CHAPTER 25

In a Land of Plenty

Contentment and Discord, 1945–1960

> "It was the longest block I ever walked in my whole life."
>
> ELIZABETH ECKFORD, confronting a mob as she walked from the bus stop to school in Little Rock, Arkansas

On September 3, 1955, a young black teenager, Elizabeth Eckford, walked past an angry mob after state troopers refused to let her enter the all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. This photo captures her harrowing ordeal as a young white woman, her face contorted with rage, screamed at Eckford. In the days that followed a sympathetic white man put an ad in the local newspaper featuring this photograph. "Study this picture and know shame," he told his neighbors. Instead for years Hazel Bryan received congratulatory letters from diehard segregationists for her verbal assault on Eckford that day. Five years later Bryan tracked down Eckford in Little Rock to apologize. Eckford went on to graduate from college, served in the army, and then started a career as a probation officer.

This photograph challenges the traditional image of the fifties as a tranquil period of material contentment and ideological consensus. Americans did enjoy unprecedented prosperity during the decade. They also, however, experienced a fair amount of domestic discord along racial, generational, and political lines. New energy surged into the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s. Acts of extraordinary bravery by Elizabeth Eckford and others like her took on new significance in an era of favorable Supreme Court rulings that pushed the federal government to take an active role in protecting the civil rights of African Americans. Leadership from black churches and black students infused the movement with an ethos of nonviolent direct action that forced white America to see the injustice of Jim Crow, the southern legal structure that relegated African Americans to second-class citizenship.

A different type of discord permeated American home-life throughout the 1950s. In many respects families were the focus of American society from 1945 to1960. Enjoying a rising standard of living in generally prosperous times, American families grew at an unprecedented rate. Lured to fast-growing suburbs by low-cost loans and affordable housing prices, an exploding middle class filled their homes with an array of possessions previously out of reach for most Americans. The baby boom generation, those 76.4 million Americans born between 1946 and 1964, now coming into adolescence, embraced new standards in dress, music, and movies that distinguished the "teen" generation from their parents. Some teenagers rebelled against authority in more overtly political ways. High school and college students, for instance, were the ground troops in many civil rights demonstrations. Others joined the counterculture beat movement to express their rebellion against social norms through poetry, novels, and art.

From 1945 to 1960 Americans debated the divergent political paths that the country could take domestically during the Cold War era. They pondered the effects of New Deal programs, unions, suburbs, civil rights, and consumption on American society. Altogether the changing American way of life created a sense of both contentment and crisis for the nation.

What symbolism made this photograph an icon of the Civil Rights Movement?

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Securing the New Deal Legacy

Once prosperity returned after World War II, Republicans launched a campaign to undo the New Deal, arguing that these Depression-era laws and benefits programs hampered the free market and deprived industrialists of the freedom to run their companies as they saw fit. Moderate Democrats, like President Harry Truman, focused on ensuring the permanency of past reforms. When labor unions launched a series of unpopular postwar strikes, Republicans joined with conservative Southern Democrats to successfully roll back New Deal legislation that had benefited the labor movement. The victory over labor, however, did not provide enough momentum for conservatives to achieve their ultimate goal: the entire dismantlement of the New Deal.

25.1 **Striking Steel Workers, 1946**
Picketing steel workers carried signs with slogans meant to win sympathy from ordinary Americans, but widespread strikes caused a public backlash against labor unions.

The Labor Movement Curtailed

In 1945 the labor movement enjoyed unparalleled strength. Government support for union organizing during the New Deal and World War II, combined with a wave of successful sit-down strikes in the 1930s, had made labor a powerful force in American society. This was the high point of the labor movement in American history. Over fourteen million workers belonged to unions, nearly 35 percent of the industrial workforce. Labor flexed its muscle in 1946, when the lifting of wartime price controls sent prices skyrocketing. Nearly 4.6 million

What overall arguments do these signs make in favor of labor's demands?

workers participated in five thousand strikes nationwide in 1945–1946, demanding not just higher wages and benefits but also the right to participate in management decisions regarding investments, product lines, production methods, and plant locations. The signs held by striking steelworkers in this photo (**25.1**) outside a Bethlehem Steel Plant were intended to mobilize public support. The slogans demanded fairness to returning veterans, gave assurances that higher wages would not lead to higher prices, and proposed a living wage for workers who made such a valuable commodity. Black and white steelworkers manned this picket line together, reflecting the success of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in mending racial divisions that had previously weakened the labor movement (see Chapter 22).

As the scale of labor unrest widened, popular support for strikes diminished. The public had little sympathy for threats to shut down the steel and car industries, which formed the core of the national economy. Strikes in the coal and meatpacking industries also caused public dismay by making it more expensive for Americans to heat their homes and eat meat. When railroad workers went on strike, Truman intervened. The railroad strike "threatens to paralyze all our industrial, agricultural, commercial, and social life," leading to potential starvation at home and abroad, the president proclaimed. Although supportive of New Deal labor legislation, Truman announced he would use the army to run the railroads and draft striking workers into the military if they did not return to work. Moments before he was scheduled to address Congress to ask for authorizing legislation, Truman received word that the strikers had returned to work.

Workers in other industries fared a bit better. Negotiated settlements in the steel and auto industries set the benchmark for wages, benefits, and shop floor practices that other companies, even nonunionized ones like the general merchandiser Sears Roebuck, adopted to maintain peaceful labor relations. Industrialists gained as well in these agreements. Longer contracts ensured a lengthy period of tranquility with no strikes, and in all settlements company owners maintained control over management decisions.

The Republicans' successful mid-term campaign slogan, "Had Enough? Vote Republican," capitalized upon voters' dismay over labor conflicts and higher prices. For the first time since 1933, the Republican Party won majorities in both the House and the Senate in the 1946 congressional elections. Republicans hoped to use this victory as a springboard for unseating Truman from the White House in 1948. The Eightieth Congress immediately passed strong anti-labor legislation over Truman's veto. Although dismayed with the strikes of 1946, Truman knew that he would need labor's vote in the upcoming presidential contest. The **Taft-Hartley Act (1947)** abolished the closed shop, a practice that required all workers who benefited from a union-negotiated contract to join the union. The law also banned so-called sympathy boycotts, strikes by workers who wanted to support another union's protest. Finally the law's requirement that all union officers sign affidavits certifying that they were not members of the Communist Party encouraged unions to purge its most radical members, often those who had pioneered new tactics, like the sit-down strike in the 1930s. The Taft-Hartley law was a serious blow to the labor movement. The merger in 1955 between the CIO and the more conservative American Federation of Labor (AFL) ushered in a more cautious era of labor organizing that mostly ignored unskilled and southern workers.

Presidential Agendas: Truman and Eisenhower

Conservative Republicans hoped that the Taft-Hartley law would spearhead a drive to dismantle the New Deal. Instead the curtailment of labor removed the most visible symbol of what was supposedly "wrong" with the New Deal just as the 1948 presidential campaign got underway. To win Truman decided that the votes of labor and northern African Americans were more important than retaining the solid South. The Democratic Party adopted the slogan "Don't let them take it away," referring to the minimum wage, unemployment insurance, and Social Security that the New Deal granted to industrial workers. Liberals in the Democratic Party successfully pushed Truman to take a stronger stand on civil rights. In July 1948, for both principled and pragmatic reasons, Truman ordered the desegregation of the armed forces, an important civil rights milestone.

Truman's embrace of civil rights caused Southern conservatives to bolt from the Democratic Party; his earlier confrontations with labor convinced social progressives to leave the party as well. Vowing to

preserve segregation conservative Southern Democrats formed the States Rights Party and nominated South Carolina governor Strom Thurmond to run against Truman and the Republican candidate, Thomas Dewey. On the political left former Vice President Henry Wallace ran on the Progressive Citizens of America ticket, representing a coalition of liberals and radicals upset about the assault on civil liberties at home and the nation's aggressive foreign policy as the Cold War took shape. Truman's campaign assault on big business as "gluttons of privilege," strong support from labor and blacks, and the success of the Berlin airlift (see Chapter 24) propelled him to a clear victory in the Electoral College (303 to 189), but he led Dewey by just 2 million in the popular vote. The concentrated segregation and states' rights vote in the South garnered Thurmond 39 electoral votes in return for the 1.2 million popular votes he received. Wallace received nearly the same number of votes as Thurmond nationwide, but won no electoral votes.

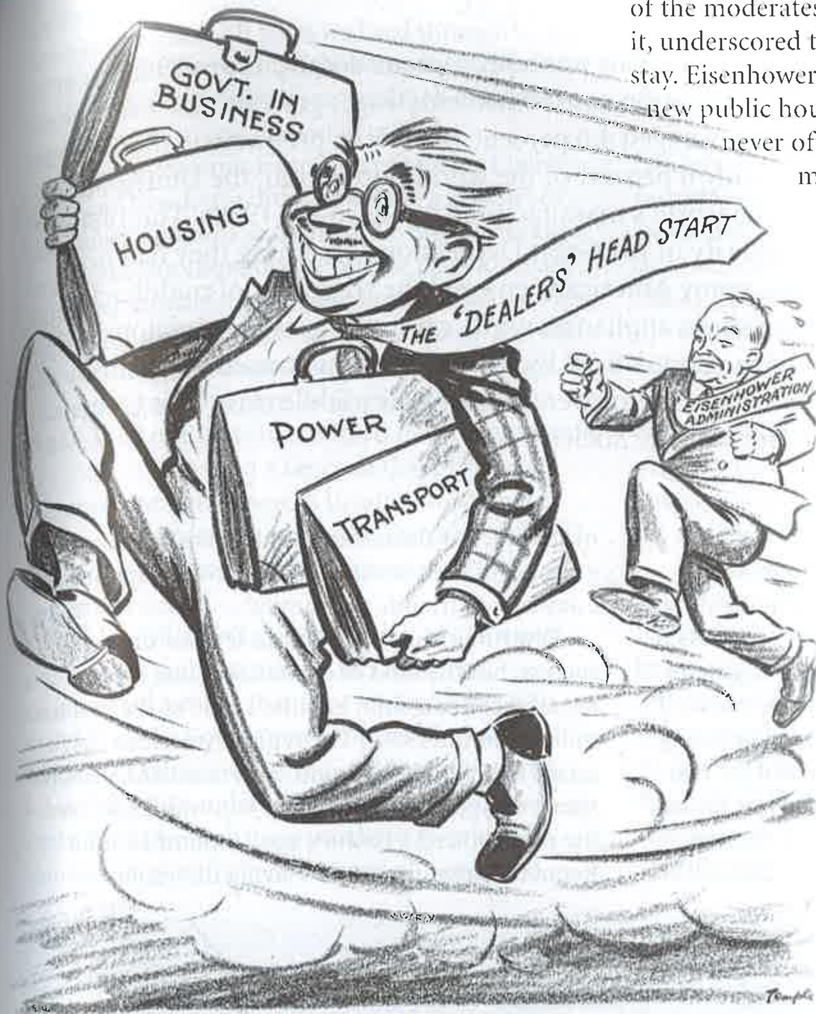
> "The time has come to walk out of the shadow of states' rights and into the sunlight of human rights."
>
> Minneapolis Mayor HUBERT HUMPHREY, urging Democrats to adopt a strong civil rights stance in the 1948 presidential election

For much of his second term, Truman focused on managing foreign affairs and fending off assaults on his administration from Senator Joseph McCarthy (see Chapter 24). Abandoning his earlier stance of merely sustaining the New Deal, Truman advanced the **Fair Deal**, proposals for national health care, public housing, education, and public works projects. The Democratic majority that controlled the Eighty-First Congress funded state school systems and urban public housing, increased the minimum wage, and continued bringing electricity and telephones into rural areas. Proposals for national health insurance stalled, but Congress did vote to build more hospitals and expanded public health facilities for the poor.

In June, 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea and political debate shifted to the Korean War (see Chapter 24). Truman, wary of undermining bipartisan support for his Cold War policies and the Korean War, did not push hard for highly controversial Fair Deal initiatives such as repealing the antiunion Taft-Hartley Act, price and wage controls, or universal health care. Only a fraction of Truman's Fair Deal proposals became law, but his program foreshadowed the more successful and extensive liberal agendas of future presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, both Democrats.

By the end of the Truman administration, most Americans could not imagine a society without Social Security or a minimum wage, expectations that shaped the political vision of the nation's next president. In 1952 and again in 1956, the Republican candidate Dwight Eisenhower won in landslide elections, both times defeating Democrat Adlai E. Stevenson, the governor of Illinois. The virtually unknown Stevenson faced the daunting challenge of overcoming southern anger at Truman's civil rights reforms (which Stevenson supported) and America's affection for Eisenhower, a World War II hero. A gifted orator Stevenson stuck to traditional stump speeches, while Eisenhower became to the first presidential candidate to use televised political ads. He honed his folksy image in short television ads that aired during the commercial breaks of popular nighttime programs. America voted overwhelmingly for the man they knew and liked, with Eisenhower defeating Stevenson by 422 to 89 electoral votes. In 1956, running on a slogan of "peace and prosperity" that noted his success in ending the Korean War, Eisenhower polled even higher numbers, receiving 457 electoral votes to Stevenson's 73.

Republican critics like Senator Robert Taft attacked the Fair Deal as "creeping socialism" because these expensive programs required high taxes and, in Republicans' view, gave the government too much power. The 1953 editorial cartoon *Who Said 'Creeping Socialism'* (**25.2**) reflected the conservatives' fear that Eisenhower would have trouble taming New Deal and Fair Deal programs. The congressman, a symbol of runaway big government, holds a briefcase labeled "Govt. in Business, Housing, Power, Transport," and his running head start makes it impossible for Eisenhower to catch up. In fact, though, the cartoon misrepresented Eisenhower's intentions. The president liked to say that he was "conservative when it comes to money and liberal when it comes to human beings." To appeal to the moderates in each party, Eisenhower announced that he had no intention of



25.2 *Who Said 'Creeping Socialism,'* 1953
During the 1952 presidential election, conservative Republicans criticized the New Deal and Fair Deal as "creeping socialism." This caricature portrays the newly elected Republican President Dwight Eisenhower struggling to catch a runaway congressman who clutches onto programs enacted during previous Democratic administrations.

dismantling popular New Deal programs. "Should any political party attempt to abolish social security and eliminate labor laws and farm programs, you would not hear of that party again in our political history," Eisenhower concluded, to the dismay of conservatives in the Republican Party. His "victory of the moderates," as some commentators termed it, underscored that New Deal reforms were here to stay. Eisenhower did curb the Fair Deal by vetoing new public housing and public works projects and never offered any new social welfare measures of his own.

Fiscally conservative, Eisenhower believed that balancing the budget and limiting government expenditures created a favorable business environment that promoted jobs and prosperity. He worked hard to foster strong ties between government and the defense industry as the Pentagon amassed a huge nuclear arsenal. In the president's view a nuclear shield protected the nation more cheaply and effectively than conventional arms or troops, which were expensive to maintain. But Eisenhower expressed misgivings about the domestic costs of a large defense budget as early as 1953: "Every gun made, every warship that is launched, every rocket fired, signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed." Nine years later, as he prepared to vacate the White House, Eisenhower suggested that he had gone too far in promoting the convergence of military and industrial interests. In a well-remembered speech, he urged Americans to monitor vigilantly the growth of the "**military-industrial complex**," Eisenhower's term for the close ties between the defense industry and the Pentagon that might influence government policy. "We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes," Eisenhower warned.

"I have always assumed that what was good for the United States was good for General Motors, and vice versa."

Secretary of Defense CHARLES E. WILSON, when asked about a possible conflict of interest between his government position and his former job as the head of General Motors, 1953

What significance did Eisenhower's "victory of the moderates" have?

A Middle-Class America

By any measurement the 1950s was a prosperous decade. From 1945 to 1960 per capita consumption rose 50 percent, wages grew by one-third, and unemployment averaged 4.6 percent. American productivity boomed well. Inhabited by only 6 percent of the world population, the United State produced half of the world's manufactured goods in the 1950s. The 1950s gave the generation raised in the austerity of the Great Depression something they had never known: prosperity. For the first time many Americans enjoyed the trappings of middle-class life—a suburban home filled with modern appliances and a car in the garage—previously available only to a small segment of the population. By 1960 the nation crossed a significant historic threshold when 60 percent of Americans were classified as middle class. The United States was no longer a primarily working-class society.

Postwar Prosperity

In 1948 Vernon Presley brought his family to Memphis, Tennessee, hoping to escape the grinding poverty of Mississippi. Gladys Presley later recalled that her son, Elvis, "would hear us worrying about our debts, being out of work and sickness and he'd say, 'Don't you worry none, Baby. When I grow up, I'm going to buy you a fine house . . . and get two Cadillacs—one for you and Daddy, and one for me." Elvis Presley fulfilled this promise to his parents when he became the most famous rock-and-roll star of the era. For the rest of his life, Elvis, an extreme example of the era's conspicuous consumption, ga away cars to friends and family.

Few Americans enjoyed this level of financial success, but the kind of deprivation that Elvis experienced as a child became a relic of the past for millions in the 1950s. The typical American "has access to amenities—foods, entertainment, persona transportation, and plumbing—in which not even the rich rejoiced a century ago," economist John Kenneth Galbraith noted. Having discretionary

25.3 and 25.4 Buying on Credit "What They Have" vs. "What They Own." The before and after photos of this *Life* magazine spread demonstrated Americans' heavy reliance on credit to accumulate the trappings of middle-class life in the fifties.

What factors caused standards of living to improve for many Americans in the 1950s?

income for things such as a television, vacations, or sending a child to college transformed the lives of American workers. "If what we lived through in the 1950s was not liberation," Jack Metzgar, the son of Pennsylvania steelworkers, noted, "then liberation never happens in real human lives."

An aggressive union movement seeking higher wages and benefits and the New Deal safety net of guaranteed pensions and unemployment insurance helped fuel this leap into the middle class for many industrial workers. Other government initiatives also helped transform the way Americans lived. In 1944 just 44 percent of Americans owned their homes. By 1960 this figure had risen to 60 percent thanks to the 1944 GI Bill of Rights that offered returning veterans low-interest loans and a tax code that provided incentives for homeowners. In addition state and federal governments constructed the roads, schools, bridges, and sewers that new suburban developments required.

During World War II production of consumer goods was scant, and many Americans had accumulated savings that they were now eager to spend. In 1950 alone Americans snatched up 6.2 million refrigerators, 14.6 million radios, and 6.2 million automobiles. This represented three-quarters of the appliances purchased worldwide. Installment plans helped millions of Americans purchase these key consumer items. Consumer debt rose from 8.3 billion in 1946 to 56.1 billion in 1960, a trend that caught *Life* magazine's attention in 1953. To illustrate the newly affluent lifestyle of middle-class Americans, *Life* photographer Loomis Dean put a couple with their two children in front of their Los Angeles suburban home alongside all their furnishings and car. The first picture (**25.3**) showed "what they have": an oven, refrigerator, two television sets, car, and furniture. The second photograph (**25.4**), "what they own," put the family in front of the foundations of a house and a pair of wheels to reflect how far along they were in their mortgage and car payments. The refrigerator, couch, stove, and one television set—all bought on credit—were missing. By purchasing so heavily with credit, this family risked losing nearly everything if a recession hit and the father lost his job.

American leaders felt that their nation's material abundance clearly demonstrated the superiority of the capitalist societies over communist ones, where basic consumer items were often in short supply. Others condemned American materialism. In his biting social commentary *The Status Seekers*, Vance Packard criticized Americans for jettisoning the frugality of the past in favor of status-seeking conspicuous consumption. Manufacturers played an active role in creating this new consumerist

Compare this family's possessions and home life to those of previous generations.

orientation. One executive conceded that it was the advertisers' job to "see to it that Americans are never satisfied." A middle-class family now considered their car or refrigerator "obsolete after two or three years even though it works well," financial columnist Sylvia Porter noted.

The Move to the Suburbs

Suburbs built in the 1920s ringed major cities and remained connected to the metropolitan core by streetcars or rail lines. In the 1950s suburbs moved farther away from cities, becoming insular communities that depended increasingly on cars to transport people. The roads Eisenhower built to help evacuate urban areas if the nation came under nuclear attack (see Chapter 24) were now filled with suburbanites running errands and commuting to work. Of the thirteen million new homes constructed between 1948 and 1958, 85 percent were built in suburban neighborhoods. By 1960 thirty-seven million Americans lived in suburbs.

When developer William Levitt erected thousands of mass-produced homes on the former potato fields of Long Island, New York, he pioneered building techniques that transformed the housing market. Applying Henry Ford's automobile assembly line–style innovations to the housing industry, Levitt built "**Levittowns**,"—planned suburban communities where developers standardized every part of the construction process. Levitt claimed that his crews could assemble a house in fifteen minutes, while it took only three minutes to complete the paperwork to purchase one. Levitt passed these savings onto homebuyers, dropping the prices of new homes from $14,000 to $8,000. When other developers copied his techniques nationwide, the low price of suburban homes, coupled with readily available government-backed financing, brought home ownership within reach of millions of Americans.

These new suburban homes typically contained living room picture windows that developers installed to make their 1,000-square-feet houses feel more spacious. When the curtains were open, these large windows also displayed a family's possessions and prosperity to the neighborhood. Suburban homes had "living kitchens" where families both prepared and ate their meals and "family rooms" to accommodate the television, toys, and games that brought the family together at the end of the day. A garage sheltered the automobile that every suburban family needed to own.

Americans offered competing visions on whether suburban living improved daily life or encouraged mindless conformity. Conflicting interpretation[s] greeted images of idealized suburban life. "For literally nothing down" Americans could purcha[se a] "box" in a suburban development "inhabited by people whose age, income, number of children, problems, habits, conversation, dress, possession[s] and perhaps even blood type are also precisely li[ke] [theirs]," wrote John Keats in *The Crack in the Picture Window* (1957). Abraham Levitt, the son [of] developer William Levitt, fought back against the charges. "Houses are for people, not critics . . . — and the people for whom we do it think it's pretty good." This debate is explored in *Competing Visio[ns]: Suburbs—American Dream or Nightmare?*

The move to the suburbs converged with an explosion of childbearing among couples who had put off having children during the Depression and World War II and younger couples encouraged by boom times to start their families immediately. Between 1935 and 1955 the birth rate jumped near[ly] 40 percent. Levittown's nickname, "Fertility Valley," underscored this link between the suburbs and the **baby boom generation**, the 76.4 million Americans born between 1946 and 1964.

The baby boom generation shaped American society for decades to come. As babies and children they helped stimulate a huge industry devoted to diapers, baby formulas, and toys. Teenagers, a term coined after World War II to describe adolescents, formed the backbone of fifties popular culture and the antiwar movement and cultural upheavals of the sixties. In the twenty-first century, as the baby boomers begin to retire, the imperative to care for a large aging population poses significant challenges for American society.

The fifties ushered in other key lifestyle changes besides suburban living and an emphasis on family life. As more Americans entered the middle class, they increasingly worked at white-collar jobs ranging from clerks to professionals to corporate executives. The effect of corporate culture on American society was as hotly debated as the impact of suburban life. In an era when McCarthyism eliminated radical discourse as a legitimate form of political expression, social critics worried that suburbs and corporations were bleaching individuality and innovation out of the national character. "When white-collar people get jobs, they sell not only their time and energy but their personalities as well," sociologist C. Wright Mills contended. Others, including *Fortune* magazine, regularly defended corporations for extending job security and prosperity to millions.

Why did suburbs boom in the 1950s?

Competing Visions

SUBURBS—AMERICAN DREAM OR NIGHTMARE?

As the suburbs grew social critics debated whether suburban life represented the epitome of the American dream or a nightmarish existence that isolated Americans from one another. To challenge historian Lewis Mumford's assertion that the suburbs were cultural wastelands, sociologist Herbert J. Gans moved his family into a Levittown to study the habits and behaviors of its residents. As you read the following excerpts from Mumford and Gans, consider how each links the suburbs to changing lifestyles. What positive and negative changes do these writers attribute to suburban life? What different futures do they envision for a suburban-based American culture?

Lewis Mumford in *The City in History* (1961) contended that suburban life bred conformity, loneliness, and alienation.

In the mass movement into suburban areas a new kind of community was produced ... a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless pre-fabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mold ...

The town housewife, who half a century ago knew her butcher, her grocer, her dairyman, her various other local tradesmen, as individual persons, with histories and biographies that impinged on her own, in a daily exchange, now has the benefit of a single weekly expedition to an impersonal supermarket, where only by accident is she likely to encounter a neighbor. ...

The cost of this detachment in space from other men is out of all proportion to its supposed benefits. The end product is an encapsulated life, spent more and more either in a motor car or within the cabin of darkness before a television set.

Levittown Street Scene

Herbert J. Gans defended suburbanites in *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community* (1967).

[Levittowners] are not apathetic conformists ripe for takeover by a totalitarian elite or corporate merchandiser; they are not conspicuous consumers and slaves to sudden whims of cultural and political fashion. ... even though Levittowners and other lower middle class Americans continue to be home-centered, they are much more "in the world" than their parents and grandparents were. Those coming out of ethnic working class backgrounds have rejected the ... ethnocentrism which made other cultures and even other neighborhoods bitter enemies. This generation trusts its neighbors, participates with them in social and civic activities, and no longer sees government as inevitably corrupt. Even working class Levittowners have begun to give up the suspicion that isolated their ancestors from all but family and childhood friends. Similarly, the descendants of rural Protestant America have given up the xenophobia that turned previous generations against the Catholic and Jewish immigrant, they have almost forgotten the intolerant Puritanism which triggered attacks against pleasure and enjoyment, and they no longer fully accept the doctrine of laissez-faire that justifies the defense of all individual rights and privileges against others' needs.

These and other changes have come about not because people are now better or more tolerant human beings, but because they are affluent. For the Levittowners, life is not a fight for survival any more; they have been able to move into a community in which income and status are equitably enough distributed so that neighbors are no longer treated as enemies, even if they are still criticized for social and cultural defiance. By any yardstick one chooses, Levittowners treat their fellow residents more ethically and more democratically than did their parents and grand-parents. They also live a "fuller" and "richer" life. ... superior to what prevailed among the working and lower middle classes of past generations."

Popular Culture in the Fifties

The introduction of television sets into family living rooms transformed the home life of millions of Americans. So did the emergence of an autonomous youth culture, with its own slang, rock-and-roll music, and modes of dress. Were these harmless expressions of adolescent rebellion or signs of the disintegration of American culture? These stirrings of generational conflict in the 1950s exploded a decade later into full-fledged revolt.

The Television Age Arrives

The first commercial television transmission occurred in 1939 when President Franklin D. Roosevelt visited the New York World's Fair. The war slowed the introduction of televisions into the consumer market, but by the 1950s, the television age had arrived. In 1948 just 178,000 homes had televisions. Seven years later three-quarters of American households owned one.

President Dwight Eisenhower set the tone for the decade with the widely publicized image of the president and his wife, Mamie, eating dinner each night off tray-tables set up in front of a television in their private White House parlor. Whereas in the forties Americans had flocked to movie theaters for entertainment, now they stayed home. "Don't be a Living Room Captive—Step Out and See a Great Movie," film studios urged Americans. Many Americans, however, appeared to agree with President Eisenhower, who wrote in his diary, "If a citizen has to be bored to death it is cheaper and more comfortable to sit at home and look at television than it is to go outside and pay a dollar for a ticket." Throughout the nation movie theaters closed and the studios made fewer films. Only drive-in theaters in suburban towns, where customers sat in their cars next to individual speakers to watch a movie on a giant outdoor screen, thrived. Drive-in theaters appealed to young parents who could pile their children into the car for a night out and teenagers who could escape the watchful eyes of adults for a few hours.

What were Americans watching at home? Many early television shows dealt with the social conditions and cultural values of the day, paying particular attention to family and consumerism. In *The Honeymooners*, the working-class Kramdens lived in a sparsely furnished apartment and often clashed, particularly when one of the get-quick-rich schemes devised by bus driver Ralph (played by comedian Jackie Gleason) started to unravel. His wife Alice always stood her ground, even when Ralph threatened her with one of the show's trademark lines: "One of these days, Alice . . . one of these days . . . POW, right in the kisser." By the end of each episode, the couple had reconciled, with Ralph often telling his wife, "Baby, you're the greatest."

I Love Lucy began in a small Manhattan apartment, but eventually Lucy Ricardo (played by Lucille Ball) and her Cuban husband Ricky (Ball's real-life husband Desi Arnez) relocated to suburban Connecticut to raise their son. Lucy's farcical adventures to get a job, enter show business, or best her husband always ended with Lucy realizing that being a wife and mother was fulfilling enough. Situation comedies like *Father Knows Best* and *Leave it to Beaver* focused on the roles that each member of an ideal white suburban family played: Father worked hard and came home in time to resolve the minor crises of the day; mother kept a spotless home, volunteered, and supported her husband's career; and children learned to tell the truth, work hard, and obey their parents. These television shows mirrored the general preoccupation with child-rearing during the baby boom, a time when family and religion were at the center of white middle-class suburban life. Yet because plotlines never involved the working class, people of color, politics, or domestic discord, these shows offered little insight into the social realities that shaped family life for millions of Americans during the 1950s.

Television programming in the 1950s provided plenty of escapist fare. Nightly news broadcasts, however, brought glimpses of the wider world into American homes and played an increasing role in politics. Politicians quickly learned to use the new medium to their advantage. Republican vice presidential candidate Richard M. Nixon was the first politician to give a televised speech to defuse a political scandal. During the 1952 presidential election, the press revealed that Nixon had a secret fund financed by California businessmen. Hoping to stem the damage, Nixon appeared on television

What insights do 1950s television shows offer into American culture?

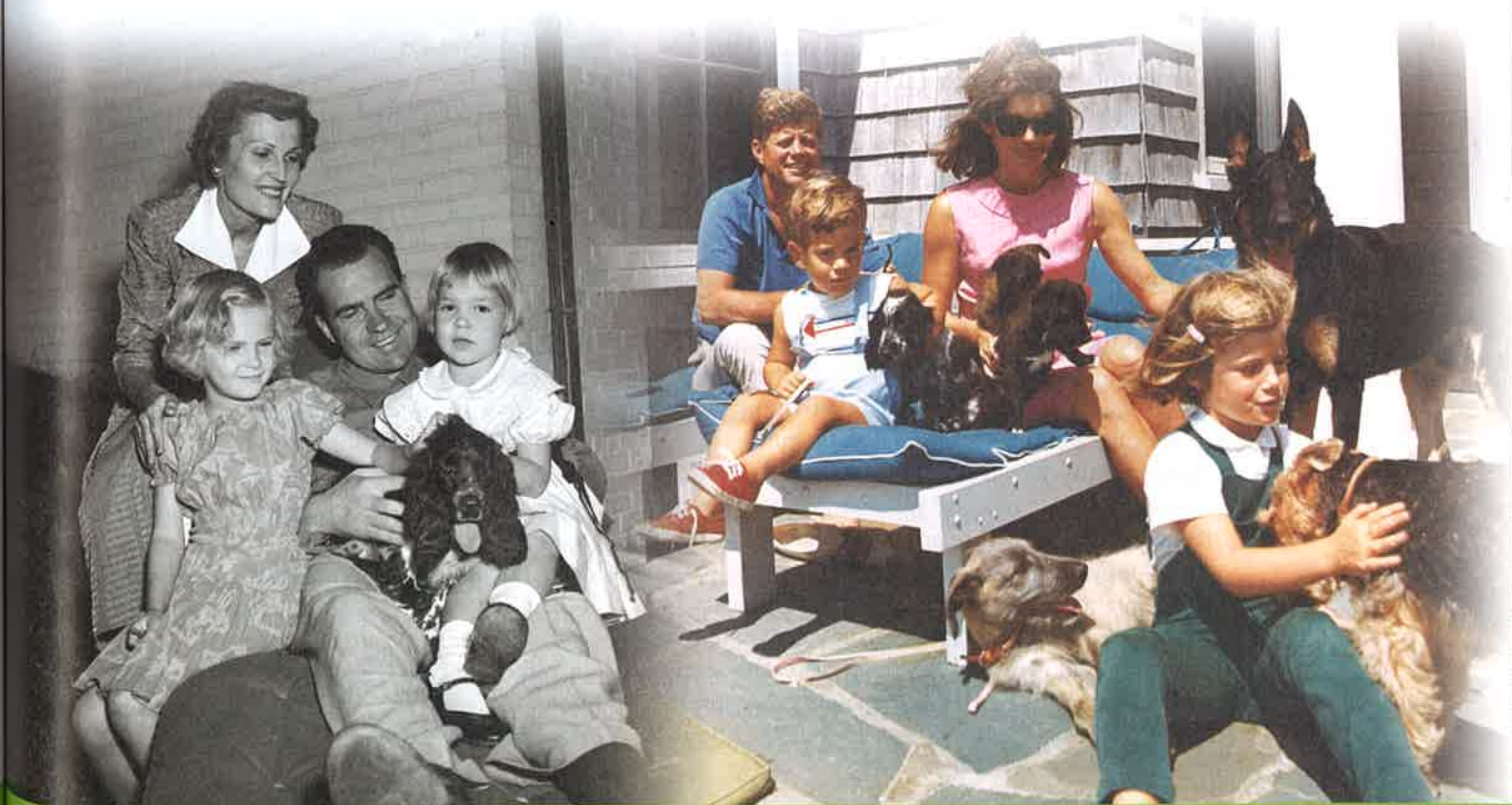
to refute charges that the money was for his personal use or that these businessmen were buying "secret favors" from him with their donations. Laying out the details of his personal finances, Nixon defiantly told viewers that without campaign donations only the rich could run for office. In the speech's most famous passage, Nixon mentioned one personal gift that he would not return. "A man down in Texas heard Pat [his wife] on the radio mention the fact that our two youngsters would like to have a dog" and surprised the family with the gift of a black-and-white cocker spaniel. "And our little girl Tricia, the six year old, named it 'Checkers.' And you know, the kids, like all kids, love the dog, and I just want to say this, right now, that regardless of what they say about it, we're gonna keep it," Nixon declared.

In the aftermath of the speech, Nixon posed with his family and Checkers in this photo (**25.5**). The Checkers speech saved Nixon's place on the Republican ticket alongside Eisenhower. Like Nixon, John F. Kennedy also astutely used posed photographs, like this one with his attractive young family (**25.6**). By creating such images Kennedy hoped to distract attention from his inherited wealth and Catholicism, long considered an undesirable religious affiliation for a politician.

On September 26, 1960 in the **Kennedy and Nixon debate**, the two candidates faced off in the first televised presidential election debate. Nearly 77 million Americans, or 60 percent of the adult population, watched this historic event. Nixon, still pale and underweight from a recent two-week stint in the hospital, squared off against a tan and fit Kennedy, who impressed viewers with his comfortable presence before the cameras. By contrast Nixon refused to wear make-up, looked like he needed a shave, wore a poorly fitted shirt, and was visibly sweating throughout the exchange. The majority of Americans who watched the debate felt that Kennedy had won, while most Americans who listened on the radio gave the edge to Nixon. Kennedy went on to narrowly win the election, revealing the power of images to sway political judgments.

Teen Culture and Rock-and-Roll

Teenagers came into their own in the 1950s. Their parents remained haunted by visions of Depression-era deprivation and the life-and-death struggle of World War II. By contrast in the fifties many middle-class teenagers grew up with an abundance of material possessions. Most teenagers agreed with their parents when it came to politics, sharing their concern about communist expansion throughout the world and the growing Soviet nuclear threat. Many however adopted



25.5 and 25.6 Two candidates, one family portrait Throughout their political careers, Richard M. Nixon and John F. Kennedy used portraits of their family life to connect with voters. These images fit with the era's idealized image of the perfect American family, which included a supportive wife, two children, and at least one dog.

How did politicians use television and photographs to shape their public image?

an ethos of pleasure-seeking that often put them at odds with their parents who emphasized thrift and self-discipline. Unlike their parents' generation teenagers were no longer expected to earn money to help support their families. Millions of young people experienced unprecedented leisure time, longer schooling, and were free to spend money earned from after-school jobs as they liked.

Teenagers flocked to buy record players and radios to play music marketed specifically to them. In 1958 the Coasters scored a number-one record with their song, "Yakety Yak," which depicts a teenager rebelling against household chores. In one refrain, the parent orders the teenager to "Take out the papers and the trash / Or you don't get no spendin' cash," to which the teenager replies "yakety yak," with the parent then retorting: "don't talk back."

"Teenagers are my life and triumph. I'd be nowhere without them."

ELVIS PRESLEY, whose stardom demonstrated the strength of teen culture in the 1950s

Teens' freedom to create their own social world filled with slang and fads that adults did not understand disturbed some critics. By the end of the decade, sociologist Edgar Friedenberg noted that "the 'teen-ager' seems to have replaced the Communist as the appropriate target for public controversy and foreboding." In this cultural clash traditionalists lambasted horror comic books and teen films for encouraging teenagers to revolt against their parents and social norms. But rock-and-roll music and musicians provoked the most outrage.

Rock-and-roll burst onto the national scene when Bill Haley and the Comets recorded "Rock Around the Clock" in 1955, the first rock-and-roll tune. The following year Chuck Berry thundered "Roll over, Beethoven, and tell Tchaikovsky the news!" proclaiming rock-and-roll the music of choice for this teenage generation. It took Elvis Presley, however, to make rock-and-roll (which got its name from a rhythm and blues slang term for sexual intercourse) a phenomenon. Exposed to the raw sexuality and powerful rhythms of African American rhythm and blues music as a young boy growing up in Mississippi, Presley also sang gospel and country music in church. Melding the sounds and explosive delivery of these musical traditions with catchy pop lyrics, Presley developed his own highly eroticized dancing style. "If I could find a white man who had the black sound and the black feel, I could make a billion dollars," predicted record producer Sam Phillips, the owner of Sun Records, a small recording company in Memphis, Tennessee. Philips found his man when Presley walked into Sun Records to record a song as a gift for his mother.

Americans embraced competing visions over whether the growing popularity of rock-and-roll meant the triumph of consumer tastes or the downfall of American civilization. Nicknamed "Elvis the Pelvis" for his suggestive hip thrusts while dancing, partially captured in this photograph (**25.7**), Presley became a lightening rod for critics who denounced rock-and-roll from the pulpit, in the press, and even in congressional hearings. When teenager Ron Kovic's family watched Presley on television's *Ed Sullivan Show*, his sister went "crazy in the living room jumping up and down," his mother sat "on the couch with her hands folded in her lap like she was praying" and his dad shouted from the other room that "watching Elvis Presley could lead to sin." In introducing Presley the affable TV host Sullivan assured parents that the twenty-two-year-old Presley was "a real decent, fine boy." To avoid controversy, however, Sullivan ordered camera crews to frame out Presley's legendary pelvic thrusts and gyrations, showing only his head and chest. It took the draft to tame Elvis. "Presley wriggled off to military service," one newspaper columnist wrote, "but comes marching home . . . shorn of his sideburns and behaving the way a sedate, serious-minded youngster should." The new "clean-cut" Presley kept his original fan base but had limited appeal to the teenage generation coming of age in 1960.

Ed Sullivan showcased a range of music, skits, and comedy acts designed to keep the whole family watching together during the hour-long show. Dick Clark, however, helped pioneer television programming exclusively for teenagers with his daily afternoon show *American Bandstand,* which featured Philadelphia high-school students dancing to the latest hits. The advent of pocketsize transistor radios meant that teenagers could listen to radio stations broadcasting the top forty best-selling records or independent rhythm and blues stations in the privacy of their bedrooms, away from critical adult ears.

Hollywood also catered to teenage tastes with films like *The Wild Ones* (1953), which featured Marlon Brando as part of a rebellious motorcycle gang, and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). In the latter

How did larger economic and technological changes make a mass teen culture possible?

frightened some adults but thrilled teenagers. Embracing the persona of an angry youth discontented with mainstream society, Dean (who died at the age of twenty-four in a car accident) became an icon of teenage rebellion in the fifties.

Parental norms often prevailed in the end. Teenagers in the fifties grew up quickly. Students who dated a lot in high school tended to marry within a few years of graduation. As much as they may have rebelled as adolescents, once married, they quickly started families, conforming to the lifestyle standards set by their parents.

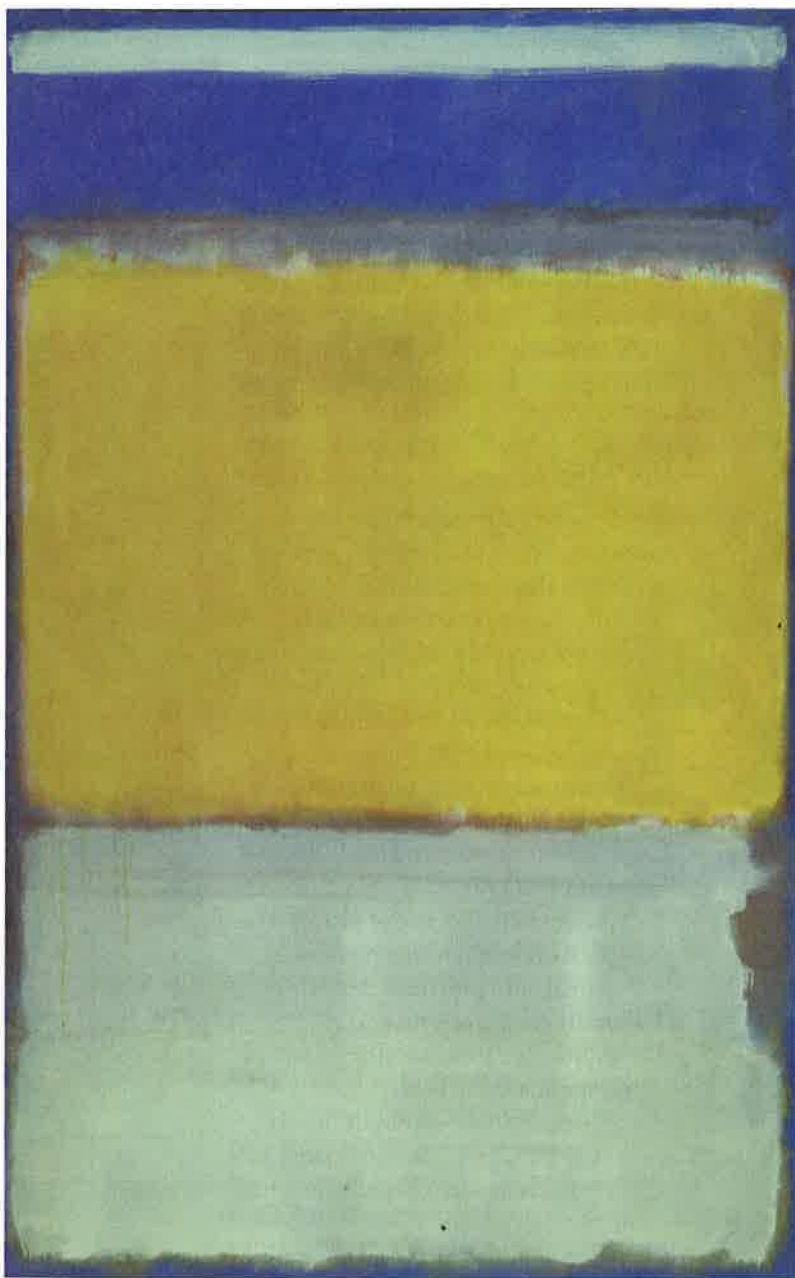
25.7 Elvis Presley Nicknamed "Elvis the Pelvis," Elvis Presley's suggestive dancing enraged parents but earned the singer thousands of adoring teenage female fans. .

The Beats

Teens in the fifties used their purchases—of music, clothes, cars—to define their generational identity, while their parents announced their newly acquired middle-class status by buying cars and suburban houses. **Beats** or beatniks, members of the bohemian communities of poets, novelists, and artists that flourished in New York's Greenwich Village and San Francisco's North Beach, offered an alternative vision. The Beats rejected home ownership, career, and marriage in favor of individual freedom and immediate pleasure (including drugs and casual sex).

The national spotlight briefly shined on City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco when it published the controversial poem "Howl" (1955) by then-struggling Beat poet Allen Ginsberg. "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix," began the opening stanza of "Howl." The poem sent readers on a journey into the underground lives of the drug addicts, musicians, artists, radicals, and homosexuals who lived on the margins of mainstream society. In the 1950s most states had so-called antisodomy laws that criminalized same-sex intercourse. Ginsberg's open celebration of gay sex in "Howl" offended anti-obscenity crusaders in San Francisco. The police arrested the owner of the City Lights Bookstore for selling the poem, but a judge

film James Dean and Natalie Wood played teenagers from upper-middle-class suburban homes; unsure how to handle their racing hormones, the two become defiant. Dean's character tries to prove his masculinity by drag racing, while Wood's character uses promiscuity to rebel against an overprotective father. This view of the suburbs as hotbeds of intergenerational conflict and alienated youth



25.8 Mark Rothko, *Number 10*
The Abstract Expressionist painter Mark Rothko expressed his personal feelings rather than reproducing objects or addressing politics in his paintings. Refusing to title or explain his paintings, Rothko wanted viewers to interpret his work freely. [Source: Mark Rothco (1903–1970), "Number 10". 1950. Oil on canvas, 7' 6 3/8" × 57 1/8", Gift of Philip Johnson. (38.1952) Location:The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, U.S.A. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY, Estate of Mark Rothco © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY]

dismissed the charge, arguing that "Howl" was a socially significant artistic work.

In his novel *On the Road* (1955), the Beat novelist Jack Kerouac celebrated the spiritual quest for a meaningful life away from the suffocating materialism and conformity of middle-class society. Guilty at times of over-romanticizing working-class life for its "authenticity" without appreciating the deadening effects of poverty, the Beats nonetheless laid the foundation for the youth protests of the sixties (see Chapter 27).

Most Americans never read "Howl" or *On the Road*. They instead formed their impressions of the Beats from watching *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*, a television series that showcased a beatnik best friend who urged Dobie to reject his father's single-minded drive to make money and instead enjoy life to the fullest. This televised depiction of Beat culture helped interject new words, such as "dig it," "cool," and "man" that the Beats took from African American culture, into the vocabulary of white teenagers.

> "What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?"
>
> Beat poet ALLEN GINSBERG, critiquing suburban life in "Howl"

Beat poets and novelists were not the only artists rebelling against received traditions in the fifties. American modern artists formulated a new mode of visual art called Abstract Expressionism that broke with the predominant painting styles of the previous generation. Before World War II leading artists included the Cubist painter Pablo Picasso who reordered the physical world in his paintings and American social realist painters who captured the lives of ordinary people during the Depression. Politics informed much artistic work in the 1930s and 1940s. In the fifties a restless generation of new artists chose instead to emphasize personal expression over politics. "The big moment came when it was decided to paint. . . . Just TO PAINT. The gesture on the canvas was a gesture of liberation, from Value—political, aesthetic, moral," wrote art critic Harold Rosenberg in 1952. American painters such as Jackson Pollock, who dripped paint on the canvas, and Mark Rothko, who painted fields of color, created signature styles that epitomized the rebellious nature of Abstract Expression (**25.8**). Young artists idolized these painters for refusing to represent reality or use their art to send a message. More tradition-bound artists denounced their work as trivial. Like James Dean in films and Elvis Presley in music, the painters Pollock and Rothko embodied the rebellious streak of fifties youth culture.

How does Rothko's painting compare to social realist paintings in the 1930s (see Chapter 22)?

Freedom Now: The Civil Rights Movement

The Civil Rights Movement entered a pivotal phase in the 1950s. Key Supreme Court rulings, new leadership, and innovative strategies emboldened thousands of black and white people to demand the end of racial segregation in the South. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) successfully challenged the constitutionality of segregated public schools. Martin Luther King Jr. emerged as a major leader, alongside a generation of activist black and white college students who employed new nonviolent strategies to compel white Americans to confront the harsh realities of Jim Crow. Favorable decisions from the Supreme Court pressured the federal government to intervene on behalf of African Americans. Meanwhile television and news magazines transmitted shocking images of racial violence that made it impossible for the nation to ignore the demands of civil rights activists.

Separate and *Unequal*: Challenging Segregated Schools

Black and white southern children, as this photo of a street scene in a small southern town suggests (**25.9**), grew up in two separate worlds. They lived in different parts of town, went to segregated schools, drank from separate water fountains, ate in different restaurants, waited for buses in different waiting rooms, sat in separate sections of movie theatres, and often shopped in different stores. For many black children segregation meant daily humiliation and unanswered questions. "I guess if you are from a small Georgia town, as I am," one black college student recalled, "you can say that your first encounter with prejudice was the day you were born. . . . My parents never got to see their infant twins alive because the only incubator in the hospital was on the 'white' side."

After World War II ethnic and racial minorities successfully challenged the legality of segregated schools. In 1947 the Supreme Court ruled that educating children of Mexican ancestry in separate California schools was illegal because state law only authorized segregated schools for children of Asian decent. In the wake of this ruling, California repealed this discriminatory law. Ending legalized racial segregation came next.

In 1954 the Supreme Court overturned the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* "separate but equal" ruling that had allowed the South to maintain segregated schools from elementary school to graduate school. In *Plessy v. Ferguson* the Court had concluded that separate facilities (schools, waiting rooms, railroad cars) for whites and blacks were constitutional as long as they offered each race similar amenities. (See *Choices and Consequences*, Chapter 14.) In practice legalized segregation usually resulted in inferior

> "Tastes the same to me, Mom."
>
> LEO LILLARD, after secretly sampling water from "white" and "colored" fountains as a boy in Nashville

25.9 A Southern Town
On their visit to town, these white and black children carefully avoided mixing, demonstrating how early children in the South learned to respect their region's racial customs.

In what ways did racial discrimination shape southern children's lives?

accommodations and schools for black citizens. The Supreme Court ruled in ***Brown v. Board of Education*** **(1954)** that segregated schools indeed violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

The *Brown* case concerned seven-year-old Linda Brown, whose parents wanted to send her to an all-white school closer to their home. In mounting the case NAACP lawyer Thurgood Marshall (who later became the first African American appointed to the Supreme Court) and his team based their argument on more than the law. To convince the public and the Supreme Court that segregation was wrong, they needed to dramatize the effects of segregation. "To show damage and a violation of equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment, you had to show that being segregated actually damaged children," psychologist Kenneth Clark asserted.

To demonstrate the irreversible effects of segregation on African American children, the NAACP cited Clark's controversial research. In a series of studies, Clark asked white and black children whether they liked a white or black doll best. The majority of children picked a white doll because it was "nice" and rejected the black doll as "bad." Clark next asked the children to identify the doll that was the most like them. The black children now had to pick the doll that many of them had just rejected as "bad." In the North black children often burst into tears rather than respond. In the South, however, reactions like the one from a young boy in Arkansas, who laughed, "pointed to the brown doll, and said, 'That's a nigger. I'm a nigger,'" convinced Clark that segregation taught African American children to accept their inferiority to whites.

Not everyone agreed with Clark's methodology, so the NAACP relied heavily on his findings in preliminary court challenges and then mentioned them only briefly in their Supreme Court filing. The wording of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, however, revealed that the NAACP had guessed right in emphasizing the impact of segregation on the self-esteem of black children. In reaching their unanimous decision, the Court noted that "to separate [black children] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone."

25.10 Emmett Till and his mother
"If you have to get on your knees and bow when a white person goes past, do it willingly," Emmett's mother told her northern-raised son before he left to visit relatives in Mississippi, instructions that the teenager tragically disregarded.

Emmett Till

In 1955 Emmett Till was just another fourteen-year-old posing for the camera with his mother. Their portrait reveals a boy with a beaming smile and a mother's pride in her growing son (**25.10**). That summer Mamie Till-Bradley sent Emmett from his home in Chicago to visit relatives in Mississippi. To prepare her northern-raised son for the racial customs of southern society, his mother warned him to think of his safety when encountering southern whites. One morning at a country store in Money, Mississippi, Emmett forgot his mother's warning. While playing with some black teens on the porch of the store, Emmett bragged that he had a white girlfriend in Chicago. "Hey, there's a [white] girl in that store there," one of the boys retorted, "I bet you won't go in there and talk to her." Responding to the dare Emmett walked into the store, bought some candy, then grabbed the arm of Carol Byrant, who ran the store with her husband, and allegedly asked, "How about a date, baby?" Till's aghast cousin ran in and pulled him out of the store.

Three days later a car pulled up to Emmett's granduncle's house in the middle of the night. Two white men burst into the house and dragged Emmett out of bed. The husband of the young woman in the store, Roy Bryant, and her brother, J. W. Milam, threw a terrified Emmett into their truck and drove away. This was the last time his relatives saw him alive. The white men drove to an abandoned shed on a nearby plantation where they beat Till severely, then drove to the Tallahatchie River and forced Emmett to strip before they shot him in the head and tossed his body into the river. With his mother's permission, *Jet* magazine and the *Chicago Defender*, stalwarts of the black press, published the grisly photos of the corpse. *Images as History: Inspiring a New Generation to Act* discusses the transforming effect that images of Emmett Till's murder had on the Civil Rights Movement.

Why did the Supreme Court rule that segregated schools were unconstitutional?

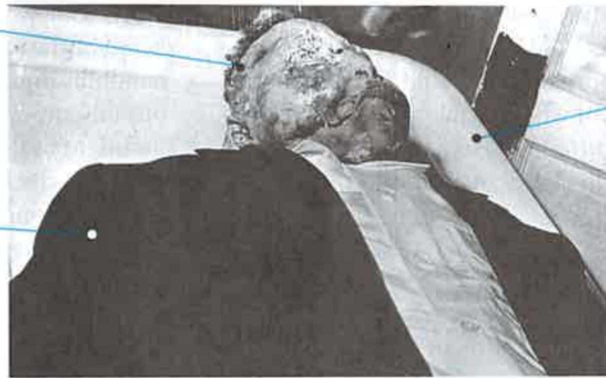
Images as History

INSPIRING A NEW GENERATION TO ACT

The photo of Emmett Till's broken body, printed in African American newspapers and magazines, became the wake-up call for a group of young people destined to play major roles in the future Civil Rights Movement. The Emmett Till case gave the nation more than a clear image of the victim. It also provided a snapshot of the killers and the vigilante justice dealt out in many small towns across the Deep South. At first, some southern officials and citizens denounced the murder. But when the northern press castigated the entire South for the crime, southerners fought back with competing claims that Emmett Till was alive and in hiding or that the NAACP had set up the murder to embarrass the South. Why are these images important for understanding the history of race relations and the Civil Rights Movement?

Deciding that "the world is going to have to look at this," Mamie Till-Bradley took her son's body back to Chicago where she insisted on an open casket funeral that thousands attended.

The black northern press provoked outrage over the killing by pairing this gruesome image of Emmett's battered corpse with the photograph of him smiling with his mother (25.10).

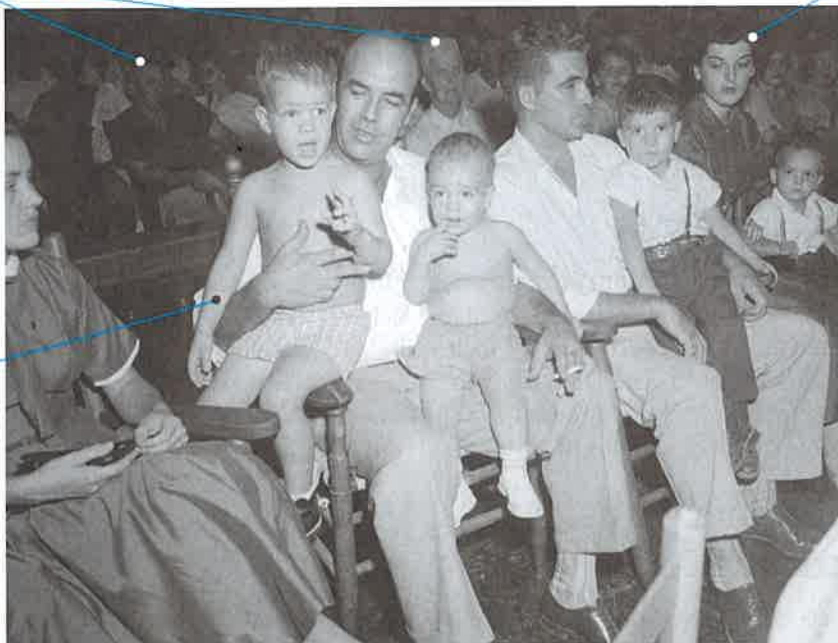


After seeing these photos future civil rights activist Julian Bond "felt vulnerable for the first time in my life—Till was a year younger—and [I] recall believing that this could easily happen to me—for no reason at all."

Emmett Till's corpse

The accused men's nonchalance in the courtroom and the show of support from the white observers sent a warning to the African American witnesses who testified against the pair, illustrating how communities like Money, Mississippi, at that time preserved the racial status quo.

Bringing their children into the courtroom bolstered the accused men's image as upstanding family men and helped teach white youth about the importance of maintaining white supremacy.



For many of his neighbors, Roy Bryant's defense of his wife protected her honor, his reputation, and fulfilled his duty to help the white community keep the color bar intact.

Men on trial for Emmett Till's murder, sitting with their families.

How do these photos compare to postcards of lynchings (see Chapter 21)?

What made Emmett Till's murder different from previous racially inspired killings of African Americans in the South was the courageous decision of his family to fight back. Ignoring the kidnappers' warnings to keep quiet (so Emmett would become yet another black boy who went mysteriously "missing"), Emmett's cousin called the sheriff and Emmett's mother the next day. The sheriff found Emmett's body and three days later arrested Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam. When Mamie Till-Bradley saw her son's tortured body, a sight that would have caused many mothers to fall apart, she instead vowed that "here's a job that I got to do now."

Emmett's granduncle, Moses Wright, had begged the white men to just whip Emmett, while his wife offered them money to leave Emmett alone. Now Moses Wright decided to seek justice by testifying against the pair when they went on trial for murder. The sixty-four-year-old Wright later recalled that as he entered the courtroom he could "feel the blood boil in hundreds of white people as they sat glaring." When the prosecutor asked him to identify Milam as one of the men who took Emmett, Wright stood up, pointed his finger, and said, "Thar he." News of Wright's testimony emboldened other black sharecroppers to step forward and testify about hearing Emmett crying for his mother as he was beaten. Fearing for their lives all of these sharecroppers left town after appearing in court.

At first it seemed they had risked everything for naught. The all-white male jury took less than an hour to proclaim the men not guilty. They would have returned the verdict sooner, the jury foreman bragged, "If we hadn't stopped to drink pop." A second jury acquitted the men on the charge of kidnapping. Two months after their murder trial, Bryant and Milam sold their story to an Alabama journalist for $4,000 and admitted killing Emmett. Double jeopardy, a legal concept that prevents authorities from retrying someone for the same crime, protected the pair from prosecution after their confession. Nonetheless the sight of ordinary black citizens standing up in court to accuse their white oppressors electrified a generation ready to strike back. Four months later, partly because of the Emmett Till case, the Montgomery Bus Boycott began.

Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955

The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was a milestone in the fight for racial equality, but by the mid-1950s civil rights activists were no longer content simply to fight for justice through the courts. Many resolved to use economic boycotts, picketing, and mass demonstrations to force white America to take notice of the injustice and violence experienced daily by African Americans. Courageous men and women, ordinary people who took extraordinary risks, set this new direction in civil rights protest.

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks, a forty-three-year-old black seamstress, boarded a bus in downtown Montgomery, Alabama, and selected a seat. She was one of forty thousand blacks who paid a dime twice a day to the white driver, then stepped down and entered the bus through the rear door. When a white man demanded her seat, Parks had to decide whether or not to comply. *Choices and Consequences: Rosa Parks Makes History* explores her decision to stay seated.

As soon as English professor Jo Anne Robinson heard of the arrest, she mimeographed 35,000 handbills urging black citizens to stage a one-day bus boycott on the day of Parks' trial. Robinson was president of the Montgomery Women's Political Council, which had been planning a one-day bus boycott for months. The Parks' arrest offered a perfect moment to act. Two of her students helped Robinson distribute the handbills to black schools, businesses, and churches. "Negroes have rights, too, for if Negroes did not ride the buses, they could not operate," the handbill read. When the day-long boycott succeeded, community leaders decided to continue it indefinitely.

The **Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955–1956)** was a year-long boycott that brought a new leader, Martin Luther King Jr., and a new strategy of nonviolent protest to the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement. The boycotters' initial demands were moderate: courteous treatment from bus drivers, first-come-first-served segregation so no one would have to give up a seat, and the hiring of some black bus drivers. The city administrators and bus company executives refused. The Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) now prepared for a lengthy boycott. Mass meetings twice a week kept boycotters' spirits high and helped disseminate accurate information within a black community that had no radio station or newspaper. The MIA also set up an elaborate carpool system to transport black workers to their jobs and back home. Volunteers picked up passengers from one of forty-two collection points throughout the city, which became the target of terrorist bombings on several occasions. Images of black workers waiting peacefully for carpools contrasted with the burnt remains of

Which individual choices mattered in the Till case?

Choices and Consequences

ROSA PARKS MAKES HISTORY

Unlike the signs above water fountains or posted in waiting rooms, there was no clear section marked "colored" on Montgomery city buses. Instead as more white passengers boarded the bus, black passengers had to vacate their seats for them. When three other black passengers heeded the white driver's request to move on the afternoon of December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks faced a set of choices over how to respond.

Choices

1 Move to the back of the bus.

2 Refuse to give up her seat.

3 Vacate her seat but express her outrage by participating in a planned one-day bus boycott.

Decision

Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat. When the driver threatened to call the police, Parks quietly replied, "You may do that." She was arrested.

Consequences

On the day of Parks's trial (she was found guilty and fined), the Montgomery Women's Political Council organized a one-day boycott that it had been planning for months and nearly all Montgomery's black citizens stayed off the buses. That evening the city's black male clergy met and formed the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), which voted to continue the boycott. The group chose Martin Luther King Jr., a twenty-six-year-old Baptist minister who headed the church that Rosa Parks attended, as their president. When the Supreme Court ruled that bus segregation was unconstitutional in 1956, the year-long boycott ended.

Continuing Controversies

Who was the real Rosa Parks?

The folklore is that Parks was simply a tired seamstress who impulsively decided to stay seated. This narrative leaves out key details. Parks was also secretary of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP and had attended the left-leaning Highlander Folk School in Tennessee where civil rights and labor leaders trained. She knew that the NAACP wanted to test the bus segregation law in the courts and had recently participated in a mass meeting protesting Emmett Till's murder. Boycott leaders played down Parks's activist past, worried that it would diminish her "everyman" appeal and that moderates might view her as a radical agitator. Some activists later suggested that this simplified tale sent the wrong message about how to initiate social change. Rosa Parks's bravery mattered, they agreed, but so did careful preparation, organization-building, and ideological dedication.

What is the enduring legacy of Rosa Parks's decision?

bombed cars provided good television footage for the national television networks that covered the boycott extensively. Television interviews with King, a twenty-six-year-old Baptist minister, turned him into a celebrity overnight and allowed him to appeal directly to moderates throughout the nation. To raise money and garner publicity for the boycott, King also toured the country giving speeches.

> "If Martin Luther King had never been born this movement would have taken place. I just happened to be there."
>
> MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., commenting on his role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Instead of discouraging the protesters, white resistance convinced the MIA to broaden its demands to include the complete desegregation of the buses. The violence now threatened to spiral out of control. When King's house was bombed, a crowd of supporters arrived carrying knives and guns. "If you have weapons, take them home," King told the crowd as news cameras rolled. Publicizing the new civil rights ethos of nonviolence, King declared, "'He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword.' . . . We must meet hate with love."

Over time white opposition to the boycott began to fracture. Some whites had been openly sympathetic to the boycott from the beginning, even though their businesses and social life suffered as a result. Others had more pragmatic reasons for helping black workers reach their jobs. When the mayor chastised white women for chauffeuring their black maids to and from work, one defiant white woman wrote to the newspaper: "If the mayor wants to do my wash and wants to cook for me and clean up after my children let him come and do it."

After nearly a year the boycott was victorious. In November 1956 the Supreme Court ruled that segregated buses were unconstitutional. On December 21, 1956, Martin Luther King Jr. boarded the first integrated bus in Montgomery with the African American minister Ralph Abernathy and the white Reverend Glenn Smiley, both key leaders in the boycott. In their carefully choreographed ride, pictured here (**25.11**), all three followed the guidelines that the MIA had established for integrating buses. An MIA pamphlet advised: "For the first few days try to get on the bus with a friend in whose non-violence you have confidence. You can uphold one another by a glance or a prayer." The MIA cautioned black riders not to respond to curses or shoves. When King entered the bus, the presence of newspaper reporters and cameramen protected him from violence. "We are glad to have you here this morning," the bus driver cordially greeted King as he climbed aboard. The ride was not so smooth for other Montgomery citizens. In the weeks to come, snipers fired into buses and Abernathy's house was bombed.

Two months later King met with ministers from eleven other southern states to form the Southern **Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)**. Black churches, they decided, could help the Civil Rights Movement devise a new nonviolent strategy of direct action that challenged segregation and discrimination throughout the South. At first King saw nonviolence mostly as a way to gain sympathy and to prevent authorities from using violence against demonstrators. King employed a bodyguard throughout the boycott and had applied for a permit to allow him to carry a gun (which the police refused). "King sees the inconsistency, but not enough. He believes and yet he does not believe . . . if he can *really* be won over to a faith in nonviolence there is no end to what he can do," Smiley noted privately.

Over the next few years, King would develop that faith. King's social justice fundamentalism evolved from his reading of Jesus's biblical "Sermon on the Mount" that urged Christians to create "a beloved community" by winning over enemies with love and humility rather than seeking to punish or defeat them. King was also influenced by activists like Reverend James Lawson who had traveled to India to study the Hindu religion's version of nonviolence pioneered by the Indian activist Mahatma Gandhi in the 1930s to win independence from Britain. Lawson was in India during the Montgomery Bus Boycott but returned in time to instruct members of the SCLC and university students as they broadened their attack on Jim Crow in the early 1960s.

The Little Rock Nine, 1957

The *Brown v. Board of Education* case launched a decades-long struggle to integrate public schools. Many white southerners had grown up without ever questioning segregation. The Brown ruling now forced them to either formulate a defense and

Why was the Montgomery Bus Boycott a turning point in the Civil Rights Movement?

rationale for segregation or consider changing generations-old habits. Throughout the South diehard segregationists dug in. "The Negro race, as a race, plainly is not equal to the white race, as a race," asserted James Jackson Kilpatrick, the editor of a Richmond newspaper. Segregationists also advanced a states' right argument, arguing that the federal government had no right to dictate racial policies to the South. Sympathetic to claims that it would be difficult to change ingrained habits overnight, the Supreme Court issued only a vague directive for school systems to desegregate "with all deliberate speed" in 1955. This ruling encouraged entrenched segregationists to try to delay integration indefinitely.

In a scattering of southern cities, moderate whites proved willing to accept the piecemeal dismantlement of Jim Crow. Little Rock, Arkansas, for instance, had desegregated its parks, buses, and libraries with little controversy. After the Brown decision the school board made plans to integrate slowly by inviting nine black teenagers to attend high school alongside two thousand white students. Nicknamed the **Little Rock Nine**, the nine teenagers who integrated Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957 became the focus of a national crisis that required the intervention of federal troops to resolve.

Segregationists quickly organized statewide opposition to the planned integration of Central High School. Concern about states' rights and segregationists' claims that integration would lead to white and black students dancing together at school social functions won over some moderates. Two weeks before the school year started, the threats began. One night a rock shattered the living room window of Daisy Bates, secretary of the local NAACP chapter. The note tied around the rock read "stone this time. Dynamite next."

Influenced by poll numbers showing 85 percent of white Arkansans opposed school integration, Arkansas governor Orval Faubus, who faced a

25.11 First Ride on an Integrated Montgomery Bus, 1958
Martin Luther King Jr., seated on the left, rides with other activists on the first day that buses were integrated in Montgomery after a year-long bus boycott. Fearing vigilante attacks from angry whites, King urged all black bus riders to exude steely resolve and to ride in pairs.

What messages did this planned scene send to whites and blacks?

difficult reelection campaign, declared he would not "force acceptance of change to which the people are so overwhelmingly opposed." In September 1957 Faubus decided to ring Central High with state troops on the first day of school to stop the black students from entering the high school. Using state troops to defy a federal mandate fit well with the desire of moderate whites and die-hard segregationists to protect the sanctity of states' rights.

To protect the black teenagers, Daisy Bates asked parents to drop the students off at her house so they could go to school together. However Elizabeth Eckford, whose family did not have a telephone, never received the message. Instead she took a bus to the school by herself and confronted the angry mob alone. At first she felt reassured when she saw the troops, whom she assumed were there to protect her. She quickly realized her error. When she tried to squeeze past a guard, "He raised his bayonet, and then the other guards moved in." As she stood there confused, the crowd started to chant "Lynch her! Lynch her!" Television cameras, tempering the crowd's enthusiasm for a lynching, likely saved Elizabeth's life. Also a godsend Grace Lorch, a white woman, came out of the crowd to help Elizabeth flag down a city bus and escape.

Over the next few days, as the crowds in front of the high school grew, attacks against news photographers and cameramen became more common. The television footage coming out of Little Rock, reporter David Halberstam noted, "made it hard for people watching at home not to take sides" as they saw "orderly black children behaving with great dignity" being assaulted by a "vicious mob of poor whites." Outrage outside of the South over such images put pressure on President Eisenhower to act, as did the negative worldwide attention that the Little Rock incident garnered. "Our [Communist] enemies are gloating over this incident and using it everywhere to misrepresent our whole nation," Eisenhower warned the country.

Resistance to Supreme Court–mandated integration created more than a racial crisis. It also led to a showdown between the federal government and the state of Arkansas. Under pressure from the White House, Faubus withdrew state troops. It was the president's responsibility to enforce federal law, Eisenhower told the American people, announcing his decision to send federal troops to Little Rock to ensure that Arkansas obeyed the Supreme Court's ruling. With paratroopers from the 101st Airborne Division ringing the school, the Little Rock Nine walked up the front steps surrounded by armed guards.

This was the first time that the federal government had used troops to protect the civil rights of African Americans since the Reconstruction era. The troops, Melba Pattillo Beals recalled, meant a "declaration of war" in the hallways of Central High where white teenagers insulted, kicked, shoved, and ostracized the Little Rock Nine, who were each sent to different classrooms. Eight of the nine finished the year. (Minnijean Brown was expelled for dumping chili on a white student's head after he insulted her in the cafeteria line.) The following year Faubus defied the order to integrate by keeping the schools closed all year. In 1959 Central High reopened with one black student in attendance; in 1960 there were five; then eight in 1961. The small numbers of black students in Central High signified the long, slow road to complete the process of school integration.

The Sit-ins

By the end of the fifties, with the nonviolent Civil Rights Movement in full bloom, the movement's attention shifted from schools to segregated lunch counters. In 1958 James Lawson began conducting SCLC workshops for local college students in Nashville to prepare them for a sit-in campaign to desegregate the city's lunch counters. At these meetings students studied Christian pacifist principles, Gandhi's theories of nonviolence, and the nineteenth-century philosopher Henry David Thoreau's ideas on civil disobedience. During sit-ins protesters occupied seats at whites-only lunch counters and remained there even after they were refused service, sometimes for hours. The sit-ins employed the tactic of **civil disobedience**, breaking the law in a peaceful way to call attention to an unjust law, and replicated a tactic used successfully by the CIO in the 1930s when workers had occupied factories during strikes (see Chapter 22). Sit-ins, like sit-down strikes, disrupted business, making it impossible for white businessmen to ignore the protesters' demands. Highly visible sit-ins in downtown Nashville department stores were also guaranteed to attract press attention.

Lawson warned the students that their anger over Jim Crow was not enough to sustain them through the challenges ahead. Instead they needed to truly embrace nonviolence as the governing principle of their lives. They were fighting back, he assured his students, but in a way that broke the cycle of violence. Armed resistance was not only morally wrong, Lawson argued, but it was also futile to believe that blacks could take on the police and army with guns.

Why did Eisenhower send troops to integrate Central High School in Little Rock?

> "Do show yourself friendly on the counter at all times. Do sit straight and always face the counter. Don't strike back, or curse if attacked. Don't laugh out. Don't hold conversations. Don't block entrances. ... Remember the teachings of Jesus, Gandhi, Thoreau, and Martin Luther King, Jr."
>
> Instructions to sit-in demonstrators in Nashville, Tennessee, 1960

Students learned how to ignore the taunts and blows that whites would heap on them during a sit-in, to go limp when pulled from the seats, and to curl into a protective fetal position if attacked with blows. Lawson's Nashville workshops identified and trained students who would become major leaders in the Civil Rights Movement, including John Lewis, Diane Nash, and Jim Bevel.

Black civil rights protesters had intermittently organized sit-ins since 1942, but it was the spontaneous decision in 1960 of four freshmen from the all-black North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College to request service at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, that ignited the national sit-in movement. By acting on impulse these four teenagers ignored SCLC rules, which emphasized careful preparation and planning before launching any civil rights protest. The evening television news broadcast images of their defiance throughout the nation, demonstrating that the actions of ordinary people could make a difference. In this posed photo taken of the four when they returned to the lunch counter the following day, the young men "had a certain look on their faces, sort of sullen, angry, determined. Before, the Negro in the South had always looked on the defensive, cringing," Bob Moses later recalled (**25.12**). Their courage inspired Moses to leave his job teaching math in Harlem and head south to join the movement. He would go on to spearhead the 1964 voter registration drive in Mississippi known as "Freedom Summer" (see Chapter 27).

25.12 Second Day of Woolworth's Lunch Counter Sit-In, 1960 These freshmen from the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College ignited the southern sit-in movement when they decided to request service at a whites-only lunch counter in Greensboro. They sat unmolested day after day for a week, until the store shut down the lunch counter.

What principles lay at the heart of nonviolent direct action?

25.13 Mississippi Sit-In, 1963
Assaults on sit-in protesters grew more vicious as the demonstrations moved into the Deep South.

Over the following weeks churches and students worked together to unleash waves of sit-ins throughout the South. In Nashville Lawson's group unfurled the longest and most sustained series of sit-ins. After a month of letting roving gangs of thugs punch and kick the students, the Nashville police tried to end the sit-ins by arresting the demonstrators for "disorderly conduct." The students responded with a "jail-no bail" strategy. "Only so many can fit into a cell; if you remain here, there can be no more arrests! Imprisonment is an expense to the state; it must feed and take care of you. Bails and fines are an expense to the movement, which it can ill afford," SCLC organizer Bayard Rustin told the students. With the jails full and the sit-ins continuing, the SCLC increased the pressure with a successful boycott of the downtown stores.

The standoff came to a head when the home of a prominent black lawyer (who had represented the students in court) was bombed. Marching to city hall the students demonstrated the power of nonviolence to change minds. Confronting the mayor, Diane Nash asked: "Mayor West, do you feel it is wrong to discriminate against a person solely on the basis of their race or color?" Answering as "a man had to answer, not a politician," Mayor Ben West, a moderate on racial issues, agreed it was wrong. Three weeks later the lunch counters in Nashville were desegregated. Energized by their success the Nashville group staged "stand-ins" in the city's segregated movie theaters and "sleep-ins" in the lobbies of whites-only hotels.

Throughout the upper South photographs of the sit-ins provoked a similar awakening among moderate whites. The contrast between "the colored students, in coats, white shirts, ties" quietly requesting service at a lunch counter and the ragtag gangs of "white boys come to heckle" was hard to ignore, noted the *Richmond News Leader* when sit-ins hit the capital of Virginia. Resistance to sit-ins in the Deep South proved more formidable and vicious. In 1963 Tougaloo College student Anne Moody sat at a Woolworth's lunch counter with two white activists in Jackson, Mississippi. As this photo shows (**25.13**) a lunchtime crowd of high school students ferociously assaulted the three and poured condiments on their heads. Egging them on was the older man in the picture, who urged the mob to get the demon-

Why were sit-ins successful in the upper South?

strators off the stools and pour salt on their wounds. The crowd's heated anger convinced Moody that "many more will die before it is over with."

By the spring of 1960, Jim Lawson and SCLC organizer Ella Baker saw that students had emerged as a powerful force within the Civil Rights Movement. The two leaders urged university students to form their own civil rights organization. Students, they realized, were willing to take more risks than were many adult activists. Employing the lyrics of a movement song that urged protesters to "keep your eyes on the prize," Baker told the students that their goal needed to be "bigger than a hamburger." The students responded by forming their own civil rights organization, the **Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee**, or **SNCC** (pronounced Snick) in 1960.

In the struggles ahead SNCC and SCLC often forged a crucial partnership between black churches and university students. Idealistic and enthusiastic college students, white and black, eagerly put themselves in the frontlines during civil rights demonstrations. Black churches provided the experienced organizers, meeting spaces, and funds necessary to organize successful protests. Often SNCC acted alone. Commenting on the importance of SNCC to the modern civil rights crusade, Diane Nash noted that "the media and history seem to record it as Martin Luther King's movement, but young people should realize that it was people just like them, their age, that formulated goals and strategies, and actually developed the movement."

The Civil Rights Movement brought together many critical features of the 1950s. While print media remained important, film footage shown on evening television news broadcasts of confrontations between racist whites and nonviolent protesters forced the rest of the nation to confront the realities of Jim Crow and racial violence in the South. Thanks to television what happened in the South no longer remained in the South. The rise of a distinctly teenage culture within the baby boom generation also helped to create a strong generational bond among those young adults who joined the movement. Finally the ideological overtones of the Cold War that pitted democratic capitalism against communism helped civil rights protesters focus attention on the inherent contradictions between America's self-proclaimed goal of spreading democracy throughout the world and visible racial discrimination at home.

Conclusion

Americans enjoyed unprecedented prosperity from 1945 to 1960. A strong labor movement, readily available credit, and generous veterans' benefits fueled a booming consumer and housing market. Growing American families headed to the suburbs, where cars and televisions played prominent roles in their daily lives. Americans debated the meaning of their newfound prosperity throughout the decade. For some this wealth offered a clear demonstration of the superiority of capitalism over communism and made people more tolerant. To others the suburbs were places where all people learned to think and act alike. Conflict also followed Americans into their homes, where parents railed against teenage tastes in music and films.

In the realm of politics, the federal government made only minor adjustments to the New Deal reforms inherited from the Roosevelt administration. The Supreme Court issued path-breaking rulings on the unconstitutionality of segregated schools and buses. In the wake of Emmett Till's murder and Rosa Parks's arrest, a new generation of civil rights activists fought back against racial injustice by employing the tactics of nonviolent direct action and civil disobedience. The publicity given to individual acts of tremendous bravery demonstrated the ability of ordinary Americans to ignite extraordinary changes in the American polity. Overall the fifties planted the seeds for the cultural conflict that traversed the nation in the sixties, a time when youth culture, civil rights, the television age, and an unpopular war in Vietnam created division and discord.

What different strengths did students and churches bring to the Civil Rights Movement?

CHAPTER REVIEW

1945–1946

Five thousand labor strikes sweep the country
Creates public backlash against unions

Baby Boom begins
Generation sets cultural trends from cradle to grave

1947–1948

Taft-Hartley Act
Puts restrictions on labor unions

First Levittown built
Mass migration to suburbs begins

Truman desegregates the armed forces
First major U.S. institution to integrate in the twentieth century

1952

Nixon's "Checkers" speech
First use of television to diffuse a political crisis

Review Questions

1. How did efforts to undo the New Deal and curtail the Fair Deal fare from 1945 to 1960?
2. How did Americans react to rising prosperity in the United States? What internal debates arose over suburbanization and teen culture?
3. Consider the role of the media in the 1950s. How did the media affect intergenerational conflicts? What role did the media play during the Civil Rights Movement? How did activists, both conservative and liberal, use the media to sway opinions?
4. What key social conditions and events triggered the modern Civil Rights Movement?
5. What means were available to African Americans to fight against Jim Crow?
6. Why was the Civil Rights Movement successful in the fifties? What role did ordinary citizens play? How important were its leaders?

1954

Brown v. Board of Education
Supreme Court orders integration of public schools

1955

Emmett Till murdered
Images of corpse spark civil rights protest

Three-quarters of American homes have televisions
Leisure habits shift as families spend more time inside the home

Montgomery Bus Boycott
Martin Luther King Jr. emerges as civil rights leader

1957

Elvis Presley appears on *The Ed Sullivan Show*
Culture clash over rock-and-roll

Little Rock Nine integrate high school in Arkansas
Showdown between federal and state governments over *Brown* ruling

1960

Sit-ins across the South
College students become a major force in the Civil Rights Movement

Sixty percent of Americans classified as middle class
American standard of living rises

Nixon-Kennedy debate
Television shapes public opinion of presidential candidates

Key Terms

Taft-Hartley Act (1947) Law that abolished the closed shop, banned so-called sympathy boycotts, and required that all union officers sign affidavits certifying that they were not members of the Communist Party. **753**

Fair Deal Truman's proposals for national health care, public housing, education, and public works projects. **754**

military-industrial complex Eisenhower's term for the close ties between the defense industry and the Pentagon that might influence government policy. **755**

Levittowns Planned suburban communities where developers standardized every part of the construction process. **758**

baby boom generation The 76.4 million Americans born between 1946 and 1964. **758**

Kennedy and Nixon debate First televised presidential election debate in 1960 watched by nearly 77 million Americans, or 60 percent of the adult population. **761**

Beats Members of the bohemian communities of poets, novelists, and artists that flourished in New York's Greenwich Village and San Francisco's North Beach and who rejected middle-class suburban values. **763**

***Brown v. Board of Education* (1954)** Supreme Court decision that segregated schools violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. **766**

Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955–1956) A year-long bus boycott that brought a new leader, Martin Luther King Jr., and a new strategy of nonviolent protest to the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement. **768**

Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) Civil rights organization founded by Martin Luther King Jr. that used black churches to devise a new nonviolent strategy of direct action. **770**

Little Rock Nine Nine black teenagers who integrated Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957 and became the focus of a national crisis that required the intervention of federal troops to resolve. **771**

sit-ins Nonviolent demonstrations where civil rights protesters employed the tactic of civil disobedience to occupy seats at whites-only lunch counters. **772**

civil disobedience A strategy of nonviolence used by demonstrators to protest a law or a policy considered unjust. **772**

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Student-run civil rights organization founded in 1960. **775**