

The United States in the 1950s – Anxiety, Anticommunism, Affluence, Alienation

ANXIETY

As World War II ended, many Americans felt anxious about the future. Three sources of this anxiety were especially prevalent:

1) Anxiety about the economy

Many of the unemployed had taken jobs in war industries or as soldiers. Once the war was over, they feared they would lose these jobs. Unemployment would again skyrocket and the depression would return.

As it happened, this did not occur. Americans had been doing without numerous consumer goods throughout the war – cars, refrigerators, furniture, and so on – because factories were producing war materials, not consumer goods.

The DEMAND for these products was high once the war ended, and consumers had saved up money during the war years (since there was very little to buy – even basic goods had been rationed or been sent abroad to supply the soldiers.) But it would take time to reconvert the factories from producing war materials to producing consumer goods. Therefore the SUPPLY was low. High demand for goods, coupled with low supply of said goods will drive up the prices of these goods.

The source of anxiety, then, was not unemployment, but rather inflation (higher prices). Many Americans were anxious that the cost of living was going up at the very time they were trying to find new jobs. Those that found jobs found prices rising faster than their wages. They would not be able to pay their bills or afford the consumer goods they needed.

2) Anxiety about the Soviet Union and its expansion into Eastern Europe

The U.S. Government, during World War II, had painted the Soviet Union and particularly its leader, Josef Stalin, in a very positive light. President Roosevelt did this to maintain Stalin's trust and to insure the Soviets remained U.S. allies against the Germans. Stalin had signed a "pact" with the Nazis once already, so there was some concern that he might do so again, simply to end the fighting. It became FDR's priority to establish good relations with the Soviets to insure the "Grand Alliance" continued until Germany surrendered. Once the Germans were defeated and the common enemy that had brought the U.S. and the Soviets together was gone, however, relations between the U.S. and the Soviets broke down quickly.

In large part this was due to events in Eastern Europe where the occupying Soviet army acted with brutality in Eastern Germany (raping over 1 million German women in the first few months after the war ended, for example). Stalin also consolidated Soviet power in other nations, such as Poland, where the Soviet presence was not welcomed. From Stalin's perspective, these Soviet actions were defensive measures necessary to protect his nation from another, future German invasion. The British and Americans saw the behavior of the Soviet army as aggressive. The peoples of Eastern Europe, on the receiving end of Soviet brutality, were even more suspicious of Moscow's intentions.

By 1946, one year after the end of the war, many Americans were anxious that the Soviet Union might pose a threat to the U.S.

Americans with relatives in Eastern Europe – Poles, Czechs, Romanians – had heard through informal communications that the new Communist governments were oppressive and the elections that put them in place had been rigged. Moreover, the Soviets and the new Eastern European governments had restricted travel to the West, adding to the impression that Europe was dividing along ideological lines – West vs East. In fact, by 1947 it was said that a state of “cold war” existed between the two blocs.

Winston Churchill, the wartime British Prime Minister, declared during a visit to the U.S. that an “iron curtain” was now dividing Europe – democratic freedom in the west and communist tyranny in the east. This kind of rhetoric heightened the anxiety in the U.S. and many feared that the “cold war” might turn into a fighting war if the Soviets tried to expand their influence any further – into France or Italy in western Europe, for example.

3) Anxiety about the unleashing of nuclear weapons and the prospect of atomic warfare

The dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan in 1945 had not initially been a source of anxiety for the American people. Most Americans were simply relieved that the war was over. Soon, however, some came to fear that it would only be a matter of time before other nations (and, in particular, the Soviet Union) were able to produce their own atomic bombs. This would seriously threaten American national security.

Still, government officials insured the American public that it would be “several years” before any other nation “unlocked” the secret of the atomic bomb.

In 1949, however, the Soviets detonated their own atomic bomb. Immediately, the government took steps to encourage civil defense measures, though realistically, most of these measures would not have had any effect. The point, however, was to ease public anxiety.

Not only was the detonation of the Soviet bomb itself an obvious source of anxiety for the American public, it soon came to light that the Soviet bomb was a near replica of

the U.S. bomb. This suggested – correctly as it happened – that Americans working as Soviet spies had given classified information on the construction of the bomb to Soviet officials.

This provoked another source of anxiety – Were there Soviet spies in the U.S. government and, if there were, how did one find them and remove them?

The Soviet detonation of an atomic bomb also precipitated an arms race between the US and the Soviet Union. In reaction to the Soviets' atomic bomb, the U.S. developed a stronger, hydrogen bomb; the Soviets in turn developed their own hydrogen bomb. In time, both sides had more than enough fire power to completely destroy the other nation. This balance was referred to as “Mutual Assured Destruction” or, appropriately enough, “MAD.”

By 1957, when the Soviets launched the first satellite into orbit (Sputnik), many Americans feared the U.S. was losing the arms race, and, by extension, the cold war. If the Soviets could develop a rocket so powerful as to thrust a satellite beyond the earth's gravitational pull and into orbit, then they could likely produce a rocket powerful enough to send a nuclear warhead to hit the US mainland. These fears were largely unfounded, but troubling nonetheless – and the cold war with the Soviets continued to be a major source of anxiety.

As the fear of nuclear conflict grew, the government came to believe that encouraging Americans to build back yard bomb shelters might ease some of the anxiety. Nuclear war, perhaps, could be survivable. The plan backfired, however, as many Americans who could not afford to build their own shelters expected that their neighbors would invite them into theirs. Tensions grew between neighbors over who would survive and who would not, compounding rather than alleviating anxiety. Such shelters, of course, offered little real protection and so the government backed away from the shelter initiative and other civil defense measures (duck and cover, classroom drills, etc.)

The level of public anxiety could be measured in unexpected ways. Tranquilizer and alcohol use, for example, spiked during the 1950s, suggesting that many Americans were looking to tamp down these feelings by “self-medication.”

Still, if it weren't for the Soviet Union (and communism), it was said, there would not be such pervasive anxiety in the United States.

Unlike in past international crises, however, simply declaring “war” on the Soviet Union was not an option. Such a war would be unwinnable. The anti-Soviet animus had to go somewhere, so instead it got turned inward. Americans often projected their dislike for communism and the Soviets onto internal enemies – supposed (and real) Communists who lived in the United States.

Therefore, the anxiety that came about due to the Cold War against the Soviet Union led to widespread anticommunism in the United States.

ANTICOMMUNISM

Most Americans did not have an especially firm grasp on what “communism” actually was. They did know, however, that whatever it was, they didn’t like it.

Popular culture often portrayed “communists” as violent, savage gangsters or criminals. (In fact, most American Communists tended to be middle-class intellectuals, union officials, or white-collar workers who spent more time in boring meetings than out terrorizing the locals.)

Politicians jumped on the anticommunist bandwagon to win votes. An election in the early 1950s, some politicians believed, could turn on which candidate appeared to be tougher on “communism.” The House Committee on Un-American Activities attracted significant media attention when it investigated Communist influence in Hollywood and the entertainment industry. Movie actors, directors, writers, and producers were called before the congressional committee to answer questions regarding their political affiliations. Some, though never members of the Communist party, had signed statements of support for the Soviet Union during World War II (when the Soviets had been a US ally) and were now accused of being “pro-Communist” for having done so. Others, however, either had been or were still Communist party members. The Party leadership ordered them not to answer the committee’s questions and so they took the Fifth Amendment (refusing to testify lest they incriminate themselves). Other non-communists also took the Fifth Amendment, declaring that the committee had no right to ask them about their political views.

In the end, many men and women lost their jobs in the entertainment industry when studio executives established the “black list” – anyone who was associated with the Communist party (or was even suspected of being associated with it) could no longer find work.

Similarly, government workers and teachers in the public schools were required to sign “loyalty oaths.” Often those who refused to sign were not Communists, but rather liberals or even radicals who believed the government was overstepping its limits by compelling people to sign such oaths. They refused to sign, not because they were not “loyal,” but because they felt the oaths violated their civil liberties.

The Communists, for their part, simply lied and signed the oaths. As a result, the entire loyalty oath program not only did not achieve its intended effect but also threatened to restrict civil liberties. Ironically, the Soviets’ ignoring of civil liberties was one of the very reasons Americans said they opposed communism.

In particular, Congressman Richard Nixon and Senator Joseph McCarthy achieved prominence by gaining reputations as hard-line opponents of communism.

Nixon dug deeply to gather evidence that Communists had served in the government during World War II. Drawing on “inside information” supplied to him by sources within the FBI and from ex-Communist agents, he meticulously put together a case against former Roosevelt administration official, Alger Hiss. As was later confirmed, Hiss was indeed a Communist agent and Nixon’s successful unmasking of him helped to launch the future president’s political career.

While Nixon was thorough and meticulous, if perhaps overzealous and off-putting, McCarthy was an irresponsible demagogue. Fast and loose with the facts, prone to making assertions without evidence, and boorish in his behavior, McCarthy nonetheless won so much support from average voters (particularly Catholics and working-class social conservatives) that the Washington establishment was reluctant to denounce him, at least at first. McCarthy’s anti-elite populism was likely more of a draw than his anti-communism. Like many demagogues before and since, McCarthy awakened the anti-intellectual strain in American political culture. Anger at “communists” quickly transformed into anger at “elites,” who allegedly were “soft” on communism.

Federal bureaucrats, like FBI head J. Edgar Hoover, also came to realize they could enhance their power and increase their agencies’ budgets if they were seen as playing a significant role in fighting communism.

In the late 1940s and 1950s, it came to light that several Americans had been secretly supplying the Soviets with classified government documents, or, in the case of Julius Rosenberg, technological data that ended up helping the Soviets construct an atomic bomb. That these men had been “secret” communists, and that some – like Alger Hiss – looked perfectly “normal” and would never have been suspected of being communists, fueled the so-called red scare. If a neat, trim, bureaucrat in a tweed suit (like Hiss) could be a communist spy, ANYONE could be!

The anticommunist crusade was, in the final analysis, a significant overreaction to a problem that had largely been solved even before the crusade began. There had been Communists in government during World War II, but by the 1950s, they had been removed, fired, or instructed to leave their positions by Soviet spymasters who feared they would be caught. In this sense, it was not a “witch hunt” – there are no witches, but there were indeed Communists – but the resulting effects on American politics and culture were undeniably negative.

Indeed, this turn of events had a chilling effect on American culture and American politics. ANYONE who stood out, who seemed to disagree with those in power, or who expressed reservations about taking a “loyalty oath” risked being seen as a communist or a “communist sympathizer.”

As a result, no one wanted to “stand out” and so American society became far more conformist. (Ironically, the conformity of Soviet society had been one of the

arguments against communism, but the times did not lend themselves to an appreciation of irony.)

In all walks of life, Americans expressed a patriotism grounded in anticommunism. Whatever communism stood for, loyal American patriots were expected to oppose. Whatever communists did or believed, Americans were expected to do or believe the opposite.

If, for example, the Soviets did not value family life and sent their children to day care centers while both parents worked for the state, America should put the “nuclear family” at the center of its culture to demonstrate the stark contrast with the communists.

As a result, Americans married younger, had more children, and, outwardly at least, put great value on the quality of family life. Popular culture again played a role in disseminating the image of the “ideal” happy family on television shows such as “I Love Lucy” and “Father Knows Best.”

Given that both men and women were identified as “workers” in the Soviet Union and gender differences were downplayed, clearly drawn gender lines were emphasized in the US. Women were supposed to stay at home to raise the kids while men went to work. Women who did work were expected to take “female” jobs – secretaries, teachers, receptionists. Even female movie stars came to look more unmistakably “feminine” – curves were back and the “androgynous” look was out.

(In fact, more married women were working outside the home during the 1950s, but the reality never got in the way of the idealized image.)

To reassure those who still worried that the “bad” communists might be hard to detect, Hollywood produced a spate of movies in which it was very easy to tell the “good guys” from the “bad guys” – white hats vs black hats.

(The more critically acclaimed films, particularly those by director Alfred Hitchcock, broke from this trend, however, and often developed plot lines in which the evil character was not revealed until the end of the film. *Psycho*, for example.)

It was also well-known that communists were atheists. Accordingly, Americans came to feel they should go out of their way to show their own religious faith. During the 1950s, church attendance went up, and the government made several symbolic nods to religion (“under God” added to the Pledge of Allegiance and “In God we Trust” added to the currency). Ministers like Billy Graham became well-known and highly regarded public figures.

Therefore, the celebration of family life, the insistence on rigid gender roles, and the focus on religious faith all distinguish us from the communists – “We aren’t like THEM.”

BUT, this approach was largely negative.

It was believed that insisting the U.S. was NOT like the Soviet Union was not enough to convince those nations still uncommitted to one side or the other in the Cold War that they should back the U.S. and not the USSR.

The US had to have something POSITIVE to offer when making the case that its system was better.

AFFLUENCE

This “something” became American **AFFLUENCE**. The US was a far wealthier nation than the USSR, and so this could be the best argument for why the system of liberal democracy and capitalism worked better than communism. American AFFLUENCE (or wealth) was positive proof that its system was better.

The negative approach of ANTICOMMUNISM therefore created the need for a more positive portrayal of the nation which centered on its AFFLUENCE. In this sense, the emphasis on Anticommunism during the late 1940s and early 1950s led to the emphasis on AFFLUENCE that came to dominate the mid-1950s.

At the end of World War II, the U.S. was, by far, the most affluent nation in the world. It accounted for 45% of the global economy. To be sure, this dominance was not to be permanent and largely reflected the fact that the world’s other economic powers – Japan, Germany, Great Britain, France, and the USSR – were still recovering from the economic devastation of the Second World War.

Still, rather than facing a return of the Great Depression at the end of World War II, the U.S. economy, after a brief struggle to reconvert to peace time production, began an extended period of expansion. In part, this was due to **the GI Bill**, arguably the most significant law passed in the 20th century.

The GI Bill provided all veterans of World War II a free college education – and, incidentally, kept them temporarily out of the job market. It also gave them access to subsidized mortgages that facilitated home ownership. Education and home ownership were the keys to a middle class life. Men and women who had grown up poor during the Depression now saw a significant improvement in their standard of living.

The Marshall Plan, sold to the American public as a way to stop the spread of Communism, also contributed to reviving the economy. Rather than force the European powers to pay reparations or repay loans (as had happened after World War I), the US government provided billions of dollars of aid to Europe. Once this assistance began to flow, European economies began the long process of recovering. Europeans began to buy more American goods – establishing long-term

brand loyalty, but also providing jobs for American factory workers who were hired en masse to meet the new demands for manufactured goods. Not surprisingly, labor unions were big supporters of the Marshall Plan since this meant better wages and more secure jobs for their members.

The Marshall Plan also won the US the good will of the western Europeans who rejected Communists and embraced more pro-US political parties. In this sense, the economic aid had a political impact – it helped to “contain” the appeal of communism.

Into the 1950s, labor and management established a predictable and relatively stable relationship. Wages went up, productivity increased, and businesses showed a willingness to negotiate with labor in good faith (though not all the time). Most significantly, economic inequality decreased considerably. The gap between the richest and the poorest narrowed and the middle class grew larger and more prosperous.

Returning soldiers were looking to buy houses (and, thanks to the GI Bill they had the money to afford a house). This fueled a boom in the housing market, particularly the demand for newly constructed houses outside of major cities (Levittown, for example). Any expansion of the housing market helps the entire economy since so many sectors benefited from increased housing construction – windows, appliances, electrical wiring, landscaping, plumbing, heating and (for the first time) air conditioning. This economic expansion created jobs for returning soldiers as well.

The growth of the suburbs in turn created a demand for improvements in infrastructure. Most jobs were still in the cities, so white-collar workers needed a quick and easy way to commute from their suburban home to their downtown office. The government responded by funding the construction of an **Interstate Highway System**. Much like the railroads during the 19th century, this new system of roads stimulated economic development across the nation. Not only did the suburbs grow, more rural and isolated areas began to develop as towns grew up along the interstates.

The auto industry likewise boomed as the commuters bought cars (and often second cars that housewives used to get around the suburbs while their husbands took the first car to work.)

Additionally, Americans took advantage of the newly built highway system to go on vacation “road trips.” Looking for familiarity in unfamiliar places, they turned to “chain” restaurants and motels. For example, staying at a Holiday Inn held more appeal than taking a chance on staying at a “mom and pop” motel, whose cleanliness could not always be relied on. The same could be said for restaurants like McDonalds.

The owners of these chains decided to “franchise” their businesses. Under this arrangement, the company would sell its name to a local buyer who would open a

McDonalds or Holiday Inn of his own. This was an appealing set up since starting a small business can be costly, especially at the outset. The buyer of the franchise would not have to worry about laying out money for advertising to establish name recognition and market share – buying the franchise name got him that. His responsibility was to run a productive outlet of the larger company while “corporate” handled advertising, marketing, product selection, and overall strategy. As a result, more Americans could open small businesses without as much of an initial capital outlay. And, Americans could eat and stay at “familiar” chain businesses. At the time, this was seen as a positive development. Today, franchises are seen in a less positive light since they have helped create a “bland” cultural landscape and squeezed out more distinct and diverse tastes.

Once settled with a job and a home, Americans began to start families. The “Baby Boom” began shortly after the war and would continue through 1964. The arrival of so many youngsters spiked demand for various kid-related products – from diapers to cribs to, later on, bicycles, toys, and breakfast cereals. All of which created high demand in various sectors of the economy and contributed to the expansion of affluence.

Americans making good salaries and able to purchase (and furnish) affordable homes led to an orgy of consumer spending. Beyond typical household goods and cars, television became the new “must-have” product.

Of course, the frenzy of consumerism did produce a degree of **conformism**. All the houses in Levittown looked much the same (though in the years to come, families would add rooms, convert garages, and so on, making their “little box” more distinct.)

Likewise, white-collar jobs also encouraged conformity – the image of the “man in the gray flannel suit” who worked a mid-level job for a large, faceless corporation became synonymous with the 1950s. Most white, middle-class men, however, were willing to take a boring job if it meant earning a decent salary and having time to spend with their families. Given their experiences in the Depression and during World War II, it was hardly surprising that most adults were looking for security and routine, even if it came at the price of taking an unchallenging or unfulfilling job.

Ironically, though popular culture often emphasized the “rugged individualist,” most fifties men did very little that was innovative or entrepreneurial. They were “company men” and happy to be so.

For most white, middle-class Americans, identity derived largely from what one bought, rather than from what one did. Consumerism was the “America Way” and buying things, in a way, became “patriotic” – a physical manifestation of the wealth available to more Americans than ever before that demonstrated the superiority of the capitalist system.

Many of the things Americans bought were not very durable. Arguably, they were cheap and poorly made. This didn't matter, however, since innovation was allegedly occurring so rapidly that there was no point in holding on to things for a long time. Before you knew it, a "new and improved" version would come along. "Luxury" meant flashy and "modern" rather than hand-crafted and long-lasting. Some referred to this development as the emergence of a "throw away" society. Later, the historian Thomas Hine would coin the phrase "Populuxe" to describe products that embodied this new availability of "popular luxury." The "chip and dip" captured the mood – inexpensive goods could nonetheless provide an aura of luxury and "class."

The obsession with innovation also revealed a common attitude at the time – the future promised to be infinitely better than the present and couldn't come fast enough. Even product design played to "futuristic" themes – space travel, rockets, acute angles that made even stationary products look like they were about to zoom off into some enticing future. Americans seemed fascinated with models of the "car of the future," "house of the future," "city of the future." And in the mid-1950s, Walt Disney introduced "Tomorrowland" at Disneyland – further indication of Americans' love of the future, which would undoubtedly feature even more affluence.

Generally unmentioned in public, but sometimes contemplated in private, was that the "future" could well be horrific – a nuclear disaster, rather than some utopian fantasy. This co-existence of affluence and anxiety, unbridled optimism and apocalyptic foreboding, characterized the early years of the Cold War. On the surface, though, affluence seemed to bring happiness and reaffirmed the superiority of the American system.

Not all Americans, and not even all middle-class, white Americans, could afford to buy whatever they wanted. For those who wanted to project the image of affluence but lacked the funds to support such a lifestyle, **credit cards** were a godsend. Previously, borrowing or incurring consumer debt had held a certain stigma, though this had been weakening since the 1920s. It weakened considerably more during the 1950s as Diner's Club, and, later, Sears, and various gas stations issued "credit cards" that enabled people to buy products with borrowed funds. Soon others, including "Master Charge" and "Bank Americard" (now Visa), would follow.

Giving access to consumer goods to those who would otherwise not have been able to afford them helped fuel further economic expansion.

Suburban shopping centers and indoor shopping "malls" first appeared in the mid-1950s. "Temples to consumerism," they came to embody in an especially flashy way the affluence of American society – a stark contrast to life in the Soviet Union where one had to line up for hours to buy even the most basic consumer items, only to find that by the time one reached the front of the line, they were no longer available.

Beyond the GI Bill, the housing boom, the baby boom, the infrastructure boom, and expanded access to credit, the introduction of new products and services

helped fuel the postwar economic prosperity.

Many of these new ideas and innovations had grown out of research and development done during World War II. The first computers, plastics, and nuclear power generators had all been “solutions” to wartime problems. Once the war was over, these new inventions and processes were often put in the service of the consumer economy. Packaging, for example, became far cheaper with the introduction of plastic, thereby bring down the price of many consumer goods. Computers increased productivity and enabled business owners to make better informed decisions in a shorter amount of time – keeping track of inventory, for example.

In sum, the 1950s were an economic “golden age” for many Americans. In stark contrast to today, inequality was decreasing and more and more Americans lived comfortably middle class lives than ever before.

That said, non-white minorities usually did not achieve their fair share of the prosperity. African Americans in particular were shut out of the suburbs, unable to secure mortgages from banks that feared the presence of blacks in a neighborhood would drive down property values. Though bankers insisted they had nothing against black borrowers per se, they claimed their “hands were tied” because of broader racial attitudes. If whites refused to buy homes in neighborhoods where blacks lived, this wasn’t the bank’s fault. Beyond that, they emphasized their purpose was to make profits, not to solve the social problems associated with racism.

Given that all Americans were not sharing in (or in other cases not appreciating) this new AFFLUENCE, a sense of ALIENATION began to develop.

ALIENATION

Two kinds of alienation emerged in the postwar era. The first arose among those who had been EXCLUDED from the prosperity of white, middle class America, usually on the basis of race.

Even after World War II, America remained a society sharply divided along racial lines. African Americans lived as second class citizens, whether in the South where segregation remained the law (de jure) or in the north, where it was more the custom (de facto).

World War II, however, marked a turning point in race relations. Americans had fought and died to defeat Nazism, an ideology based on the premise of “racial superiority.” After winning the war, it seemed hypocritical at best for the U.S. to continue to defend any system based on the notion that one race was superior to another. Racism remained after World War II, but white supremacy (much like anti-Semitism) as “common sense” was no longer

acceptable in polite company.

Both during and after the war, Civil Rights activists called attention to the incompatibility of segregation and democracy. They demanded not special treatment, but equality of opportunity. To exclude African Americans from enjoying the prosperity and opportunities that white Americans were coming to enjoy was “un-American.”

In 1954, the activists had their views confirmed by the Supreme Court. The Court’s ruling in the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education* ended segregation in the public schools, marking the end of the “separate but equal” doctrine established in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Chief Justice Earl Warren, who had been a popular governor of California before being appointed to the Supreme Court, used all his political skills to produce a 9-0 ruling so that there would be no doubt that the nation was turning its back on segregation.

Beyond segregation being “un-American,” maintaining a racist system undermined the U.S. image in the world. The populations of most developing nations were non-white. As the U.S. tried to convince these nations to side with Washington, not Moscow, in the Cold War, the task became significantly more difficult so long as segregation and racism were so prevalent in U.S. society.

Soviet propaganda never failed to call attention to the oppression of blacks in the U.S. South and the poor economic conditions in which blacks lived in the North. The U.S. system, the Soviets told the non-white citizens of the developing world, had nothing to offer them. Only Communism provided equality and economic security. In Communist societies, the Soviets claimed, there was no racism (a demonstrably untrue statement, but this didn’t necessarily matter so long as the racist aspects of U.S. society were so obvious.)

Civil Rights activists, then, had another argument to advance their cause: so long as the U.S. tolerated racism and legal segregation, it would be putting itself at a disadvantage in the Cold War. Accordingly, the Cold War likely helped the Civil Rights Movement more than it hurt it. By forcing U.S. officials to live up to their idealistic rhetoric about “freedom and equality,” activists achieved tangible gains. White officials might not have been morally committed to advancing civil rights for African Americans, but they certainly did not want to give the Soviets any advantage in the propaganda wars that characterized the Cold War.

Also, the emergence of mass media, particularly television, worked to the advantage of the Civil Rights Movement. Activists in the South soon learned how to paint “pictures” that would play to the sympathies of northern whites. Often this meant having clean cut, morally upright, well-dressed, middle-class African Americans as the “face” of the movement. (Note that the photos to emerge from the desegregation of Little Rock High School feature African American women who could hardly be seen as “threatening.” Similarly, church going Rosa Parks

was the “face” of the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott, not Claudette Colvin, a single pregnant woman often described, even by other African Americans, as “feisty” and “mouthy.”)

In sum, World War II, the emerging Cold War, and the new medium of television all contributed to the expansion of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s. These factors, combined with the sacrifices made by grassroots activists, black and white, forced national attention on the gap between American rhetoric and reality, between the affluence of white middle-class America and the poverty of alienated black America.

In fact, the Civil Rights movement grew in part from a sense of alienation – Why should blacks remain poor, second class citizens when postwar affluence was lifting so many poor and working class whites into the middle class?

For many blacks, the “American Dream” seemed to be “for whites only.” It was not that blacks didn’t want to pursue the American Dream (and become affluent themselves), but rather that they were kept from doing so solely on the basis of race. **White America’s affluence, then, led directly to black America’s alienation.**

A **second form of alienation** to emerge from the affluence of postwar society was embodied in those who participated in and benefited from the prosperous times of the 1950s but found the era’s crass materialism, conformist culture, and conservative social mores to be stifling.

Unlike African Americans who were alienated because they were kept out, many white Americans were alienated because they were kept in. They longed to break free from the constraints of conventional middle class culture. Some even envied African Americans because they were not part of that culture.

Figures from numerous walks of life rejected what they considered the white bread, bland, boring, overly planned, routine aspects of mainstream American culture.

Artists such as Jackson Pollock developed a new school of painting – abstract expressionism – which celebrated spontaneity and the breaking of conventional rules while it implicitly critiqued more traditional modes of artistic expression seen in the work of popular mainstream artists like Norman Rockwell.

Novelists and poets also expressed alienation from mainstream American culture. Authors like J. D. Salinger decried the “phoniness” of society while holding up for admiration characters such as Holden Caulfield who tried to live more authentic lives outside the bounds of middle class respectability.

The Beat poets, too, voiced their alienation from the priorities of cold war America and the conformity that patriotism seemed to demand – often employing shocking profanity

to do so. Some pointed out that in the name of combatting the evils of Communism, many Americans had taken up some of Communism's most deplorable aspects and had simply become a mirror image of that which they claimed to be fighting. American society had become gray, totalitarian, violent, and inhumane – no different than the USSR.

Similarly, comic books exposed young readers to a darker, more violent vision of America in which everyone did not always agree and consensus was often frayed. The most controversial comic books even suggested that all was not well in American society and that the mainstream culture was a fraud masking deeper social ills.

As had happened numerous times before, worried parents lashed out at the “messenger” (the comic books) and refused to come to terms with the “message” (all was not well in affluent America). Some believed this new “mass media” was seducing their children and that some children were imitating the violent behavior they saw in comic books – much as earlier generations of parents had blamed novels, motion pictures, radio, and pulp magazines (and later generations blamed rap music and video games).

For their part, many children (and even some adults) embraced the subversive message of the comic books and welcomed them as an escape from a mainstream culture that they found inauthentic, boring, and monotonous.

The puritanical sexual mores of Cold War America also produced a degree of alienation, and, in time, rebellion. The first sign of the coming sexual revolution appeared in 1953 with the publication of *Playboy* magazine which celebrated a more liberated (if at times misogynist) sexuality.

Not surprisingly, the largest contingent of alienated Americans came from the **younger generation**. Having never experienced the economic deprivation of the Depression or the uncertainty of the war years, they saw living comfortably as “boring” rather than as a welcome relief. Finding their parents’ obsession with material gain and the trappings of middle class life to be inauthentic and even morally corrupting, they asked, “Is this all there is?” Often their exasperated parents replied, “What more do you want?”

Most young people were not yet sure how to answer this question, but they gravitated to pop culture icons who seemed to embody their sense of alienation and aimlessness. Movies catering to young people often featured brooding, alienated characters who struggled to articulate their displeasure with mainstream society, but clearly rejected its conventions and routines – particularly its materialism and conformity. The popular young actors Marlon Brando and James Dean often played characters who “went wrong” – not through any fault of their own, but due to the failings of the society in which they were raised.

Youthful alienation also expressed itself in the music of rhythm and blues artists who would later be known as the founders of “rock’n’roll.” In this case, however, the

affluent society quickly co-opted and monetized the alienation of the young as music for the teen market became a big business almost overnight.

In some respects, this popularization of a previously marginalized style was epitomized by Elvis Presley, but Presley was himself an authentic product of an alienated culture. He had grown up poor in Memphis, Tennessee in a largely black neighborhood. His earliest musical influences were white gospel and rockabilly alongside black rhythm and blues. He had both white and black friends, none of whom considered themselves part of the mainstream, middle class culture.

Presley's early audiences were usually black teens. Only later did he enjoy "cross-over" success with white audiences. As a white boy who played black music, Presley was something of an oddity. In the segregated, race-obsessed South of the mid-1950s, it seemed unimaginable that any white performer hoping to "make it big" would imitate black musical styles. Black music was considered "inferior" if not "savage" or "barbaric." If he was "stealing" black culture, most of his white contemporaries would have agreed that he was stealing something that had no worth.

And yet Presley struck a nerve among both young blacks and whites. By blurring racial lines, he seemed to suggest that by mixing the races one might produce something better and not something corrupt or immoral.

Likewise, Presley implicitly challenged gender norms (he dyed his hair, wore make up, and "fancy" costumes – seemingly "feminine" behaviors) and explicitly challenged conventional attitudes about the expression of sexuality. Moralists considered Presley's performances to be "obscene" due to their sexually charged nature. He swayed and thrust his hips, "leered" seductively at his female audience, and sang songs that had explicitly sexual themes. Rather than presenting sexuality as "dirty" or "shameful," however, Presley seemed to be sending the message that overt sexuality was fun, liberating, spontaneous, and exciting.

Presley may have alarmed parents, but he became immensely popular – and wealthy. By age 22, he was a millionaire. He flaunted his wealth – buying a pink Cadillac, for example – and earned the resentment of those who believed he had done nothing to "earn" his fortune. In this sense, he mocked the Protestant work ethic that held hard work, thrift, and sobriety would lead to success. Presley's success suggested that these "moral" qualities were beside the point if one could capture the fancy of the fickle teen market.

At a deeper level, Presley was part of a trend that was growing by the end of the decade – a deep-seated dissatisfaction among an increasingly large number of Americans with the mainstream conformist, rigid culture of the 1950s.

The "alienated" now seemed to constitute more than just a tiny minority of malcontents. They were the beginnings of a new culture of rebellion that would come to full flower in the mid-1960s.

Before that cultural explosion, however, there was a sense that “something was brewing” – a sense of ANTICIPATION that a fresh wind was blowing and that change was on the horizon.

In many ways, the presidential candidacy of John F. Kennedy captured this sense of anticipation. The alienated – African Americans, young people, non-conformists, artists, and intellectuals – were to have their day, or so they hoped, in the new decade.