CHAPTER 36

American Zenith, 1952–1963

# focus questions

. What was the driving force behind the affluence and the consumer culture of the 1950s?

. How did the *Brown* decision and the confrontation in Little Rock set the stage for the civil rights movement of the 1950s?

. What were the differences between Eisenhower’s foreign policy and those of his predecessors in the battle of the Cold War?

. What were the major issues facing Eisenhower in Europe and Asia?

. How did literature reflect confusion in the attitudes and feelings Americans had about how to deal with postwar modern society during the 1950s?

6. What was the basis of “Beat” criticism of American society?

7. What was Kennedy’s New Frontier? How was that philosophy played out, both domestically and internationally, within the first few years of Kennedy’s administration?

8. What was flexible response and how was that different from the foreign policy philosophy of the previous administrations?

9. What role did Eisenhower and Kennedy have within the Vietnam conflict?

10. How did Kennedy deal with the civil rights issue?

# Chapter Themes

**Theme:** The 1950s witnessed a huge expansion of the middle class and the blossoming of a consumer culture. Crucial to the development of a new lifestyle of leisure and affluence was the rise of the new technology of television.

**Theme:** While Dwight Eisenhower and the majority of Americans held to a cautious, family-oriented perspective on domestic social questions, an emerging civil rights movement and the influence of television and popular music presented challenges to the spirit of national consensus.

**Theme:** The Eisenhower years were characterized by prosperity and moderate conservatism at home and by the tensions of the Cold War abroad.

**Theme:** The Kennedy administration’s flexible response doctrine to combat Third World communism bore ill fruit in Cuba and especially Vietnam.

chapter summary

Using the new medium of television to enhance his great popularity, grandfatherly “Ike” was ideally suited to soothe an America badly shaken by the Cold War and Korea. Eisenhower was slow to go after Joseph McCarthy, but the demagogue’s bubble finally burst. Eisenhower also reacted cautiously to the beginnings of the civil rights movement but sent troops to Little Rock to enforce court orders. While his domestic policies were moderately conservative, they left most of the New Deal in place.

Despite John Dulles’s tough talk, Eisenhower’s foreign policies were also generally cautious. He avoided military involvement in Vietnam, although aiding Diem, and he pressured Britain, France, and Israel to resolve the Suez crisis.

Eisenhower also refused to intervene in the Hungarian revolt and sought negotiations to thaw the frigid Cold War. Dealing with Nikita Khrushchev proved difficult, as *Sputnik,* the Berlin Crisis, the U-2 incident, and Fidel Castro’s Cuban revolution all kept Cold War tensions high. In a tight election, Senator John Kennedy defeated Eisenhower’s vice president, Richard Nixon, by calling for the country to “get moving again” by more vigorously countering the Soviets.

American society grew ever more prosperous in the Eisenhower era, as science, technology, and the Cold War fueled burgeoning new industries such as electronics and aviation. Women joined the movement into the increasingly white-collar workforce, and chafed at widespread restrictions they faced.

A new consumer culture, centered on television, fostered a new ethic of leisure and enjoyment, including more open expressions of sexuality in popular entertainment. Intellectuals and artists criticized the focus on private affluence rather than the public good. The abstract expressionism of Jackson Pollock and the “Pop” Art of Andy Warhol challenged traditional views of painting. Many mainstream writers focused on the dilemmas of modern postwar society, particularly on the problems of middle-class suburbanites. Formerly underrepresented groups such as Jewish, African American, and southern writers had a striking new impact on American culture.

Kennedy’s New Frontier initiatives bogged down in congressional stalemate. Cold War confrontations over Berlin and Russian missiles in Cuba created threats of war. Countering Third World communism through flexible response led the administration into dangerous involvement in Vietnam and elsewhere.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* Describe the general domestic atmosphere of the Eisenhower years: broad economic prosperity (with occasional recessions) and broad social consensus based on the New Deal and anticommunism. The emphasis might be on seeing this harmony as a reaction to the turbulent 1930s and 1940s and also noting some of the hidden anxieties of the time.

REFERENCE: David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (1993).

* Explain the up-and-down atmosphere of the Cold War in the 1950s. Note the general improvement in relations from Stalin’s day, but also the numerous conflicts and the arms race that constantly threatened nuclear annihilation.

REFERENCE: Thomas J. McCormick, *America’s Half Century: U.S. Foreign Policy in the Cold War* (1989).

* Examine the growing importance of civil rights issues in the 1950s, as illustrated by *Brown* v. *Board of Education* and King’s Montgomery bus boycott. The slow pace of court-ordered desegregation might be contrasted with the increasing determination of blacks to attack the still pervasive Jim Crow system.

REFERENCE: Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–1963* (1988).

* Consider the initial impact of television on all areas of American life in the 1950s, including politics, consumption (advertising), family life, religion, and popular culture.

REFERENCE: Lynn Spiegel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (1992).

* Explain the Kennedy administration’s vigorous activism in the Cold War, both against the Russians and against Third World communists. The emphasis might be on the contrast between relative success dealing with the Russians (for example, the Cuban missile crisis) versus frustration in the Third World (for example, the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam).

REFERENCE: James N. Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (1991).

# for further interest: additional class topics

* Consider America’s relation to the French war in Vietnam or the installation of the shah in Iran. Discuss how American policies, while avoiding immediate conflicts, sowed the seeds of later, more serious difficulties.
* Examine the Kennedy-Nixon campaign of 1960 for the specific light it shed on wider themes of the time, including anticommunism, the new importance of television, and tensions that accompanied the movement of previously marginal groups like Catholics into the center of American life. (See boxed quote on page 868.)
* Consider the relationship between economic transformations and the role of women in the 1950s. Show both the new emphasis on domesticity and childrearing, and the beginnings of rebellion by suburban women. (See section Examining the Evidence on page 852.)
* Conduct a class debate on topics such as Racial Segregation in Public Schools Is Unconstitutional, The Suburbs: The New American Dream, and America Should Send a Man to the Moon. Primary source readings will come from the following book: *Opposing Viewpoints in American History—Volume II: From Reconstruction to the Present*, San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 1996. Another good source of debate topics is Larry Madaras and James M. SoRelle, *Taking Sides—Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in American History, Volume II: Reconstruction to the Present*, Connecticut: McGraw-Hill, 2000.
* Show students the following video: *The Century—America’s Time* (ABC Video in association with The History Channel), *Volume IV: 1953–1960: Happy Daze*. “Despite America’s renewed identity and prosperity, paranoia about Communism gives rise to the ‘witch-hunts’ of McCarthyism. The sound of a new generation emerges as rock ’n’ roll fills the airwaves, while African Americans, angered at their second-class citizenship, let their discontent be known. ”
* Have the students read Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955). Use this novel to discuss the tensions faced by average Americans during the height of the 1950s. This was made into an award-winning movie in 1956.
* Have the students watch the movie *Edward Scissorhands* (1990). What is the symbolism of this movie—how does it portray life of the 1950s? Does it do so in a positive or negative light? The movie is rated PG-13.
* Have the students read selections from C. Wright Mills’s *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (1951), *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), and *The Power Elite* (1956). Important works in American Intellectual Thought of the 1950s.
* Have the students read C. Wright Mills’s “Letter to the New Left” (1960) in David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper’s (Editors), *The American Intellectual Tradition: Volume II—1865 to the Present*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
* Have the students watch political campaign commercials from the Living Room Candidate website, especially the elections of 1952 and 1960; have the students discuss the role of TV on politics (http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/index.php, last accessed September 2014).
* Focus on the Kennedy image. Compare the vision of Camelot with the historical realities of Kennedy’s performance as president and controversies over his private behavior and character.
* Use Martin Luther King Jr.’s life and work to explain the principles of the nonviolent civil rights movement. Perhaps show how King came under assault from some whites and blacks during his lifetime for being either too militant or not militant enough.
* Show students the following videos: *The Century—America’s Time* (ABC Video in association with The History Channel), *Volume IV: 1960–1964: Poisoned Dreams*: “President John Kennedy balances the explosive Cuban missile crisis while suppressing clashes between the races over equal rights at home. Kennedy emerges as the preeminent global power broker, but his assassination leaves an indelible wound on the American psyche.” *Volume IV: 1965–1970*: *Unpinned*: “With no end in sight to the Vietnam War, the radical ‘counterculture’ erupts in violent protest. Political and cultural norms are challenged through music, literature and style, reflecting the country’s most turbulent era during the century’s second half.”
* Have the students explore the speeches and writings of Kennedy. Robert Dallek and Terry Golway, *Let Every Nation Know: John F. Kennedy in His Own Words* (2006), a book with a listening CD of excerpts of Kennedy’s most famous speeches along with background information on each speech; Theodore C. Sorensen (Editor), *“Let the Word Go Forth”—The Speeches, Statements, and Writings of John F. Kennedy* (1988); The American Presidency Project (http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/, last accessed September 2014).

# character sketches

## John Foster Dulles (1888–1959)

Dulles was Eisenhower’s secretary of state and a leading architect of American strategy in the Cold War.

The son of a New York Presbyterian minister, Dulles grew up under strong religious influences, which stayed with him all his life. His maternal grandfather, John Watson Foster, had been secretary of state under Benjamin Harrison, and Dulles met such men as William Taft, Andrew Carnegie, and Bernard Baruch when they visited his father.

Dulles served in the American delegation at Versailles but in the 1930s, he became the leading Republican expert on foreign policy. In 1936, he made a controversial speech that expressed sympathy for Germany and appeared to welcome Nazism. Dulles’s brother Allen was a top American intelligence officer in World War II and later head of the CIA.

Always a controversial personality, Dulles expressed firm opinions and engaged in moral posturing that grated on many people, including Churchill and Eisenhower, but he often won them over by the force of his character and intelligence.

**Quote:** “Some say we were brought to the verge of war. Of course we were brought to the verge of war.… If you try to run away from it, if you are scared to go to the brink, you are lost.” (1956)

REFERENCE: Leonard Mosely, *Dulles* (1978).

## Dwight David Eisenhower (1890–1969)

Eisenhower’s rise from obscure colonel to supreme Allied commander in World War II was spectacular, but George Marshall and others had long taken note of his talents and marked him for future advancement.

His parents were basically of middle-class background, but at the time of Eisenhower’s birth, his father had been laid off, and the family had temporarily moved from Abilene, Kansas, to Denison, Texas, where “Ike” was born.

Eisenhower and George Patton were both reprimanded for urging the use of tanks in World War I. During his World War II years in Europe, “Ike” spent much time with his driver, Kay Summersby, leading to rumors that he and Mamie planned to divorce.

His excellent personal relations with Soviet Marshal Zhukov gave Eisenhower a different view of the Russians and led him to seek personal contacts with them.

Before the 1952 campaign he tried to teach Nixon how to fish and was disappointed when his running mate proved unwilling or unable to learn the sport.

**Quote:** “My first day at the President’s desk. Plenty of worries and difficult problems. But such has been my portion for a long time. The result is that this seems (today) like a continuation of all I’ve been doing since July 1941—even before that.” (Diary entry, January 1953)

REFERENCE: Stephen Ambrose, *Eisenhower* [2 vols.] (1983, 1984).

## Rosa Parks (1913–2005)

Parks is the black seamstress whose refusal to move to the back of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, on December 5, 1955, set off a bus boycott and the beginning of the civil rights movement.

Even though she took her action on her own, Parks had previous acquaintance with black protest ideas and leaders. As a young woman, she had tried to organize an NAACP youth chapter in Montgomery, though without success. She had met A. Philip Randolph and Roy Wilkins and knew black leaders in Montgomery. She was also a leader in her local church, St. Paul AME Church.

She had planned ahead that she was going to sit in the front of the bus that day and refuse to move. After her arrest, she went to E.D. Nixon, head of the local Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, who circulated leaflets calling for the wider protest.

Parks worked with the civil rights movement for years. She eventually moved to Detroit and remained active in black causes.

**Quote:** “I just decided I was not going to be moved out of that seat.” (Interview, 1978)

REFERENCE: Douglas Brinkley, *Rosa Parks* (2000).

## Elvis Aron Presley (1935–1977)

Presley was the rock-and-roll star who helped transform American popular musical styles in the 1950s and after.

Presley grew up in Memphis, Tennessee, where he learned both gospel music and black blues music. His first recordings were done for Sam Phillips, a producer who had been looking for a white singer who sounded like a black man. After signing a contract with RCA Victor in 1955, his career came under the control of Colonel Tom Parker, who promoted him into a national phenomenon.

Presley’s sexually suggestive style led to many protests from parents and conservative groups, as a result of which he was shown only from the waist up in his first television appearance in 1956. Presley’s thirty-three movies were nearly as popular as his records and his drafting into the army in 1960 was treated as a major event. After his death, his home in Memphis became a virtual pilgrimage shrine for his fans.

**Quote:** “Please, Mr. Sholes, don’t make me stand still. If I can’t move I can’t sing.” (To a record producer, 1954)

REFERENCE: Albert Harry Goldman, *Elvis* (1981).

## Martin Luther King Jr. (1928–1968)

King was much criticized in his lifetime, but in 1986, his birthday began to be celebrated as a national holiday—the first such honor given to a black American.

He came from a long line of Baptist preachers. His father, Martin Luther King Sr., was pastor at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, and Martin Jr. was for a time copastor with him.

King and his wife, Coretta Scott, both came from the middle-class Atlanta black community. He experienced sharper discrimination when he went north to study theology. King earned his doctorate from Boston University with a dissertation on the doctrine of God and also studied the nonviolent teachings of Gandhi. Later, he and his wife visited India to learn more about Gandhian techniques.

During King’s civil rights campaign in Chicago in 1966, he lived in a ghetto slum on the West Side. His outspoken attacks on the Vietnam War caused considerable criticism that he was not sticking to civil rights issues. At the time of his assassination, he was conducting a campaign for black garbage workers in Memphis.

**Quote:** “When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of that old Negro spiritual, ‘Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!’” (“I Have a Dream” speech, 1963)

REFERENCE: David L. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*: *Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (1986).

## John Fitzgerald Kennedy (1917–1963)

Kennedy achieved a narrow victory in 1960 and, for most of his time in office, had to battle for political support, but after his assassination he entered the pantheon of national heroes.

Through much of his youth, Kennedy struggled to compete with his more athletic and glamorous older brother, Joseph Kennedy Jr. After Joe’s combat death in World War II, John took his place as the focus of his father’s ambitions for the presidency.

Kennedy’s Harvard senior thesis was published as a book, *Why England Slept,* with the aid of his father. During his youth, Kennedy was often seriously ill with back troubles compounded by Addison’s disease, which was thought to be life-threatening. In 1954, he underwent major back surgery and missed the Senate vote censuring Joseph McCarthy.

Kennedy was cool, skeptical, sardonic, and well read. He had a reputation as a playboy but was also a sober, well-disciplined, determined politician who used his abilities to the fullest.

**Quote:** “Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans, born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage, and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and throughout the world.” (Inaugural address, 1961)

REFERENCES: Herbert Parmet, *Jack: The Struggles of John F. Kennedy* (1980); Herbert Parmet, *JFK: The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (1983); Thomas Reeves, *A Question of Character: A Life of John Kennedy* (1991).

# questions for class discussion

. How does Eisenhower’s political leadership compare with that of other general-presidents: Washington, Jackson, Taylor, and Grant?

. Was Eisenhower’s seeming caution and inactivity a lack of vigorous leadership or a wise prudence in the exercise of power? (See boxed quote on page 868.)

. Was the 1950s a time of American triumph abroad and affluence at home, or was it a period that actually suppressed many problems of race, women’s roles, and cultural conformity? (See boxed quotes on pages 856 and 857 as well as section Examining the Evidence on page 869.)

. Which writers and artists best expressed the concerns of American culture in the 1950s? (See boxed quotes on page 871.) Was there a connection between the rise of pop-culture figures such as Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe and the changes in art and writing (such as the Beats and the new southern writers)?

. Compare and contrast the literary outpouring of World War I with that of World War II. What caused the shift from a realism in literature to a more fantasized and psychedelic prose?

6. Did Kennedy fulfill his promise to “get America moving again”? Why or why not? (See boxed quotes on pages 874 and 881.)

# makers of america: the great african american migration

## Questions for Class Discussion

. Why did World War II finally provide the historic impetus to cause African Americans to leave their ancient conditions of oppression in the rural South?

. What benefits did African Americans gain from their migration north and west, and what problems did they still have?

## Suggested Student Exercises

* Use photographs or other documents of the African American migration to northern cities in the World War II era. Examine what evidence the photographs provide about the economic conditions of the migrants.
* Read passages from one of the novels of the era, for example, Richard Wright’s *Native Son* or Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man,* to illustrate the feelings and perceptions of African Americans as they entered life in the large northern cities. Wright’s autobiography, *Black Boy,* also explains the conditions and aspirations that led many young blacks to leave the rural South and move north.

# CONTENDING VOICES: RICHARD NIXON VS. NIKITA KHRUSHCHEV

# Questions for Class Discussion

1. What merits did Nixon argue were offered with consumer capitalism? How did he link these merits with aspects of American democracy?

2. What merits did Khruschev argue the Soviet economic system offered its citizens that American citizens lacked?

# makers of america: the BEAT GENERATION

**Questions for Class Discussion**

1. Why was the term “beat” used by the poets and personalities who participated in this cultural protest movement?

2. Compare and contrast the life experiences of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs.

**Suggested Student Exercises**

* Have students read Jack Kerouac’s On the Road (1957). Why is this novel known as the Bible of the Beat Generation?
* Conduct a class discussion on why various aspects of the Beat Generation would have been appealing to young people in the 1960s who were frustrated with the results of the “system” in foreign policy and in dealing with problems of race and poverty at home.