ESSAYS

Was America at its best in the fifties, or is that an illusion created by hindsight? In the first reading, John Patrick Diggins of the University of California, Irvine, charts social and economic change in the fifties. He characterizes the era as one of bountiful lifestyles, traditional values, and remarkable stability for families. Diggins further argues that the fifties were not an aberration, but represent "the steady norm of America's political temper." Stephanie Coontz, a professor at Evergreen State College, articulates almost the reverse argument: the fifties remade the nuclear family, trapped men and women in roles they came to loathe, and created a stereotype of the "perfect fifties family" that clouds political debate to the present. This stereotype, she insists, is "the way we never were."

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A Decade to Make One Proud

JOHN PATRICK DIGGINS

Although McCarthyism, the cold war, Korea and politics dominated front pages in the fifties, opinion polls profiled the American people as preoccupied with their own lives and largely nonpolitical. To most white, middle-class Americans the fifties meant television; bobby sox and the bunny hop; bermuda shorts and gray flannel suits; "I Love Lucy"; Marlon Brando astride a motorcycle and Elvis belting out "Hound Dog"; Lolita the nymphet; crew cut and duck's ass hairstyles; Marilyn Monroe; James Dean; cruising and panty raids; preppies and their cashmeres and two-toned saddle shoes; Willie Mays; Rocky Graziano; drive-in movies and restaurants; diners with chrome-leg tables and backless stools; suburbia; barbecued steaks; Billy Graham and the way to God without sacrifice; the Kinsey Report and the way to sex without sin. Few items in this list would strike one as serious, but many of them have proved durable. Indeed, such subjects fascinate even members of the post-fifties generation. In the seventies and eighties mass magazines like *Newsweek* and *Life* devoted special issues to the fifties as "The Good Old Days" and Hollywood produced *The Last Picture Show, American Graffiti,* and *The Way We Were.* Nostalgia even succeeded in trivializing the Korean War, as with the immensely popular "M*A*S*H."

Nostalgia is one way to ease the pain of the present. Those who survived the sixties, a decade that witnessed the turmoils of the Vietnam War and the tragedies of political assassination, looked back wistfully on the fifties as a period of peace and prosperity. Many of those who survived the fifties, however, particularly writers and professors, passed a different verdict. "Good-by to the fifties—and good riddance," wrote the historian Eric Goldman, "the dullest and dreariest in all our history." "The Eisenhower years," judged columnist William Shannon, "have been years of flabbiness and self-satisfaction and gross materialism. . . . The loudest sound in the land has been the oink-and-grunt of private hoggishness. . . . It has been the age of the slob." The socialist Michael Harrington called the decade "a moral disaster, an amusing waste of time," and the novelist Norman Mailer derided it as "one of the worst decades in the history of man." The poet Robert Lowell summed up his impatience in two lines: "These are the tranquil Fifties, and I am forty./Ought I to regret my seedtime?"

On the other side of the political spectrum, conservative writers tended to praise the fifties as "the happiest, most stable, most rational period the western world has ever known since 1914." They point to the seemingly pleasant fact that in the fifties, in contrast to the sixties, many nations like India and Burma achieved independence without resorting to armed force. The same era enjoyed a postwar prosperity and overcame a massive unemployment that had haunted the depression generation, and did it without raising inflation. Yet even conservatives conceded that the fifties were not a "creative time" in the realm of high culture. This was all right for

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many of them since "creative periods have too often a way of coinciding with periods of death and destruction."

Whatever the retrospective of writers and intellectuals, those who lived through the fifties looked upon them as a period of unbounded possibility. This was especially true of the beginning of the decade when the lure and novelty of material comforts seemed irresistible. Toward the end of the decade a barely noticeable undercurrent of dissatisfaction emerged and by the early sixties a minority of women and men would rebel against the conditions of the fifties and wonder what had gone wrong with their lives. A sweet decade for the many, it became a sour experience for the few who would go on to question not only the feminine mystique but the masculine as well. In dealing with the fifties one must deal with its contented and its discontents. . . .

The economic context is crucial. Between 1950 and 1958, the economy expanded enormously. A steady high growth rate of 4.7 percent heralded remarkable increases in living standards and other conditions of life. This prosperity derived from a combination of factors: (a) the lingering postwar back-up demand for consumer goods together with increased purchasing power as a result of savings; (b) the expansion of plant and machine tool capacity, and other technological advances left by the war and revived by the cold war and Korean conflict; (c) the appearance of new and modernized industries ranging from electronics to plastics; (d) population growth and the expansion of large cities; (e) increases in the productivity, or output per man-hour, of the working force; and (f) the commitment to foreign aid, which made possible overseas credits and American exports.

America experienced three mild recessions in the fifties, but through them all the rate of personal income grew and reached a record high of a 3.9 percent rise in 1960. If few became rich, the great majority lived more comfortably than ever before and enjoyed shorter hours on the job, as America moved to the five-day work week. Prior to the Second World War only 25 percent of the farming population had electricity. By the end of the fifties more than 80 percent had not only lighting but telephones, refrigerators, and televisions.

The generation that had borne the depression and the war was now eager to put politics behind and move into a bountiful new world. One strong indicator of confidence in the future was a sudden baby boom. Demographers had been predicting a postwar relative decline in fertility rates and no expansion of immigration quotas. Instead, population leaped from 130 million in 1940 to 165 million by the mid-fifties, the biggest increase in the history of the Republic. Population migrated as well as grew, spreading into the region that came to be called "the sun belt," states like Florida, Texas, Arizona, and California. Farms and small towns lost population. Many big cities, while still growing with lower-class and minority inhabitants, witnessed the flight of the middle class to the periphery. The massive phenomenon of suburbia would rip apart and remake the texture of social life in America.

Suburbia met a need and fulfilled a dream. During the depression and the war most Americans lived in apartments, flats, or small houses within an inner city. After the war, with GIs returning and the marriage rate doubling, as many as two million young couples had to share a dwelling with their relatives. Some settled for a cot in the living room, while married college students often had to live in off-campus

quonset huts. Their immediate need for space in which to raise a family was answered by the almost overnight appearance of tracts, subdivisions, and other developments that sprawled across the landscape. Ironically, while suburban growth cut into the natural environment, felling trees and turning fields into asphalt streets, the emotional appeal of suburbia lay in a desire to recapture the greenness and calm of rural life. Thus eastern tracts featured such names as "Crystal Stream," "Robin Meadows," and "Stonybrook," while in the West the Spanish motif of "Villa Serena" and "Tierra Vista" conveyed the ambience of old, preindustrial California. In California the tracts were developed by Henry J. Kaiser and Henry Doelger, who drew on their war-time skills for mass production to provide ranch-style homes complete with backyards and front lawns. In the Northeast William Levitt offered New Yorkers and Pennsylvanians houses with shuttered windows and steep pitched roofs to mimic the cozy Cape Cod look. Levitt had never liked cities. Having no patience with people who did, he saw his opportunity after the war when the government agreed to guarantee to banks the entire amount of a veteran's mortgage, making it possible for him to move in with no down payment, depending on the Veteran Administration's assessment of the value of the specific property. To keep building costs down, Levitt transformed the housing industry by using prefabricated walls and frames assembled on the site. In an effort to foster community spirit, he and other builders added schools, swimming pools, tennis courts, and athletic fields with Little League diamonds. For young members of the aspiring middle class, suburbia was a paradise of comfort and convenience.

Others were not so sure. "Is this the American dream, or is it a nightmare?" asked *House Beautiful.* Architectural and cultural critics complained of the monotony of house after house with the same façade, paint, and lawn inhabited by people willing to sign an agreement to keep them the same. One song writer would call them "little boxes made of ticky-tacky." Some children who grew up in them would agree, rebelling in the following decade against all that was sterile and standardized. The most angry critic was the cultural historian Lewis Mumford, author of *The City in History.* Mumford feared that Levitt was doing more to destroy the modern city than did the World War II aerial bombings. He also feared that suburbia was transforming the American character, rendering it dreary and conformist when it should be daring and courageous. "In the mass movement into suburban areas a new kind of community was produced, which caricatured both the historic city and the archetypal suburban refuge, a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people in 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."

Admonishments aside, Americans were falling in love with suburbia—at least at first; some would have second thoughts and later wonder what they had bought, the theme of the cheerless film *No Down Payment* (1957). By the end of the fifties one-fourth of the population had moved to such areas. If not beautiful, suburbia was affordable, and thousands of homeless veterans were grateful to have their place in the sun for $65 per month on a full purchase price of $6,990 that included separate bedrooms for the children and a kitchen full of glittering gadgets. Such amenities also enabled housewives to be free of some domestic chores as they became involved in

community affairs while their husbands commuted to work in the cities. A frequent event was the Tupperware party, arranged by wives ostensibly to sell household conveniences but also to overcome isolation and boredom. The most serious drawback of suburbia was that its planners envisaged no need for public transportation. As a result, suburbanites became forever dependent upon the automobile. When their children reached driving age, some households became three- or even four-car families. But in the fifties, when gasoline was relatively cheap and the promising new freeways wide and uncongested, the car was seen as a solution, not a problem. Indeed, for proud teenagers it was the supreme status symbol, the one possession that with its "souped-up" carburetors and lowered chassis and various metallic colors, answered the need for freedom and diversity in a community of flatness and conformity.

In the fifties, car was king. Freeways, multilevel parking lots, shopping centers, motels, and drive-in restaurants and theaters all catered to the person behind the wheel. By 1956 an estimated seventy-five million cars and trucks were on American roads. One out of every seven workers held a job connected to the automobile industry. In suburbia the station wagon became a common sight. But really to fulfill the American dream one needed a Cadillac, or so advertisers informed the arriviste of new wealth with such effectiveness that one had to wait a year for delivery. Almost all American automobiles grew longer and wider. Their supersize and horsepower, together with more chrome and bigger tailfins, served no useful transportation purpose but were powerful enhancers of self-esteem. At the end of the decade, when many rich Texans, some country-western singers, salesmen, and even gangsters and pimps owned a Cadillac, it became what it always was, gauche, and its image declined from the sublime to the ridiculous.

In the fifties the spectacle of waste, once regarded by the older morality as a sign of sin, had become a sign of status. It was no coincidence that Americans junked almost as many cars as Detroit manufactured, thereby fulfilling Thorstein Veblen's earlier prediction that modern man would be more interested in displaying and destroying goods than in producing them. Veblen's insight into "conspicuous consumption" also took on real meaning in this era as Americans rushed out to buy the latest novelty, whether it was a convertible, TV set, deep-freeze, electric carving knife, or the "New Look" Christian Dior evening dress. The postwar splurge of consumption had been made possible by the $100 billion of savings Americans had banked during the war. Immediately after the war, household appliances were in demand, then luxuries like fashionable clothes and imported wines. For those who bought homes for $8,000 or more, luxuries were seen as necessities. The middle-class suburbanite looked out his window and "needed" what his neighbor had—a white Corvette or a swimming pool. Travel to Europe, once regarded as the "Grand Tour" only for the rich and famous, became accessible to millions of Americans in the fifties. For the masses who remained at home and took to the road, new tourist attractions sprang up, like Disneyland. Mass recreational mobility changed the nation's eating habits. In 1954 in San Bernardino, California, Ray Kroc, a high-school dropout, devised a precision stand for turning out French fries, beverages, and fifteen-cent hamburgers that grew rapidly into a fast-food empire: McDonald's.

Spending less time cooking and eating, Americans had more time for shopping. Discount houses such as Korvette's and Grant's opened up for the lower-middle class while the prestigious Neiman-Marcus catered to the needs of oil-rich Texans. Parents

raised in the depression naturally felt that more was better, not only for themselves but particularly for their children. Teenagers splurged on phonograph records, bedroom decorations, cashmere sweaters, trips to Hawaii, motor scooters, and hot rods. The seemingly infinite indulgence of the young worried many parents even as they contributed to it. In a survey 94 percent of the mothers interviewed reported that their children had asked them to buy various goods they had seen on television.

Television in America, unlike in England and much of Western Europe, was supported by the advertising industry, which did more than any other institution to fill the viewer's eyes with images of abundance. Advertisers spent $10 billion a year to persuade, not to say manipulate, the people into buying products that promised to improve their lives, whether frozen peas or French perfume. Professional football, the prime target for beer ads, invented the "two-minute warning" in the last quarter to accommodate commercials. Confronted by a medical report linking smoking to lung cancer, tobacco companies increased their ad campaigns with jingles like "Be Happy Go Lucky!" Television bloomed with romantic scenes of a dashing young man offering a cigarette to a seductively beautiful woman under a full moon. As violins rose, the match was lit, and her face turned into that of a goddess—young, eager, divine. Partial takeoffs from the Bogart-Bacall films of the early forties, Madison Avenue could readily exploit such scenes, perhaps realizing that desire can always be tempted precisely because it can never be completely fulfilled.

What facilitated the illusion of fulfillment was a little rectangle of plastic dubbed the credit card. In 1950 Diner's Club distributed credit cards to select wealthy New Yorkers to give them the privilege of eating at swank restaurants without fumbling for money. By the end of the decade Sears Roebuck alone had more than ten million accounts for those who chose to live on credit or, more bluntly, to be in debt. Installment buying shot consumer indebtedness up to $196 billion, so high that certain department stores offered "debt counselors" for worried customers. One soothing nostrum was a good stiff martini, the favorite drink of suburbia and the commuters' circle. Drinking rose sharply in the fifties. So did prescription-drugs use. Sales of "tranquilizers" soared; by 1959, 1,159,000 pounds had been consumed. The following decade the Food and Drug Administration discovered that the once-popular pill "miltown" had no medicinal value. But for the fifties generation, coping with the boss's demands at work and the children's at home, popping tranquilizing drugs became a respectable adult addiction. That mental anxiety should accompany material abundance is no surprise. For centuries moralists had warned that people become unhappy when they get what they want—or think they want. Suburbia offered Americans the cleanliness and safety of a planned community, but nothing is more hopeless than planned happiness. . . .

During the forties and fifties music became widely accessible to the masses of people. Elaborate hi-fi sets replaced the simple victrola and the jukebox lifted the spirits of the lonely, the tense, and the bored. Light operas like "Oklahoma," "South Pacific," and "My Fair Lady" played to packed theaters, and Americans listened to Mary Martin and Ethel Merman belt out popular songs.

One of the most curious shifts in popular musical tastes that separated the forties and the fifties involved the careers of Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley. During World War II Sinatra suddenly became the idol of hordes of bobby soxers who were mysteriously mesmerized by his crooning serenades, some shrieking and swooning, others

fainting or possibly pretending to. . . . Yet the hysteria ended almost as suddenly as it began, and by the early fifties Sinatra could not land even a Hollywood film contract. Then another singer captured the youth's imagination and another mode of music determined the nation's sound and rhythm for years to come—Elvis and rock 'n' roll.

. . . Unlike Sinatra, who appeared so emaciated as to be starving, Presley exuded raw strength and sensuality. Parents brought up on the mawkish music of Bing Crosby tried in vain to shield their children from contamination by the new phenomenon sweeping the country. They were aghast watching "Elvis the Pelvis" with his tight pants, full, pouting lips, and shoulder-length black hair, grip the microphone and buck his hips in gestures so lewd that some TV producers would only film him from the waist up. Magnetic but aloof, self-possessed yet sad, Presley stood before screaming crowds as the icon of the fifties, charging teenagers with energy and emotion in scores like "I Want You, I Need You, I Love You," "Don't Be Cruel," and "Love Me Tender."

Commentators in the fifties often compared Presley to Marlon Brando, James Dean, and Montgomery Clift, three new film stars who revolutionized acting methods and left audiences emotionally drained and confused. . . . All were actors who conveyed complex emotions more felt than understood in an attempt to express what could not be voiced. In *On the Waterfront, East of Eden,* and *From Here to Eternity,* Brando, Dean, and Clift displayed a sensitivity and depth of pure feeling that rendered them almost defenseless against the world. Indeed the film *Rebel Without a Cause* is haunted by tragedy. All of its four stars—Dean, Natalie Wood, Sal Mineo, and Vic Morrow—would suffer tragic deaths.

To the fifties generation, James Dean communicated the emotions of a crippled romantic, a moody idealist whose dreams about the world have already been destroyed by his resentment toward it. "My mother died on me when I was nine years old," he complained of his broken home. "What does she expect me to do? Do it all myself?" Raised in Indiana by a father and step-mother, Dean had little interest in school except for basketball, track, and dramatics. After dropping out of college in California, he held a string of odd jobs before heading for New York and acting school. There he was discovered and immediately compared to Brando in *The Wild One:* the same wandering, lonely eyes, the scornful lip, the inarticulate mumblings, and the controlled rage that made being "cool" the strategy of survival. . . . Dean also played the restless, searching youth, hungering for innocence, knowing too much about the compromises and complacencies of the world. Thus in films he appeared both wiser and sadder than the older characters. Yet he would make no reconciliation with reality. To do so was to adjust and settle down, precisely what society demanded of the fifties generation. "Whoso would be a man," wrote Emerson a century earlier, "must be a nonconformist." On September 30, 1955, Dean's speeding white Porsche-Spider collided with another car; the steering wheel went right through him. Lost and lovable, the symbol of troubled youth, James Dean was dead at the age of twenty-four. . . .

"Live fast, die young, and have a good-looking corpse." The lines by the novelist Willard Motley haunted sensitive youths of the fifties generation, many of whom experienced the era with more unease than did their parents. As children they had come to know the horrors of the bomb from the media; in school they were taught "duck-and-cover" exercises in case of attack; at home some of the affluent heard their parents speak of building bomb shelters in the backyards. Teenagers often knew someone who had been killed in an auto accident or drag race. A best-selling novel, Irving Shulman's *The Amboy Dukes,* intended to expose the brutality of urban street gangs; for young males it had the opposite effect of glorifying courage in the face of violence. A similar response could be felt after watching such films as *Rebel Without a Cause, The Wild One,* and *Blackboard Jungle,* where the opening scene thunders with the theme song, "Rock-Around-the-Clock," a shrill of seething rebellion. Asked what he was rebelling against, Brando replied: "What've ya got?" Perhaps the quest for security on the part of the parents drove their children to desire risk and adventure all the more. Boys cruising in hot rods and quaffing six-packs of beer knew they were flirting with danger, as did those girls who risked pregnancy to discover the secret pleasures of the body. Why not? The fifties was the first generation in modern history to know that the world could end tomorrow. . . .

The amount of attention the media devoted to sex in the fifties may be misleading since there is reason to doubt significant changes in behavior actually occurred. Sex was then an emotion more felt than fulfilled. It was also a fantasy, and if fantasies reflect what people desire and not necessarily what they do, desires nonetheless are a large part of the human secrets of life.

During the decade, while teachers and professors were lamenting the decline in educational standards and ministers and priests the decline of morality, teenagers and college students were awakening to something stirring in their own bodies, something at once new, at least to them, and exciting and confusing, a subject more seen and felt than heard and understood. It could be seen in *Playboy,* which started publishing in 1955, exposing more naked angles to the female body than male students could ever imagine, fleshy images that aroused erotic fantasies and made one forget Somerset Maugham's witty warning about sex: the pleasure is momentary, the price damnable, and the position ridiculous. . . .

Their curiosities were met by two postwar publications, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953), both by Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues of the Institute for Sexual Research at Indiana University. . . .

Fifty percent of American husbands had committed adultery and 85 percent had sexual intercourse before marriage. Ninety-five percent of males had been sexually active before the age of fifteen and by the ages sixteen and seventeen the activity was at a peak. The average unmarried male had three or four orgasms a week. Nearly 90 percent of men had relationships with prostitutes by their thirty-fifth birthday, and one out of six American farm boys had copulated with farm animals. As to females, two out of three had engaged in premarital petting. Fifty percent were non-virgins before marriage. One out of every six girls had experienced orgasm prior to adolescence, and one in four by the age of fifteen. . . .

No one knew how accurate Kinsey's figures were and no one knew what to make of them. Fearing the worst, a few politicians persuaded the Rockefeller Foundation to withdraw support of Kinsey's Institute for Sexual Research. A double standard prevailed. The male study aroused relatively little objection, but when the female document emerged a few years later some Americans regarded it as a threat to women's virtue. . . . Very acceptable, however, were big breasts, and those who had them—Jayne Mansfield, Jane Russell, Mamie Van Doren, Marilyn Monroe,

Elizabeth Taylor. These desirables covered magazines in poses that defied the laws of geometry.

But even these monuments to photography could mislead by confusing fantasy for reality. Was there a sexual revolution in the fifties? Hardly. . . .

Among the lower classes uninvestigated by Kinsey and perhaps untouched by *Playboy,* sex still had more to do with having a lot of children than having multiple orgasms. Married middle-class adults probably enjoyed more sexual intimacy with their marital partners than their parents or grandparents ever contemplated. . . .

The striking thing about the fifties was not the coming crisis of the modern family but its enduring stability. True, the rising divorce rate alarmed Americans in the immediate postwar years. But it soon leveled off and then decreased so that at the end of the fifties the rate was near that of the forties—1.4 percent versus 2.5 percent. Neither marriage nor the family had been threatened by the Kinsey report. Monogamy may have been strained by the freeing effect of carnal knowledge, but most Americans remained inhibited and feared their sexual feelings as soon as they felt them. "Sex is Fun—or Hell," was how J. D. Salinger put it in one of his short stories. In the words of one memoirist, women in particular vacillated between "titillation and terror." Ultimately most married men and women accepted their situation, for better or for worse. Society said they should, and in the fifties the pressures of society, not the risqué pleasures of the body, dictated the conduct of life. . . .

The mixed messages were only part of the many paradoxes of the fifties. It was an age of stable nuclear families and marital tension, of student conformity on the campus and youth rebellion on the screen and phonograph, of erotic arousal before the visual and sexual hesitancy before the actual, of suburban contentment with lawns and station wagons and middle-class worry about money and status, of high expectations of upward mobility and later some doubts about the meaning and value of the age's own achievements. Members of the fifties generation were unique. They had more education and aspirations. They married younger and produced more babies. They possessed more buying power and enjoyed more material pleasure than any generation of men and women in American history. And it is a measure of the complexity of the fifties that its members could reach no consensus about the meaning of their accomplishments and disappointments. Looking back from the eighties, one male member, a building contractor and multimillionaire, put it this way:

> If you had a college diploma, a dark suit, and anything between the ears, it was like an escalator; you just stood there and you moved up. . . .

The Truman and Eisenhower years gave Americans a sense of pride in themselves and confidence in the future. It is questionable whether either sentiment survived the fifties intact. The America that emerged victorious from World War II was not the same America fifteen years later. The decline of confidence resulted in part from the changing nature of warfare brought by modern technology. After the Second World War Americans could take pride in the performance of their soldiers. With the increasing complexity of the cold war, which offered the possibility of either covert CIA operations or nuclear attack and retaliation, warfare seemed more and more a choice between the dishonorable and the suicidal; and if new inventions in sophisticated missile weaponry would make some Americans feel proud of their technological achievements, it was a pride born of fear.

The cold war itself, however, is not the only explanation for the decline of self-assurance that came to be felt at the end of the Eisenhower years. Equally troubling was the sense of unease and discontent. No one had predicted it. In 1950, for example, *Fortune* published a book with the curious title, *U.S.A., the Permanent Revolution.* The title, taken from Leon Trotsky, was meant to depict a new way of life founded on unlimited prosperity, active citizen participation, winning friends abroad with generous foreign aid and free-trade policies, and proudly accepting the burdens of history as a great world power. America must be understood not as a nation of definite goals but of indefinite growth. "Americans wish that other people could see their country as it really is: not as an achievement but as a *process*—a process of becoming." But can there be growth without conscious direction and meaning? "Why should we assume that America has *any* meaning?" the editors asked. "Rightly understood, the principles that embody the meaning of America are the very forces that have done most to change America."

By 1960, all confidence that America could simply be accepted as a process of continual growth and change came to be questioned and in many instances rejected. "What is wrong with America?" queried the *U.S. News and World Report.* "What shall we do with our greatness?" asked the editors of *Life.* President Eisenhower set up a "Commission on National Goals" and Walter Lippmann analyzed the "Anatomy of Discontent," which he specified as a willingness to fulfill them. The Reverend Billy Graham thought Americans overextended themselves in more concrete ways. "We overeat, overdrink, oversex, and overplay. . . . We have tried to fill ourselves with science and education, with better living and pleasure . . . but we are still empty and bored." Adlai Stevenson doubted that America's "permanent revolution" would have any impact on the rest of the world. "With the supermarket as our temple and the singing commercial as our litany, are we likely to fire the world with an irresistible vision of America's exalted purpose and inspiring way of life?" "Something has gone wrong in America," complained the novelist John Steinbeck of his fellow people. "Having too many things, they spend their hours and money on the couch searching for a soul." Everywhere Americans were engaged in the "great debate" about "the national purpose." Americans have become worried, journalists concluded, because they feel they lack inspiring ideals and because they have been led to believe that they do not need them. "The case of the missing purpose," wrote a philosopher in *The Nation,* "is a case of human beings missing the purpose of life." The proud decades were over.

Or were they? Several months before Eisenhower's farewell and Kennedy's inauguration, things were changing. Within a few years America would be addressing problems it never knew existed and some people would be singing "We Shall Overcome!" Yet even before the sixties ended America would be more divided than ever, the two Kennedys and King dead, and the Republicans back in office. Now it was Nixon who promised to bring Americans "back together again." Henceforth, the period of the fifties, once regarded as a dreadful aberration standing between the more compassionate thirties and activist sixties, would seem more and more the steady norm of America's political temper. The generation of the sixties experienced the previous decade as a burden that had to be radically transformed, and some of its worst aspects were confronted and eradicated. But as the radical sixties petered out, it became all the more clear that the two decades beginning with the Second World War shaped the nation's environment and consciousness in more enduring ways than

had once been expected. The forties and perhaps especially the fifties are still living in the present, and the assumptions and values of the two decades have become ingrained in our habits and institutions. "What is the national purpose?" asked Dean Acheson in response to the great debate of the late fifties. "To survive and, perchance, to prosper." In doing both well, America still had good reason to be proud of itself.

Families in the Fifties: The Way We Never Were

STEPHANIE COONTZ

Our most powerful visions of traditional families derive from images that are still delivered to our homes in countless reruns of 1950s television sit-coms. When liberals and conservatives debate family policy, for example, the issue is often framed in terms of how many "Ozzie and Harriet" families are left in America. Liberals compute the percentage of total households that contain a breadwinner father, a full-time homemaker mother, and dependent children, proclaiming that fewer than 10 percent of American families meet the "Ozzie and Harriet" or "Leave It to Beaver" model. Conservatives counter that more than half of all mothers with preschool children either are not employed or are employed only part-time. They cite polls showing that most working mothers would like to spend more time with their children and periodically announce that the Nelsons are "making a comeback," in popular opinion if not in real numbers.

Since everyone admits that nontraditional families are now a majority, why this obsessive concern to establish a higher or a lower figure? Liberals seem to think that unless they can prove the "Leave It to Beaver" family is on an irreversible slide toward extinction, they cannot justify introducing new family definitions and social policies. Conservatives believe that if they can demonstrate the traditional family is alive and well, although endangered by policies that reward two-earner families and single parents, they can pass measures to revive the seeming placidity and prosperity of the 1950s, associated in many people's minds with the relative stability of marriage, gender roles, and family life in that decade. If the 1950s family existed today, both sides seem to assume, we would not have the contemporary social dilemmas that cause such debate.

At first glance, the figures seem to justify this assumption. The 1950s was a pro-family period if there ever was one. Rates of divorce and illegitimacy were half what they are today; marriage was almost universally praised; the family was everywhere hailed as the most basic institution in society; and a massive baby boom, among all classes and ethnic groups, made America a "child-centered" society. Births rose from a low of 18.4 per 1,000 women during the Depression to a high of 25.3 per 1,000 in 1957. "The birth rate for third children doubled between 1940 and 1960, and that for fourth children tripled."

In retrospect, the 1950s also seem a time of innocence and consensus: Gang warfare among youths did not lead to drive-by shootings; the crack epidemic had not yet hit; discipline problems in the schools were minor; no "secular humanist" movement opposed the 1954 addition of the words *under God* to the Pledge of Allegiance; and 90 percent of all school levies were approved by voters. Introduction of the polio vaccine in 1954 was the most dramatic of many medical advances that improved the quality of life for children.

The profamily features of this decade were bolstered by impressive economic improvements for vast numbers of Americans. Between 1945 and 1960, the gross national product grew by almost 250 percent and per capita income by 35 percent. Housing starts exploded after the war, peaking at 1.65 million in 1955 and remaining above 1.5 million a year for the rest of the decade; the increase in single-family homeownership between 1946 and 1956 outstripped the increase during the entire preceding century and a half. By 1960, 62 percent of American families owned their own homes, in contrast to 43 percent in 1940. Eighty-five percent of the new homes were built in the suburbs, where the nuclear family found new possibilities for privacy and togetherness. While middle-class Americans were the prime beneficiaries of the building boom, substantial numbers of white working-class Americans moved out of the cities into affordable developments, such as Levittown.

Many working-class families also moved into the middle class. The number of salaried workers increased by 61 percent between 1947 and 1957. By the mid-1950s, nearly 60 percent of the population had what was labeled a middle-class income level (between $3,000 and $10,000 in constant dollars), compared to only 31 percent in the "prosperous twenties," before the Great Depression. By 1960, thirty-one million of the nation's forty-four million families owned their own home, 87 percent had a television, and 75 percent possessed a car. The number of people with discretionary income doubled during the 1950s.

For most Americans, the most salient symbol and immediate beneficiary of their newfound prosperity was the nuclear family. The biggest boom in consumer spending, for example, was in household goods. Food spending rose by only 33 percent in the five years following the Second World War, and clothing expenditures rose by 20 percent, but purchases of household furnishings and appliances climbed 240 percent. "Nearly the entire increase in the gross national product in the mid-1950s was due to increased spending on consumer durables and residential construction," most of it oriented toward the nuclear family.

Putting their mouths where their money was, Americans consistently told pollsters that home and family were the wellsprings of their happiness and self-esteem. Cultural historian David Marc argues that prewar fantasies of sophisticated urban "elegance," epitomized by the high-rise penthouse apartment, gave way in the 1950s to a more modest vision of utopia: a single-family house and a car. The emotional dimensions of utopia, however, were unbounded. When respondents to a 1955 marriage study "were asked what they thought they had sacrificed by marrying and raising a family, an overwhelming majority of them replied, 'Nothing.'" Less than 10 percent of Americans believed that an unmarried person could be happy. As one popular advice book intoned: "The family is the center of your living. If it isn't, you've gone far astray."

In fact, the "traditional" family of the 1950s was a qualitatively new phenomenon. At the end of the 1940s, all the trends characterizing the rest of the twentieth century suddenly reversed themselves: For the first time in more than one hundred

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