

An Era of Social Change

*Postwar United States
(1945–1975)*



The Golden Age

Social change

The Great Society

Thematic Icons



Economics and business



Geography and environment



Historical concepts and questions



Politics, government and citizenship



Society and culture



War, diplomacy and foreign policy

Icons: For more detailed instructions, see the *User Guide*



Flash activity (these activities are not editable)



Teacher notes included in the Notes page



By the end of this section, you will learn about a variety of different social changes that took place during the 1950s and 1960s:

- The baby boom and population shifts
- Youth culture and educational reform
- Mass media, leisure and culture
- Civil rights for minorities and women.



The baby boom



In the years following the war, the birth rate increased at an unprecedented level. The **baby boom** ran from the late 1940s to the early 1960s, creating the biggest generation in U.S. history. Reasons for this population explosion included:

- lower marriage age
- reunion of families after war
- desirability of more children
- advances in medicine and childcare
- confidence in lasting economic prosperity.





As millions of soldiers returned home after the war, the U.S. experienced a severe housing crisis.

The response to this crisis was the creation of the **suburbs** – residential areas on the outskirts of a city – by applying techniques of mass production to home construction.



William Levitt is credited with the idea of the modern, mass-produced suburb. The first such planned community was Levittown on Long Island, New York, which was started in 1947 with 150 affordable, single-family homes being constructed each week.

Why did people want to move to the suburbs?



The suburbs created an entirely new social dynamic built around the single family home, located in neighborhoods outside urban areas. This image of American life is strongly associated with the Golden Age.

Americans began escaping from the city to enjoy a new kind of social life. This included barbecues in the backyard, cocktail parties, Little League sports and neighborhood school meetings.





After World War II there was a population shift. The percentage of people living in cities remained stable, but more people lived in suburbs and fewer people lived in rural areas. Drag the labels to the correct places in the table to show the percentage of people living in each location in each decade.

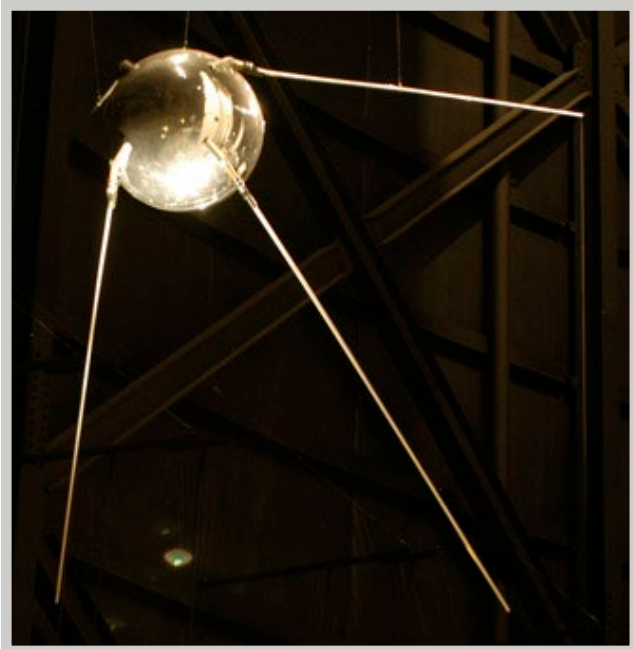
Press **start** to begin.

start





During the **Cold War** in the 1950s, much of the nation's educational agenda revolved around promoting civil defense. The **Federal Civil Defense Administration** produced numerous instructional programs. Teachers were seen as critical participants in preparing students for potential attack.



On October 4, 1957, the Soviet Union launched *Sputnik I*, the first satellite, into orbit and initiated the **space race**.

This was a shock to Americans who had come to expect total superiority in all things technological and resulted in a massive effort to exceed the Soviets.

What happened in 1949 that really scared the U.S.?



The launch of Sputnik symbolized a threat to American security and its superiority in science and technology. As a direct result, public education underwent a critical review and educational reform was accelerated and given extra funding.

The **National Defense Education Act** was passed in 1957. It gave support to science, technology, and math education at school and university level.

It was based on the premise that the federal government had a vested interest in promoting such education as a component of national defense.



What current federal education programs are there?



Due to the baby boom the population of the US not only grew, but became younger. The period 1950s saw an increase in the number of children between the ages of 5 and 14 from 24.3 million to 35.5 million.



Teenagers were identified as an key group between childhood and adulthood who were able to stay in education for longer rather than have to work. This was due to the economic prosperity.

Teens developed their own culture and were key consumers for everything from music to soft drinks to make-up.



Despite the indispensable role women played in the war effort, after the war, they were once again relegated to the home. Jobs that had been open during the war were now closed.



A new image of the perfect housewife came into existence in the 1950s with the birth of television. Men were seen as providers and protectors while women ran the domestic sphere.

During the 1960s more women entered the workforce but they were paid significantly less than men. Spurred on by the other civil rights movements around them, women began to demand equal treatment.

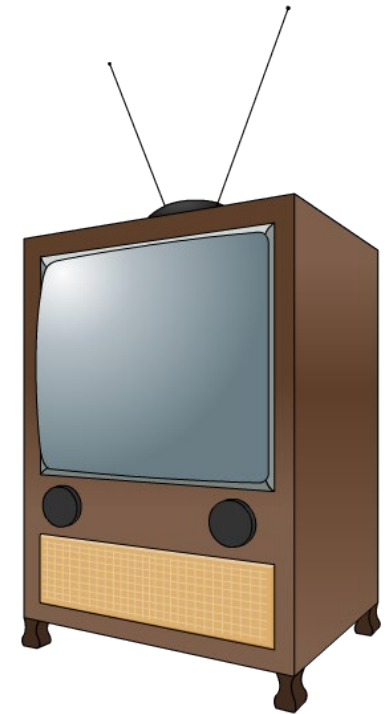
Do you know what equal rights women achieved?



Television first became widely available in 1948, changing the way people received information and entertainment. By 1960, 90% of households had a TV. By 1959, the typical American family was watching six hours of TV a day, seven days a week.

TV changed family social dynamics. The rise of TV dinners shows how family entertainment became centered around the television.

Critics worried that televised portrayals of violence could have a damaging effect on children. Others complained about the limited, and often stereotypical, depictions of women and ethnic minorities in TV shows.



Why did television have such a huge impact?



Other types of media were very important during the 1950s and 1960s as people became increasingly connected.

Popular media helped to create a shared national culture. People also enjoyed similar leisure activities as they had more free time.

Press on each item to find out more information about it.

Press **start** to begin.

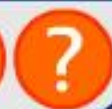
start





During the 1960s, mainstream **popular culture** created a widespread sense of cultural uniformity. Some groups responded by forming **counterculture** movements. Press the buttons to find out about aspects of culture and changing attitudes in the 1960s.
Press **start** to begin.

start





Rampant consumerism and the growth of advertising and mass media caused some to worry that America's social, political, moral and aesthetic standards were being tainted.

Some Catholic and evangelical Christian churches began to attack what they saw as an increasingly **secular** society, arguing that secularism was un-American.

Starting in the mid-1960s, a new religiously and socially conservative movement began to have a significant effect on American society.



How did religious groups stay relevant to people?



The Civil Rights Movement brought about many important social changes in the 1950s and '60s.

Can you sort these key events of the Civil Rights Movement into chronological order?

More information about each event can be found by pressing the orange information buttons.

Press **start** to begin.

start





Other minority groups also suffered from prejudice and discrimination. The Latino population of the U.S. grew to 9 million during the 1960s. They were often exploited and poorly paid, but began to organize politically and made gains in employment and education.

In 1954, the government began the termination and relocation program for Native Americans. It aimed to abolish reservations and relocate Indians.



This program was abolished in 1962. After protest movements, Native Americans gained more rights, especially in the 1975 **Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act.**