Chapter 27: America at Midcentury, 1952–1963

Chapter Review

I. AMERICAN COMMUNITIES Popular Music in Memphis

Elvis Presley combined a hard-driving, rhythmic approach to blues and country music with a riveting performance style; as much as anyone he defined the new music known as rock ’n roll. Postwar teenagers would constitute the most affluent generation of young people in American history. As a boy, Elvis turned to music for emotional release and spiritual expression. Elvis performed along with black contestants in amateur shows at Beale Street’s Palace Theater. Nat D. Williams, a prominent black Memphis disc jockey and music promoter, recalled how black audiences responded to Elvis’s unique style. Elvis himself understood his debt to black music and black performers. When Sun Records sold Presley’s contract to RCA Records in 1956, Elvis became an international star—and, like many young American men, was drafted in 1958 to serve in the Cold War Army, despite his fame. By helping to accustom white teenagers to the style and sound of black artists, Elvis helped establish rock ’n roll as an interracial phenomenon, one which reflected, but did little to resolve, America’s racial tensions.

II. UNDER THE COLD WAR’S SHADOW

Dwight D. Eisenhower took office in 1953 as the confrontation with communism dominated America’s relations with the rest of the world. Eisenhower developed new Cold War strategies, from greater reliance on nuclear weapons to the use of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) for covert action, to forestall an all-out nuclear conflict. He ended the Korean War and avoided military involvement in Indochina. By the time he left office in 1961, he felt compelled to warn the nation of the growing dangers posed by a “military industrial complex”—largely of his own making. But his Democratic successor, John F. Kennedy, would discover just how difficult it was to escape the Cold War frame in shaping American foreign policy.

a. The Eisenhower Presidency

Eisenhower’s success in ending the Korean War set the tone for his administration and increased his popularity. As president, Eisenhower sustained the anti-Communist rhetoric of Cold War diplomacy, and his administration persuaded Americans to accept the Cold War stalemate as a more or less permanent fact. At the core of Eisenhower’s political philosophy lay a conservative vision of community.

The majority of the American public, however, evidently agreed with Eisenhower’s easygoing approach to his office. In running the White House and overseeing his administration, Eisenhower adapted the staff system with which he had effectively managed the unwieldy Allied forces during World War II. In his Cabinet appointments, Eisenhower favored men congenial to the corporate interests they were charged with
regulating. At the same time, Eisenhower accepted the New Deal legacy of greater federal responsibility for social welfare but was cautious in approving new spending even when facing mild recessions in 1953 and 1958. Eisenhower feared starting an inflationary spiral more than he worried about unemployment or poverty, and overall real wages grew steadily on his watch.

b. The “New Look” in Foreign Affairs

Stalin’s death in March 1953 did not lead to a hoped-for thaw in U.S.-Soviet relations. Facing a Cold War with no end in sight but fearing creation of a “garrison state,” Eisenhower pursued a high-tech, capital-intensive defense policy that emphasized America’s qualitative advantage in strategic weaponry and military spending fell from 66 percent to 49 percent of the budget during his two terms. Despite “New Look” threats of “massive retaliation” to any Soviet provocation, Eisenhower refused to act when East Berliners rebelled in 1953 or Hungary revolted in 1956, tacitly acknowledging a Soviet sphere of influence.

In 1958, Khrushchev, probing American intentions and hoping to redirect the Soviet economy toward the production of more consumer goods, unilaterally suspended nuclear testing. Eisenhower, meanwhile, planned his own friendship tour of the Soviet Union. But in May 1960 the Soviets shot down an American U-2 spy plane gathering intelligence on Soviet military installations, ending any potential thaw. The Soviet Union’s dramatic launch of Sputnik, the first space-orbiting satellite, in October 1957 upset many Americans’ precarious sense of security. Although Eisenhower knew there was no “missile gap,” he used the crisis to create NASA for space exploration and missile research and a National Defense Education Act funding science and foreign language education. He also acquiesced in an unnecessary $8 billion increase in defense spending.

c. Covert Action

Eisenhower named Allen Dulles, brother of the secretary of state and a former leader of the wartime Office of Strategic Services to head the CIA. Dulles sent covert agents across the globe, not only to collect information, but to provide secret support to “friendly” regimes and political parties. With a spreading anticolonization movement in Africa and Asia, the Soviets offered aid to anti-imperialists, leading Eisenhower to fear threats of anti-Americanism that might threaten economic and security interests. If hot spots burst into flame, he was prepared to use covert countermeasures and military intervention.

d. Global Interventions

In 1953, a popular, but left-leaning, regime in Iran threatened Middle Eastern energy supplies. The CIA financed and sponsored an overthrow of the Mossadegh government and returned the repressive Shah to power. Oil supplies were secure, but American support for the Shah fed anti-Americanism in Iran. U.S. recognition of Israel also created tensions. The Arab countries launched an all-out attack on Israel in 1948 immediately after the United States and the Soviet Union had recognized its independence. Israel
repelled the attack but expelled Palestinians and grabbed Arab territory. Egyptian leader Nasser provoked another crisis in 1956 by signing an aid deal with the Soviets and threatening to nationalize the Suez Canal. When British, French, and Israeli forces attacked Egypt in October 1956, the United States refused to support her NATO allies, and sponsored a UN resolution calling for a ceasefire and a withdrawal of foreign forces. Open U.S. support for Israel, however, led many Arab nationalists to turn to the U.S.S.R. for support. Meanwhile, in Guatemala, a 1954 CIA-sponsored coup overthrew President Jácobo Arbenz Guzmán, who had threatened to expropriate land from the American-based United Fruit Company, installing the pro-American Colonel Armas, who promptly launched a reign of terror against real and suspected enemies. President Eisenhower publicly denied any knowledge of CIA activities, but the intervention sparked an anti-American backlash in Latin America. In Indochina, the United States provided France with massive military aid and CIA cooperation in its desperate struggle to maintain its colonial empire. Despite a French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, Eisenhower refused to support national reunification elections and supported Ngo Dihn Diem, an unpopular and repressive South Vietnamese leader who only held power with American economic and military support. The 1955 SEATO security pact, including the United States, Great Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, the Philippines, and Pakistan, underlined America’s commitment to containment in Southeast Asia, foreshadowing the Vietnam War of the 1960s.


III. THE AFFLUENT SOCIETY

With the title of his influential book, The Affluent Society (1958), economist John Kenneth Galbraith gave a label to postwar America. While American capitalism had worked “quite brilliantly” in the years since World War II, Americans, he argued, needed to spend less on personal consumption and more on schools and social services. The deeply held popular belief in the right to a continuously expanding economy and a steadily increasing standard of living—even against the backdrop of global anxieties associated with the Cold War—shaped American social and political life.

a. Subsidizing Prosperity

Federal aid helped people to buy homes, attend college and technical schools, and live in newly built suburbs. The Federal Housing Administration (FHA), established in 1934, extended the government’s role in subsidizing the housing industry. The FHA insured long-term mortgage loans made by private lenders for home building. The mortgage interest deduction proved an important middle-class tax benefit for millions of postwar home buyers. Yet FHA policies also had long-range drawbacks, institutionalizing racial and income segregation of suburbia in public policy.

The majority of suburbs were built as planned communities, such as William Levitt’s Levittown, which became a model for the growing middle class; however, most suburbs
were all white. The G.I. Bill helped many veterans buy suburban houses and loaned millions to get college degrees or vocational training, further boosting the middle class. The Interstate and Defense Federal Highway Act of 1956 boosted postwar growth, especially in the suburbs and stimulated the automobile industry while shortchanging public transportation. In response to Sputnik, the NDEA supported K-12 and college programs in math, science and languages, while continued spending on defense programs and military bases created well-paying civilian jobs encouraged by congressional sponsors who benefited from spending in their districts.

**MHL document:** National Defense Education Act (1958) at www.myhistorylab.com

b. Suburban Life

Suburban living unquestionably represented an improvement in material conditions for many postwar families. The suburban boom strengthened the domestic ideal of the nuclear family as the model for American life. Suburban domesticity was usually presented as women’s only path to happiness and fulfillment until Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) raised a dissident voice.

For millions of suburban families, the middle-class life could be achieved only with two incomes. Taking jobs largely in clerical, white collar, and other service fields, married women looked to supplement income and ensure a solidly middle-class standard of living for their families. The postwar rebirth of religious life was strongly associated with suburban living. California, continuing the boom of the war years, came to embody postwar suburban life with car-dependent “drive-in” movies, banks, and eateries. Contemporary journalists, novelists, and social scientists contributed to the popular image of suburban life as essentially dull, conformist, and peopled exclusively by the educated middle class, but ignoring ethnic and economic division. Many new suburbs had a blue-collar cast, and distinctly Irish, Italian, and Jewish neighborhoods were common, if little noted in popular discourse.

**MHL map:** Population Shifts, 1940–1950 at www.myhistorylab.com

c. Organized Labor and the AFL-CIO

By the mid-1950s American trade unions reached their peak as a share of the labor market, reflecting the enormous gains made during the New Deal and World War II. Union influence in political life, especially within the Democratic Party, had also increased.

George Meany, the brusque, cigar-chomping head of the AFL, seemed the epitome of the modern labor boss, focusing on improving the economic well-being of their members while loyally spouting anti-communist rhetoric. While CIO leader Walter Reuther had been more outspoken in his demands for social and political change, he supported the 1955 merge that created the AFL-CIO and brought some 12.5 million union members under one banner.
The merger marked the apex of trade union membership, and after 1955 its share of the labor market began a slow and steady decline. Scandals involving union corruption and racketeering hurt the movement’s image. In 1959, Congress passed the Landrum-Griffin Act, which widened government control over union affairs and further restricted union use of picketing and secondary boycotts during strikes. Only 400,000 government workers belonged to unions in 1955, but public sector employees would be a growing segment of the union movement from the 1950s onward.

d. Lonely Crowds and Organization Men

David Riesman, in *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), argued that modern America had given birth to a new character type, the “other-directed” man. Previously the nation had cultivated “inner-directed” people—self-reliant individualists who internalized self-discipline and moral standards. Morality and ideals now came from the overarching desire to conform.

William H. Whyte’s *Organization Man* (1956), a study of the Chicago suburb of Park Forest, portrayed people obsessed with fitting into their communities and jobs. In place of the old Protestant work ethic, middle-class suburbanites now sought a comfortable, secure niche in the system. In *White Collar* (1951), C. Wright Mills scathingly analyzed the job culture of middle-class salaried employees, office workers, and bureaucrats. In *The Power Elite* (1956), Mills warned that a small, interconnected group of corporate executives, military men, and political leaders had come to dominate American society, giving unprecedented power to what Eisenhower later termed the military-industrial complex.

e. The Expansion of Higher Education

American higher education experienced rapid growth after the war, with enrollments growing from 2.6 million in 1950 to 7.2 million in 1970 as the GIs and their baby-boom children went to school, mainly in growing public institutions.

Because college students, married men, fathers, and grad students got draft deferments, while male high-school graduates faced induction into the armed forces, college represented an important line dividing classes in postwar America. Colleges and universities by and large accepted the values of postwar corporate culture, offering business and professional degrees that became a gateway to the middle class. Businessmen were well represented on university boards of trustees and universities were increasingly run like businesses, with administrators adopting the language of input-output, cost effectiveness, and quality control.

f. Health and Medicine

Although improvements in medical care, such as polio vaccines, meant longer and healthier lives, more sophisticated treatments and expensive new hospital facilities
sharply increased the costs of health care, leaving the poor and elderly Americans unable to afford modern medicine. Thousands of rural communities and small towns lacked doctors or decent hospital facilities. Critics of the medical establishment charged that the proliferation of medical specialists and large hospital complexes had increased the number of unnecessary surgical operations, especially for women and children. The American Medical Association (AMA), which certified medical schools, did nothing to increase the flow of new doctors. Truman had proposed national health insurance, to be run along the lines of Social Security, while Eisenhower had sought government assistance to private health insurance companies. The AMA denounced both proposals as “socialized medicine” and blocked their adoption.

In 1948, an Indiana University entomologist, Alfred Kinsey, published *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, followed five years later by *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*. While many were shocked to learn about widespread and varied American sexual behavior, his books demystified sex and promoted greater openness.

**MHL video: The Polio Epidemic and Polio Vaccine** at [www.myhistorylab.com](http://www.myhistorylab.com)

**IV. YOUTH CULTURE**

The term—and concept—of “teenager” entered American life after WWII. The 15 years following World War II saw unprecedented attention to America’s adolescents. Deep fears were expressed about everything from teenage sexuality and juvenile delinquency to young people’s driving habits, hairstyles, and choices of clothing. At the same time, advertisers and businesses pursued the disposable income of America’s affluent youth with a vengeance, indirectly promoting growth of youth culture.

a. The Youth Market

The children born in those years had, by the late 1950s, grown into the original teenagers, the older siblings of the celebrated baby boomers of 1946–1964. Together, the demographic growth of teens and the postwar economic expansion created a burgeoning youth market with $10 billion in disposable income by 1959.

Specialized market research organizations, such as Eugene Gilbert & Company and Teen-Age Survey Incorporated, sprang up to serve business clients eager to attract teen consumers and instill brand loyalty. To many parents, the emerging youth culture—especially rock and roll and the “immorality” it encouraged—was a dangerous threat to their authority.

The increasing uniformity of public-school education also contributed to the public recognition of the special status of teenagers. Dorothy Baruch’s *How to Live with Your Teenager* (1953) and Paul Landis’s *Understanding Teenagers* (1955) were popular guidebooks for parents, while the marketplace, schools, child-rearing manuals, the mass media all reinforced the notion of teenagers’ status as a special community.
b. “Hail! Hail! Rock ‘n Roll!”

The growing teen market and the expansion of television and car radios created new marketing and entertainment opportunities. Ray Charles, Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, and Little Richard, African American rhythm and blues artists, recorded for small independent labels which expanded beyond their black base, reaching millions of white teenagers through radio, jukeboxes and record stores. The big labels largely ignored the new phenomenon, except for pallid “covers” which often outsold the originals. There were limits to how closely white kids could identify with black performers. Some disc jockeys refused to play cover versions and attracted enthusiastic audiences of both black and white young people, with Alan Freed, who popularized the term “rock and roll,” leading the way with radio shows and live concerts. As a rock ‘n roll performer and recording artist, Elvis Presley challenged the old lines separating black music from white, and pop from rhythm and blues or country, reinventing American popular music in the process and opening the way for other white rock ‘n rollers, many of them Southerners, such as Jerry Lee Lewis, Buddy Holly, the Everly Brothers, and Roy Orbison. Chuck Berry, a black singer-songwriter, broke through in Elvis’ wake to become wildly popular and successful, redefining what it meant to be young in postwar America with songs like “School Days,” “Memphis,” and “Maybelline.”

c. *Almost Grown*

Teenage consumers remade the landscape of popular music. New magazines aimed exclusively at teens flourished in the postwar years. *Modern Teen, Teen Digest,* and *Dig,* like rock ‘n roll music, focused on the rituals, pleasures, and sorrows surrounding teenage courtship.

Two-car families made it easier for 16-year-olds to win driving privileges formerly reserved for 18-year-olds. Girls began maturing and dating earlier and the college custom of “going steady” spread downward into high school. By the late 1950s, 18 had become the most common age for women to marry. Teenagers were torn between their identification with youth culture and pressures to assume adult responsibilities. Many young people juggled part-time jobs with school and very active social lives. Teen-oriented magazines, music, and movies routinely dispensed advice and sympathy regarding this dilemma.

d. *Deviance and Delinquency*

Many adults held rock ‘n roll responsible for the apparent decline in parental control over teens, while white Southerners suspected the music of bringing together white women and black men. At the same time, gang fights, drug and alcohol abuse, car theft, sexual offenses, and other forms of juvenile delinquency seem to be on the rise, probably telling us more about anxieties over family life and the erosion of adult authority than about crime patterns, all magnified by media attention. In 1954, psychiatrist Fredric Wertham published *Seduction of the Innocent,* arguing that crime comic books incited youngsters to crime. In *The Wild One* (1954), Marlon Brando played an unsavory motorcycle gang leader. In *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), James Dean, Natalie Wood, and Sal Mineo
played emotionally troubled youths in an affluent California suburb. While parents wrung their hands over teen morals, Brando and Dean, along with Elvis became role models and heroes.

V. MASS CULTURE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Developed in the 1930s, TV came into its own as the dominant mass media after the war, and by 1960, 90 percent of families had a set and watched it five hours a day. TV defined and shaped culture in ways other media never had, simultaneously reinforcing and challenging conformity, status, and materialism.

a. Television: Tube of Plenty

The three main television networks—NBC, CBS, ABC—grew directly from radio organizations, and nearly all broadcast stations were network affiliates. Television and advertising developed a symbiotic relationship. Although TV, like radio, was supported by advertising, the higher cost of TV time led sponsors to buy scattered time slots rather than bankrolling an entire show. Earlier TV, like the *The Milton Berle Show*, was a radio variety show with pictures when it premiered in 1948, and many, often ethnic, comedies and dramas followed this pattern. For a brief time, original live drama flourished on writer-oriented shows such as *Goodyear Television Playhouse* and *Studio One*. By the late 1950s, TV had become more homogenized and all the urban ethnic comedy shows were off the air. Shows aimed explicitly at children, such as *Howdy Doody*, pulled kids into the television orbit at an early age, while TV’s power to create overnight crazes ran from Elvis on *Ed Sullivan* to *Davy Crockett*—the later pioneering the marketing tie-in, with $300 million in shirts, toys, and coonskin caps sold.

b. Television and Politics

Prime-time shows avoided references to political issues for fear of alienating sponsors or alarming self-appointed anti-Communist watchdogs. As in Hollywood, the Cold War restricted the range of political discussion on television. Any honest treatment of the conflicts in American society threatened the consensus mentality at the heart of the business. Even public affairs and documentary programs were largely devoid of substantial political debate. Television made Democratic senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee a national political figure through live coverage of his 1951 Senate investigation into organized crime. The 1952 election brought the first use of TV political advertising for presidential candidates. The Republican Party hired a high-powered ad agency to create a series of short, sophisticated advertisements touting Dwight D. Eisenhower and setting the precedent for TV’s impact on electoral politics.

c. Culture Critics

The urge to denounce the mass media for degrading the quality of American life united radical and conservative critics. Vance Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957) highlighted advertiser’s exploitation of human psychology. Critics of mass culture argued
that the audiences for the mass media were atomized, anonymous, and detached, ignoring statistics that showed most Americans watched TV in groups and social settings. Led by the novelist Jack Kerouac and the poet Allen Ginsberg, the Beats shared a distrust of the American virtues of progress, power, and material gain. The Beat sensibility celebrated spontaneity, friendship, jazz, open sexuality, drug use, and the outcasts of American society. Kerouac, born and raised in a working-class French Canadian family in Lowell, Massachusetts, coined the term “beat” in 1948. At a 1955 poetry reading in San Francisco, Ginsberg introduced his epic poem “Howl” to a wildly enthusiastic audience. Beat writers received a largely antagonistic, even virulent reception from the literary establishment. The mass media soon managed to trivialize the Beats, but their work foreshadowed the 1960s counterculture and youth rebellion.

VI. THE COMING OF THE NEW FRONTIER

No one could have resembled Dwight Eisenhower less in personality, temperament, and public image than John Fitzgerald Kennedy. The handsome son of a prominent, wealthy Irish American diplomat, husband of a fashionable, trend-setting heiress, 42-year-old JFK embodied youth, excitement, and sophistication. As only the second Catholic candidate for president, Kennedy ran under the banner of the New Frontier, inspiring idealism and hope in millions of young people at home and abroad, and his presidency seemed to embody the call for a new sense of national purpose beyond simply enjoying affluence. In foreign affairs, Kennedy was a traditional Cold Warrior, but may have been softening his position by the time of his death.

a. The Election of 1960

After representing Massachusetts in the House and Senate since 1946, Kennedy won the Democratic nomination over Hubert Humphrey and Lyndon B. Johnson by stressing his intellect, youth, and his image as a war hero. Vice President Richard Nixon was better known and more experienced, but in the first televised presidential debate, Kennedy’s confident manner and telegenic good looks made him more appealing than the nervous and ill-looking Nixon. Both candidates emphasized foreign policy. Nixon defended the Republican record and stressed his own maturity and experience. Kennedy hammered away at the alleged “missile gap” with the Soviet Union and promised more vigorous executive leadership.

Kennedy squeaked to victory in the closest election since 1884. The new administration promised to be exciting and stylish, a modern-day Camelot peopled by heroic young men and beautiful women. Just before Kennedy took office, Eisenhower delivered a Farewell Address warning of the dangers of the “military industrial complex” which his own policies had, wittingly or unwittingly, helped to create. Despite the military buildup and a series of confrontations with the Soviets, Ike left America no more secure than he had found it in a telling demonstration of the limits of power and Cold War assumptions.

b. New Frontier Liberalism

Kennedy hoped to revive the long-stalled liberal domestic agenda, advocating a higher minimum wage, greater federal aid for education, increased Social Security benefits, medical care for the elderly, support for public housing, and various antipoverty measures. Much of his agenda was blocked or cut back by conservative Democrats in Congress. More successful was the Peace Corps, with idealistic young volunteers providing assistance to Third World nations.

Kennedy addressed women’s rights with his Presidential Commission on the Status of Women, led by Eleanor Roosevelt, which called for a range of reforms in federal programs, and he directed executive agencies to prohibit sex discrimination in federal hiring and promotion. The administration pushed lower business taxes through Congress, even at the cost of a higher federal deficit. Kennedy also increased the federal commitment to a wholly new realm of government spending: the space program. Greater use of the White House staff increased Kennedy’s authority, since these appointees, unlike cabinet secretaries, escaped congressional oversight, but intensified a pattern of presidents operating through small groups of fiercely loyal aides, often in secret.

c. Kennedy and the Cold War

Kennedy began as a Cold War Hawk, committed to containment. To head the State Department, Kennedy chose Dean Rusk, a conservative former assistant to Truman’s secretary of state, Dean Acheson. Allen Dulles, Eisenhower’s CIA director, remained at his post. Defense appropriations continued to grow, as did covert operations, often involving the new elite “Green Beret” Special Forces.

Not all of these efforts succeeded. In Laos, the CIA-backed government could not defeat Soviet-backed Pathet Lao guerrillas. When Communist Vietcong guerrillas launched a civil war in South Vietnam against the U.S.-supported Saigon government, Kennedy sent thousands of Green Berets and other military advisers to support the rule of Ngo Dinh Diem, and ordered a covert action against Ho Chi Minh’s government that included sabotage and intelligence gathering, with little impact.

Kennedy’s approach to Vietnam reflected a Cold War analysis of General Maxwell Taylor and Walt Rostow. By 1963, 16,000 support and combat troops were in South Vietnam, and Kennedy acquiesced in a CIA-backed coup that overthrew the unpopular
and ineffective Diem regime. In Latin America, Kennedy unveiled the Alliance for Progress, a ten-year, $100 billion economic development program. The idealistic program raised growth rates in Latin American, but little of the benefit trickled down to the poor and democracy made little gain.

d. The Cuban Revolution and the Bay of Pigs

In 1959, the oppressive Batista regime in Cuba, which had long and deep ties to American business, was overthrown by a seemingly populist movement led by Fidel Castro. When the United States withdrew economic aid in response to Castro’s land reform program, Cuba turned to the Soviets for aid. Eisenhower established an economic boycott of Cuba in 1960, then severed diplomatic relations.

Kennedy inherited from Eisenhower plans for a U.S. invasion of Cuba by secretly armed and trained anti-Castro exiles. Kennedy approved the operation but refused Air Force cover at the last minute. At the Bay of Pigs in April 1961, Castro’s efficient and loyal army easily subdued them. Despite CIA predictions, there was no popular uprising against Castro. As Castro stifled internal opposition, many Cuban intellectuals and professionals fled to the United States. American liberals criticized Kennedy for plotting Castro’s overthrow, while conservatives blamed him for not supporting the invasion. The CIA continued to support anti-Castro operations and launched at least eight attempts to assassinate the Cuban leader.

f. The 1962 Missile Crisis

Khrushchev responded to the Bay of Pigs in the summer of 1962 by sending intermediate-range nuclear missiles, to Cuba. After U-2 over flights revealed the missile batteries, Kennedy went on national television to announce the discovery, demand removal of all missiles, and order a naval blockade of Cuba. After tense negotiations, Khrushchev offered to remove the missiles in return for a U.S. pledge not to invade Cuba, while Kennedy secretly assured Khrushchev that he would dismantle obsolete Jupiter missiles in Turkey. On November 20, Kennedy publicly announced the withdrawal of Soviet missiles and bombers from Cuba. U.S.-Soviet relations continued a mild thaw with the Limited Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty, in August 1963, prohibiting above-ground, outer space, and underwater nuclear weapons tests. Kennedy may also have been reconsidering the commitment to Vietnam, but his death meant we will never know what he might have done had he been reelected in 1964.

MHL document: John F. Kennedy, Cuban Missile Crisis Address (1962) at www.myhistorylab.com

g. The Assassination of President Kennedy

The assassination of John F. Kennedy in Dallas on November 22, 1963 sent the entire nation into shock and mourning. Millions had identified his strengths—intelligence, optimism, wit, charm, coolness under fire—as those of American society. In life,
Kennedy had helped place television at the center of American political life. Now in the aftermath of his death, television riveted a badly shocked nation. One day after the assassination, the president’s accused killer, an obscure political misfit named Lee Harvey Oswald, was himself gunned down before television cameras covering his arraignment in Dallas. Two days later, tens of millions watched the televised spectacle of Kennedy’s funeral, trying to make sense of the brutal murder. Although a special commission headed by Chief Justice Earl Warren found the killing to be the work of Oswald acting alone, many Americans doubted this conclusion. Kennedy’s death gave rise to a host of conspiracy theories, none of which seems provable.

Much of the domestic liberal agenda of the New Frontier would be finally implemented by Kennedy’s successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, who dreamed of creating a Great Society.

VII. CONCLUSION

By 1963, more and more Americans were enjoying the middle class dream of a good job, providing a house full of appliances, a car, and a good education for children who would be even better off than their parents. JFK’s youth and energy symbolized a generational shift in politics and society and inspired many Americans, but by his death in 1963, doubt and anxiety were once again setting in.

Learning Objectives

Students should be able to answer the following questions after studying Chapter 27:

1. How did the Eisenhower administration’s foreign policy respond to Cold War challenges?
2. On what foundations did the nation’s post-World War II prosperity rest?
3. What ideas did America’s suburban life evoke, and how did those ideals correspond to suburban realities?
4. What explains the emergence of a distinct youth culture in 1950s’ America?
5. What criticisms did television and the 1950s’ mass culture evoke?
6. Who was John F. Kennedy and why did his New Frontier seem so promising to many Americans?

Discussion Suggestions and Possible Answers

1. How would you evaluate the Eisenhower presidency? Was he a good, fair, or poor president? Defend your evaluation.

   **Answer:** President Eisenhower accepted the permanence of the Cold War and maintained a staunch anti-communist foreign policy. His success in bringing the Korean War to a conclusion gained him popular support that would last for his entire presidency. On domestic affairs, Eisenhower took a relaxed approach to governing and especially regulation. However, he also accepted that the Federal government held a greater responsibility for social welfare than earlier Republican leaders had embraced.
2. The text argues that the booming economy of the 1950s was, in fact, heavily subsidized by the federal government. Do you buy that interpretation? How could the United States be subsidizing the economy at the same time it was battling communism?

**Answer:** Federal subsidies prompted considerable growth, especially in planned suburbs and in the interstate highway system. Additional federal aid was extended for college and high-school education programs, especially in math and science as well as in housing. All of these programs were a part of the domestic Cold War, as the interstate highway system was seen as necessary for moving military equipment around the nation in the event of a Soviet attack and education spending was defended as necessary to maintain American technological superiority.

3. Why did white teenagers find rock ‘n roll so compelling? Why did adult authorities find it so shocking?

**Answer:** Part of the appeal of rock ‘n roll stemmed from the creation of a new youth culture in the 1950s. American teenagers found the clearest statement of their lives through rock ‘n roll songs. Moreover, music was a way for young people to challenge parental authority, albeit in a limited manner. Parents found much of the new music shocking. First and foremost, the music had deep roots in black music and culture. Although many record companies supported covers of the songs by white musicians, the influence was unmistakable. Parents also attributed the rise in juvenile delinquency and truancy to the music that challenged their authority.

4. During the Eisenhower years the United States began extensive intervention in the Third World. Why? What assumptions led to those decisions? Can you make a connection between these assumptions and the policy of containment discussed in the previous chapter? Was there a difference between the official explanations and the underlying motives?

**Answer:** Eisenhower’s “New Look” foreign policy emphasized the use of covert action to promote American interests, political as well as economic, in the Third World. In particular, CIA activity in places such as Iran, Guatemala, and Southeast Asia were all aimed at preventing leftist or communist governments from becoming established in those countries. The Eisenhower administration routinely denied all knowledge regarding those activities.

5. How would you evaluate the Kennedy presidency? Was he a good, fair, or poor president? Why would you make that evaluation?

**Answer:** President John F. Kennedy inspired idealism with his calls for Americans to embody a new sense of national purpose at home and abroad. His good looks and his attractive fashionable wife, contributed to this image, which contributed to his election victory in 1960. In terms of actual achievements, however, Kennedy’s record is more mixed. Kennedy’s first foreign policy crisis, the Bay of Pigs, was a disaster. In 1962, in a nuclear showdown with the Soviet Union over missiles in Cuba, Kennedy performed much better and his balanced, tough approach is credited with avoiding nuclear war. Kennedy
reinvigorated some democratic programs that had foundered under President Eisenhower, but was stymied in other areas, especially Civil Rights. Ultimately, his assassination in 1963 ended his presidency, leaving his successor, Lyndon Johnson, to enact much of his New Frontier agenda.

**Lecture Outline**

American Communities: Popular Music in Memphis

Under the Cold War’s Shadow
- President Eisenhower
- The “New Look”
- CIA and Covert Actions Abroad
- Egypt, Guatemala and Other Interventions

The Affluent Society
- Government Programs—FHA, Interstate Highways
- Life in the Suburbs
- Organized Labor and the AFL-CIO Merger
- Lonely Crowds and the Organization Man
- Expanding Higher Education
- New Medical Programs

Youth Culture
- Teenagers and the Youth Market
- Rock ‘n Roll
- Teen Culture: Almost Grown
- Deviance and Juvenile Delinquency

Mass Culture and Its Discontents
- Television and Advertising
- Politics and Television
- Cultural Critics and the “Beats”

The Coming of the New Frontier
- Election of 1960
- Ike Warns of the Military-Industrial Complex
- New Frontier Liberalism
- Kennedy and the Cold War
- Fidel Castro, the Cuban Revolution and the Bay of Pigs
- 1962: Cuban Missile Crisis
- Assassination of John F. Kennedy
Resources (Web, Films/Video)

Films/Video
The PBS series *Making Sense of the Sixties* (60 minutes, color). 1991. This series opens with an episode that effectively sets up the middle-class culture of the 1950s and links it to the fear of Communism.

*That Rhythm Those Blues*, from PBS’ *American Experience* series. (60 minutes, color). 1988. Focuses on black rhythm and blues singers Charles Brown and Ruth Brown and shows how the music spread and was changed as whites took control of it.

*The Missiles of October* (150 minutes). MPI Home Video, 1973. Movie presents multiple points of view on the Cuban Missile Crisis, successfully underscoring the high stakes and tension of the 13-day confrontation in October.

My History Lab Connections

Reinforce what you learned in this chapter by studying the many documents, images, maps, review tools, and videos available at www.myhistorylab.com.

Read and Review

**Read the Documents**
*National Defense Education Act* (1958)
*John F. Kennedy, “Inaugural Address”* (1961)
*Dwight D. Eisenhower, “Farewell to the Nation”* (1961)
*John F. Kennedy, Cuban Missile Crisis Address* (1962)

**See the Maps**
*Population Shifts, 1940–1950*

Research and Explore

**Read the Documents**
*Exploring America: How to Lie with Statistics*
*Whose History Is It?: Any Old Way You Choose It: Rock and Roll as History, Myth, and Commerce*

**Read the Biographies**
*John Foster Dulles*
*Jack Kerouac*
See the Video
Newsreel: JFK 1917-1963
The Polio Epidemic and Polio Vaccine

Critical Thinking Exercises

Many students have rather uncritically accepted the TV shows of the late 1950s as accurately depicting American life in that era. Students could evaluate those shows against the reality as portrayed in the text. Students might also want to check out the first few chapters in Stephanie Coontz’s, The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap (Basic Books, 1992) for additional information. A discussion of what’s in those shows—and (equally significant) what’s not in them—should get fairly lively.