

## 16.2 - American Life in the 1950s

Was the 1950s a decade of progress?

### The U.S. Postwar Economy

#### How did the U.S. economy change after World War II?

Immediately following World War II, the United States began to transition from a wartime economy to a peacetime economy. The War Production Board stopped supervising and rationing the use of materials that were important to the military, such as steel and aluminum, and imported commodities, such as rubber, coffee, and sugar. This allowed manufacturers to again produce consumer items, including automobiles, refrigerators, and houses.

Meanwhile, the Office of Price Administration removed its price controls, and the National War Labor Board ended wage controls. Prices of goods and wages for workers could now fluctuate based on supply and demand.

Due to these dramatic changes, the U.S. economy went through an adjustment period. During World War II, the federal government had controlled prices and restricted the types and amount of products people could buy. These measures helped prevent inflation. When the war ended, the government lifted the restrictions. Demand for goods increased faster than supply increased, causing inflation. Prices for many goods such as beef cattle skyrocketed.

#### Labor Unrest

In addition to inflation, the period immediately following World War II was characterized by labor unrest. Early in the war, a few labor unions tried to strike and met strong opposition from the government and criticism from the public. The War Production Board helped resolve some of these grievances with small increases in benefits. Additionally, several major unions signed “no-strike” pledges, promising not to strike during the war. Once the war ended, the government stopped controlling wages, and laborers again used strikes to demand changes from employers and business owners. In 1946, close to 5,000 work stoppages resulted in 116 million lost workdays.

In 1947, Congress decided that labor union work stoppages had grown out of control and enacted the Labor-Management Relations Act, commonly called the Taft-Hartley Act. This law tilted the balance of power toward management through several measures. It authorized the president to prohibit a strike that was against the national interest. The law also banned secondary boycotts, which are work stoppages by one union in support of another union’s strike. It banned closed shops, businesses that agree to hire only union members. It also allowed states to pass “right-to-work” laws, which forbid unions from forcing workers to pay dues.

### Returning to Normal After World War II

#### How did U.S. citizens adjust to life after World War II?

Many Americans had difficulty adjusting to the postwar economic changes. Many workers feared they would lose their jobs once the U.S. economy shifted from a wartime economy to a peacetime economy. This fear was especially high among returning soldiers. During the war, women, African Americans, and other minorities had entered the workforce to support the war effort by producing goods the troops needed. What would these workers do when wartime supplies were no longer needed? What would happen to returning soldiers? Would they be able to find jobs when they returned to the United States?

## The GI Bill

To help veterans readjust to civilian life, Congress passed the GI Bill of Rights in 1944. The GI Bill, also called the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, provided benefits to World War II veterans. The GI Bill helped produce a highly trained workforce and reduce unemployment by allowing veterans to attend school.

The bill supplied home loans to veterans, which enabled returning soldiers and their families to buy homes. This kept employment high in the building trades as well as in other industries. The GI Bill also provided veterans with loans to start businesses, training for new types of jobs, and payments for those who remained unemployed. These unemployment payments would be paid for up to a year after soldiers returned home, assuming they could not find work.

## The Baby Boom

The flood of returning soldiers contributed to the [baby boom](#). The *baby boom* refers to the increased birthrate that occurred from 1946 to 1964. Both the Great Depression and World War II disrupted many Americans' plans to marry and raise families. After the war, people moved on with their lives, and their families grew. Returning soldiers who were ready to settle down began to marry and raise families.

The economic prosperity of the times helped many couples afford the financial costs of children. As a result, the birthrate soared. A country's birthrate is calculated as the number of births per 1,000 women. The U.S. birthrate jumped from 83.4 in 1945 to 100.4 in one year. The birthrate continued to climb to its peak of 117.7 in 1957. It did not return to below 90 until 1967. From 1946 to 1964, Americans gave birth to 75.9 million babies.

## A More Prosperous and Healthy Nation

### What led to a boom in the U.S. economy following World War II?

Rationing policies and price controls had been lifted by the 1950s. Americans were free to buy new goods without limits. These changes led to an increase in demand for goods. The increase in demand meant that more products had to be made to keep up with the demand. Because of this demand, employment rose. For example, farmers who had been left unemployed since the Great Depression were able to find work at factories in urban areas.

After the war, there was a large migration of workers from rural areas to urban centers. The demand for goods led to more employment opportunities. Manufacturing jobs paid good salaries. More manufacturing jobs meant more workers with enough money to purchase more goods.

After the war, countries around the world had come to depend on U.S. products. European and Asian countries struggled to recover from the destruction of the war. In contrast, the United States had suffered very little physical damage. As a result, U.S. manufacturing peaked in the 1950s. This is because the country could produce goods for Americans and for citizens abroad. Many European and Asian factories would need to be rebuilt before they could manufacture anything.

### Prepared to Prosper

Other war factors contributed to the country's economic growth. Due to mobilization for World War II, the transportation industry was well developed. New machines made agriculture, manufacturing, mining, and logging more efficient. All of these industries had plenty of experienced managers. They had become experts during the war. Once the war was over, these industries could produce goods for the economy's postwar needs.

Throughout the 1950s, the economy boomed. Employment remained high. Consumer spending increased. In 1946, Americans spent \$143 billion on personal consumption. Personal consumption includes almost everything people buy and use. Examples are food, clothing, recreation, transportation, and household goods. By 1961, the total spent on personal consumption more than doubled to \$335 billion. The increased demand created even more jobs. There were white-collar jobs in management, sales, and advertising. These industries also needed record keepers and accountants.

Between 1947 and 1956, the GI Bill's funds for education alone pumped \$14.5 billion into the economy. This number came from a combination of tuition, equipment, and room and board. By 1950, the Veterans Administration had guaranteed more than 2.3 million home loans. The 1950s was a period of great change. During this period, a variety of important medical breakthroughs occurred. These helped create a higher quality of life for citizens.

### A Healthier Nation

Medical breakthroughs in the 1950s benefitted many U.S. families. Few diseases frightened families as much as polio in the early 1900s. Polio tended to strike during the warm summer months. It swept through populations every few years. Through the early 1950s, it attacked an average of 35,000 people a year. At the peak of one epidemic in 1952, there were nearly 60,000 cases across the nation. At its mildest, the virus caused flu-like symptoms. More extreme cases resulted in severe muscle paralysis and even death. Paralysis is the loss the muscles' ability to function. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt got the disease in 1921. He lived with severe pain and paralysis until his death in 1945.

Jonas Salk was an important medical researcher during this time. In 1952, he experimented with a new vaccine for polio. A vaccine is designed to prevent a disease. Salk first tested it on children who already had survived polio. Next, he tested the vaccine on others who had not suffered from polio. Salk discovered that his formula successfully created new antibodies without any illness. Antibodies help fight diseases before they hurt the body. The vaccine was tested nationwide on schoolchildren in 1954. This test was highly successful. By late 1955, about four million people were vaccinated. Thanks to the Salk polio vaccine, the number of cases of polio in the United States greatly declined. It went from nearly 30,000 in 1955 to around 6,000 in 1957. By the early 1960s, a new vaccine for the measles had joined the polio vaccine. By 1967, a vaccine for the mumps had been introduced, too.

These vaccines were not the only medical breakthroughs of the 1950s. Penicillin had been praised as a clinical wonder drug in the 1940s. Penicillin has the ability to kill numerous infections. However, supply was a problem. It was difficult to produce enough penicillin from natural mold to make a lot of it. Robert Burns Woodward was a chemist at Harvard University. In 1947, he was the first to synthesize, or make from scratch, the structure of penicillin. This led to the mass production of synthetic penicillin in the early 1950s. Another important medical advance was the discovery of the structure of DNA in 1953. This discovery has greatly advanced knowledge of genetics ever since. Understanding the double-helix structure resulted from the research of four scientists: Rosalind Franklin, Francis Crick, James Watson, and Maurice Wilkins. A third breakthrough came in 1958. This was the year that Wilson Greatbatch invented the first practical pacemaker. A pacemaker is an electrical device that helps the heart beat. His electrical heart implant, and revisions to this early model, have saved millions of lives. With these advances in medicine, U.S. citizens generally experienced a better overall quality of life after World War II. However, did all groups enjoy the growing success of the times?