suburb was most famous for this?
6. Why did many people move to the Sunbelt during the 1950s?
7. What were the effects of white flight on urban areas in the 1950s?
8. How did changes in technology affect farmers?
9. What were the roots of rock and roll music?
10. What were the beatniks rebelling against?