

Post-World War II Domestic Issues

Post World War II America saw changes in everyday life scarcely imaginable in the 1930s. The military requirements of war had generated enormous advances in technology, medicine, communications and the implements of war. Medicines such as penicillin, antibiotics and techniques for the treating of injuries and diseases were greatly stimulated by the demands of warfare and its impact upon civilian populations. The research that went into the development of the atomic bomb also produced information about the phenomenon of radiation and how it applied to such things as x-ray technology. The first jet aircraft were developed by Germany during the Second World War, and all-purpose vehicles such as the famous Jeep (general purpose vehicle) fostered advances in automotive design. Radar and other sophisticated technology devices had uses that would later be applicable in the civilian arena for civil air control. Methods developed by companies such as Kaiser advanced the technology necessary for building ships of all sorts. The Kaiser-Permanente health plan was created by that corporation in the World War Two era.

As typified by the mythical figure of Rosie the Riveter, the roles of American women had changed dramatically during the world war. Approximately 800,000 women served in the Armed Forces in a variety of capacities. For the 13 million men who served, the military experience was also eye opening: farm boys, city dwellers, college students, businessmen, teachers, musicians, artists, laborers and skilled technicians serving together—not to mention an unparalleled mixing of racial and ethnic groups, and men from different geographic areas—brought new perspectives to the men who served in the armed forces during the World War II era.

The difficulty was that when those men returned, they had changed, often drastically, and so had the women they had left behind. The younger soldiers and sailors had gone off as boys of 18 and returned as old men of 21. The girls had gone to work in factories, businesses, USOs and Red Cross or other patriotic agencies and were now independent-minded women, not necessarily ready to resume the status quo. The end of the war was indeed a time for celebration, and the returning GIs were treated as heroes. But getting back to a “normal” life was difficult. Many men and women who had married during whirlwind courtships of weeks or even days before the men left discovered that their spouses were strangers; the person they remembered had changed. The result of all these changes was that marriage, birth and divorce rates all rose dramatically in the postwar years.

The Postwar Economy

Another thing that was obviously true after the war was that the Depression was over. Massive government spending during the war—twice as much as in all of America’s prior history combined—had ended unemployment and created tens of thousands of new jobs for men and women. Dust bowl farmers who had arrived in California destitute in the 1930s had found jobs in aircraft and ship building plants and were well off by 1943. Soldiers with families sent their paychecks home; there was little to spend them on in many places where they were stationed. Instead those paychecks went into savings accounts because their wives were working and also had little on which to spend the extra income: no appliances, no new cars, and very few luxury items, for industry had devoted its full attention to the war effort.

Fears that the returning GIs would cause economic hardships did not materialize, for the need to shift the economy back to peacetime production demanded a lot of labor. Although local conflicts occurred over hiring priorities and preferences for veterans, there was plenty of work to go around. Americans spent, but not wildly, for memories of the Depression returned as those of the war began to fade. Though the economy boomed, it did not get out of control, and fear of another depression gradually waned. The postwar agonies historically faced by many nations—rampant inflation, rioting, labor disorders—were not completely absent in the U.S. from 1945-1955, but they did not rise above manageable proportions. For one thing, the demands of the Cold War and other factors kept government spending at high levels, and the demand for consumer goods and new homes kept the economy moving upward. Americans had never had it so good. They knew it and were proud, feeling they had earned it.

The Late 1940s

Looking back, it is hard to imagine how many things we now take for granted were different in 1945. To mail a first-class letter cost three cents; air mail was extra. Practically no homes had a television set; even by 1949 less than 3% of residences had one. There were no pushbutton or dial telephones; you would pick up the receiver and wait until an operator, inevitably female, said, “Number, please?”—and you gave her the number. You had to ask for a special operator for long-distance. A significant percentage of farm homes were still without electricity or indoor plumbing; appliances such as refrigerators and washing machines and dryers were luxuries which many working-class families could not yet afford.

As virtually no automobiles had been manufactured from 1943 to 1945 because the auto companies were busy building tanks, jeeps, 5-ton trucks and military aircraft, the old 1940 and 41 models were brought out again until designs could be revamped. The Singer company went back to making sewing machines instead of machine guns, and silk was once again used for stockings instead of parachutes. Butter, sugar, meat and gasoline were no longer rationed. People took their old cars down off the blocks where they had sat during the war because of tire and gasoline rationing, and the top half of headlights no longer had to be painted black for air defense.

American labor had also prospered during World War II. By 1945 union membership was at almost 15 million, over 35% of the nonagricultural labor force, an all-time high. In 1946 President Truman recommended measures to Congress designed to help the economy recover. With the huge demand for consumer goods and new homes, anti-inflation measures were instituted to keep the overheating economy under control. This attempt was made despite the fact that the Office of Price Administration, which had kept a lid on inflation during the war, was abolished in 1947. Life did not return to what it had been in 1940, it took off in exciting and often confusing new directions.

The Housing Boom

The critical need for the returning men starting families was housing. University campuses provide an interesting glimpse of how different effects of the war came together. The GI Bill of Rights, which included provisions for college tuition assistance, as well as job training and help with home loans, helped create a new phenomenon. Veterans who might never have thought about going to college decided that it was worth a try, since Uncle Sam was footing part of the bill. Men who chose to attend college on the GI Bill did not necessarily delay marriage, as they had postponed their lives long enough while at war. They often delayed having children so that their wives could work, but they were still families, and around the fringes of college campuses makeshift structures such as tin Quonset huts, old military barracks or other temporary buildings were converted into cheap apartments. The married college student—until 1945 an oddity for the most part—was now a fixture on the campus. Overall, Americans were eager to marry and start families, and by 1946 the well-known baby-boom was underway; the birth rate in 1946 was 20% higher than in 1940 and continued at a high rate until the 1960s.

Elsewhere the demand for housing was equally strong, and thousands of young families were willing to move into new suburban communities such as Levittown, Long Island, (left) where prefabricated houses were constructed from one set of plans in row after row, even to the placing of a single tree in the same place in every yard. Some social critics found such communities appalling in their sameness. But the occupants, who perhaps remembered growing up in the Depression 1930s, found that paint, do-it-yourself landscaping and other improvements could create some sense of personal identity. All the same, cartoonists and song writers had fun with this “ticky-tacky” life style.

The Age of the Automobile

One extra that did not come with suburban houses but which was often indispensable to this new suburban way of life was the automobile. In the immediate postwar years, Ford, GM, Chrysler, Kaiser, Studebaker, Hudson, Packard and the other manufacturers retooled their plants from making trucks, tanks and jeeps. They dusted off prewar designs and began producing cars that looked very much like 1939 and 1940 models. But within two or three years newer, sleeker, more streamlined and modern



designs appeared, and the automobile age took off. Cars and gasoline were cheap—in fact the gas war became a roadside feature in the 1950s, as did the drive-in restaurant with curbside service, the drive-in movie theater, and a new form of temporary lodging, the motel. At first few new cars had air-conditioning, fancy radios or automatic transmissions, which through the 1950s were often expensive extras. But they were bright, shiny and colorful, and when the interstate highway system was begun under President Eisenhower in the 1950s, they would take you almost anywhere in unprecedented comfort and speed.



Truman's Administration

As Franklin Roosevelt's successor, President Harry Truman faced enormous challenges. Truman had not even wanted to be vice president, and when he received the shocking news of the president's death from Eleanor Roosevelt at the White House, his first words were, "Mrs. Roosevelt what can we do for you?" Maintaining her composure, the president's widow answered, "No, Harry, what can we do for you? For you are the one in trouble now."

Truman initially promised to carry on with Franklin Roosevelt's policies, but he eventually designed his own legislative program. Although President Truman did succeed in overseeing a reasonably orderly transition to a healthy peacetime economy, his ambitious political program ran into difficulty with the Republican Congress elected in 1946. Opponents of Roosevelt's New Deal had used the war to get rid of many of Roosevelt's measures, and conservative Democrats and Republicans were not prepared for another "new deal." However, President Truman made significant advances in the area of civil rights. Because Congress was not prepared for major civil rights legislation, President Truman used the power of his office to desegregate the Armed Forces and forbid racial segregation in government employment.

With a strong labor flexing its muscle, and with the huge demand for consumer goods, the American economy was vibrant. Workers were in a position to make demands, and they did. President Truman was at the center of the struggle between labor and management, and in order to strengthen his position with labor, a natural Democratic constituency, he vetoed the controversial Taft-Hartley Act of 1947. It was called by some the "slave labor act" because it was seen as unfriendly to labor and unions. Truman's veto was overridden, and the act banned the closed shop (union only shop.) It also prohibited union contributions to political campaigns, required union leaders to swear that they were not Communists, and included other stern measures.

Despite conflict between President Truman and the Republican Congress, much was accomplished in the postwar years. The National Security Act of 1947 revised the Armed Forces, creating the Department of Defense, a separate United States Air Force and the new National Security Council. In addition the law made the Joint Chiefs of Staff a permanent entity and established the Central Intelligence Agency, an outgrowth of the wartime Office of Strategic Services, or OSS, to coordinate intelligence gathering activity. In 1951, in a reaction against the extended term of Franklin Roosevelt, Congress passed and the states ratified the 22nd Amendment, which limited all presidents after Truman to two terms.

The 1948 Election

The 1948 presidential election was one of the most memorable in American history. The Republican candidate, Governor Thomas Dewey of New York, had gained fame for his anti-crime work and had run against Roosevelt in 1944. Because of Harry Truman's support for civil rights, including the integration of the Armed Forces and the United States Civil Service, a number of Southern Democrats left the Democratic Party. They nominated South Carolina Governor J. Strom Thurmond on a States' Rights Democratic ticket; they were called the "Dixiecrats." Meanwhile the left wing of the Democratic Party nominated Henry A. Wallace on a Progressive Party ticket. Those two defections from the Democratic ranks seemed to doom President Truman's chances for reelection.



By mid-September the polls were predicting a sure victory for Governor Dewey, and taking the polls seriously Dewey conducted a lethargic campaign, assuming that he had the election in hand. President Truman, however, went on a whistle-stop campaign by train in which he covered 31,000 miles and made speeches all along the way. He criticized the "do-nothing Congress," and people in the audience yelled, "Give 'em hell, Harry!" The President responded, "I don't give them hell—I just tell the truth and they think it's hell!"

His supporters would roar with laughter and applause. Post-election analyses later showed that Truman was closing the gap rapidly in the last few days before the election. Without the assistance of modern computers, however, the pollsters were unable to keep up with the changes. Thus on election night everyone still assumed that Governor Dewey could rest easy.

In one of the most famous journalistic gaffes in American political history, the *Chicago Tribune* came out with its famous headline, "Dewey defeats Truman." The next morning a victorious Harry Truman held up the paper grinning broadly—he had won 49% of the vote and had achieved a 303 to 189 margin in the Electoral College. Harry Truman had won his second term and was president in his own right. The blunt, plain-spoken Missourian, who had a famous sign on his desk—"The Buck Stops Here"—would serve four more years.

In 1949, President Truman, inspired by his stunning upset victory in the election, introduced a new legislative agenda, which he called the "Fair Deal." It sought to take up where the New Deal had left off and included repeal of the Taft-Hartley Act, raising the minimum wage and expanding social security. Conservatives, however, feeling that they had seen government programs advance more than far enough under Roosevelt, gave lukewarm support at best to Truman's ideas, although some bills were passed. Congress had also passed the 22nd Amendment, which was ratified in 1951. Although it did not apply to President Truman, his election in 1948 was the fifth straight Democratic victory. Had he chosen to run again in 1952, he probably would have met the same fate as Adlai Stevenson, who lost in a landslide to World War II hero General Dwight Eisenhower.

The 1950's

The 1950s were a decade of both stability and change. Inflation was tamed even as the economy continued to grow; for example government workers and military personnel received no pay raises from 1955 to 1963 because inflation remained at near zero. The civil rights revolution in the South got started in 1954 and 55 with the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* and the Montgomery bus boycott begun by the courageous Rosa Parks. For most of middle America, however, the 1950s were a time of flashier cars, the expansion of television, the rise of rock 'n roll, mass production, the accelerated movement to suburbia, and a rising but strangely dissatisfied middle class. Underneath the somewhat tranquil exterior of American society the beat generation brought a foretaste of the rebellious 1960s.

The Eisenhower Years

General Dwight D. Eisenhower was elected president in 1952. He was nominated over conservative Senator Robert Taft of Ohio following a lively contest at the Republican convention. He selected as his vice president Senator Richard Nixon of California. By election day it was clear that everyone liked Ike, and he was elected in a landslide. Eisenhower was better prepared for the Presidency than many imagined, for in his job as Supreme Allied Commander in Europe during the war he had had to deal with both political and military matters. But that experience did not quite prepare him for all the political machinations of Washington.

Along with the civil rights turmoil in the South that increased during the 1950s, an undercurrent of fear and anxiety persisted because of the nuclear arms race. With the growing threat from the Soviet Union, the military was enlarged, and military spending helped stimulate the economy. One project begun by President Eisenhower as a national defense measure was the creation of the interstate highway system. Within a decade Americans could drive almost literally from coast to coast without encountering a stop light. American life became ever more focused on the automobile. Although a significant number of families still did not own a car, and few families had two cars, the automobile had become a necessity rather than a luxury for most Americans.

By the mid 1950's the Depression years seemed far away. Most Americans were enjoying a standard of living that was unprecedented. Not all of the economic news was good, however. Americans had benefited in the immediate postwar years because their industrial facilities had been untouched by the war. But as the European nations built new factories to replace the ones that had been bombed out, American industries faced obsolescence. As farming methods continued to improve, farmers were able to produce more and more, driving the prices of agricultural goods down. The federal government initiated various price supports to prop up farm commodities.

Suburban life centered around the family, and most Americans felt that life was pretty good. However, an undercurrent of frustration persisted. One tale about the apparent sameness of the suburbs had a man getting off his commuter train, walking absently toward his home, accidentally walking a block too far, entering a house that seemed to be just like his own, to be greeted by a wife who seemed familiar. Only after the couple had sat down to dinner and started to talk did everyone realize that the man had arrived at the wrong house. Sloan Wilson's novel, *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, and the film of the same name starring Gregory Peck reveal the pressures of 1950s conformity and the haunting memories of the Second World War. Although the modern feminist movement had not yet begun, its seeds were being planted among bright, educated women who were finding that being a housewife and mother were not always fulfilling.

Although he had suffered a heart attack in 1955, President Eisenhower felt fit and competent to run for reelection in 1956, and he won by another landslide. Recognizing that that many people still "liked Ike," the Democrats decided to stay with their 1952 candidate, Governor Adlai Stevenson.

The Late 1950's

For all the subliminal discontent, Americans were generally self-assured and confident in their ability to meet life challenges, both domestic and international. That certitude was ruptured, however, with the startling announcement in 1957 that the Soviet Union had launched the first orbital satellite. It was called Sputnik. While fascinating to scientists, the Russian satellite struck fear in the hearts of many who believed that the Soviets would convert their successes in outer space into military advantage. Before the United States could get its first satellite aloft, the Russians had sent a cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin, into orbit. While Soviet rockets seemed capable of sending large payloads into space, American rockets often blew up on the launch pad. It was not until President Kennedy announced a national goal of landing an astronaut on the moon and returning him safely to Earth before the end of the decade of the 1960s that America began closing the gap in the space race.

In reaction to the launching of Sputnik Congress passed a bill creating the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and another, the National Defense Education Act, to improve American education by beefing up programs in mathematics and science. While Americans continued to like and respect President Eisenhower, he seemed like a grandfather figure to many. By the time of the election of 1960, Americans sought a younger more vigorous president, whom they got in John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

Life in the 1950s in America had about it rather glaring inconsistencies. On the surface, much seemed well. People were making more money than ever before; men and women were going to college in far greater numbers than ever before; television was a new form of entertainment, which by the mid-1950s was a feature of a majority of households, though most households had only one small black-and-white set (left). Sports were more popular than ever, popular music was going off in new directions with the emergence of Elvis Presley and rock and roll, and industries like aircraft changed people's transportation habits almost as much as the train or automobile. The St. Lawrence Seaway connecting the Great Lakes with the Atlantic Ocean was also opened in 1959. Ceremonies in Chicago and elsewhere were attended by President Eisenhower and Queen Elizabeth II. Nostalgic films have shown the 1950s to be good, comfortable, at least, and free from turmoil, although some might say they were bland and often uninteresting, maybe even boring. But overall, the "nifty fifties" were still good.

But there were dark sides. In the South, and in parts of the North as well, racial tensions that had been smoldering since Reconstruction began to emerge with the birth of the modern civil rights movement. And while the world was relatively at peace, various crises in Europe, Asia and the Middle East kept tensions high. And above all—there was the bomb. Until 1949 the U.S. was the only nation that had produced (and used) atomic weapons. When Soviet Union scientists, whom many believe were aided by secrets stolen from the U.S., exploded its first atomic device, the atomic (later nuclear) arms race was on.

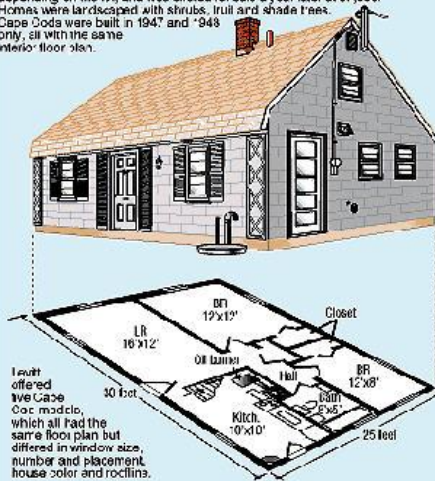
The two superpowers established what became known as the balance of terror as more and more powerful weapons were produced and tested. School children were drilled on what to do in case of a nuclear attack, subterranean bomb shelters were built (sometimes in people's back yards), and for a long time the assumption was that sooner or later World War III—more horrible than World Wars I and II put together—was bound to start. One did not have to be a pessimist to think the unthinkable, that it was not a matter of "if," but "when." It was for understandable reasons that the Cold War was also known as the balance of terror.



Levitt's Homes A look at the two types of homes Levitt built in the Levittown area.

The 1947 Cape Cod

The Levitt Cape Cod offered 4 1/2 rooms on a 25-by-30-foot slab, with an unfinished expandable attic, and a kitchen full of appliances that included a Bendix washer. The kitchen was in the front - at the time, a novel approach - and two bedrooms were in the rear. It rented for \$50-\$55 per month, depending on the lot, and was offered for sale a year later at \$7,500. Homes were landscaped with shrubs, fruit and shade trees. Cape Cods were built in 1947 and '48 only, all with the same interior floor plan.

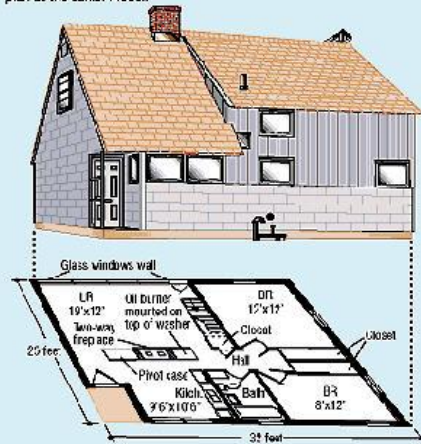


Levitt offered two Cape Cod models, which all had the same floor plan but differed in window size, number and placement, house color and roofline.



The 1949 Ranch

The Levitt Ranch, a so 4 1/2 rooms, was first offered in 1949. It was 50 square feet larger than the Cape Cod and retained the cape's floor plan, keeping the kitchen in the front, but pushing the living room to the rear and bedrooms to the side. The attic was unfinished. There was a two-way hearth between the fully equipped kitchen and the living room. It sold for \$7,993, with a monthly mortgage payment of \$58. The 1953 and 1951 models had the same basic floor plan as the earlier model.



The five 10'-0" ranch models, while differing in exterior features, all had the same floor plan and each came with a revolving storage cabinet and a 16-foot picture window in the rear of the house.



Newsday/Richard Urzetti