

## Affluence and Alienation

The negative approach of **ANTICOMMUNISM** 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.

### 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.

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.

### **GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES TO HELP THE ECONOMY**

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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 sudden improvement in their standard of living. The middle class grew significantly during the 1950s in large part due to the benefits bestowed by the GI Bill.

**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.

The offer of aid went not only to the nations of Western Europe, but also to those of Eastern Europe (behind the “Iron Curtain”) including even the Soviet Union. These nations were desperate for aid, but the American motives for offering aid were not

entirely altruistic. Washington officials hoped that economic aid to these nations might undermine the citizens' loyalty to the Communist regimes that governed them. (Such governments, particularly in places like Poland and Czechoslovakia, were not especially popular in the first place.) Initially, the Polish and Czech governments did express tentative interest in participating in the Marshall Plan, suggesting that Washington could perhaps pull them away from the Soviet orbit.

Stalin would have none of this, however. He rejected American aid as an "imperialist plot for domination." He told the leadership of the Eastern European nations that they were forbidden to accept any American economic aid. (He also implied, privately, that leaders who disobeyed him would not remain leaders for long.)

In time, the Soviets offered their version of the Marshall Plan, called the "Molotov Plan." Unlike the Marshall Plan, however, this plan ended up taking resources from the Eastern European nations and bringing them to the Soviet Union. And, unlike the Marshall Plan, which won the US the appreciation and admiration of the peoples of Western Europe, the Molotov Plan contributed to the increasing resentment of the Soviet Union among the peoples of Eastern Europe.

Once American economic assistance began to flow to the nations of Western Europe, their economies began the long process of recovering. The Marshall Plan therefore 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 its intended political impact – it helped to "contain" the appeal of communism.

The Marshall Plan also achieved its intended economic impact. Europeans used the money from the US government 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. It also demonstrated that the unions and their workers were playing a significant role in stopping the spread of Communism, and were thus unquestionably "patriotic." (Some conservative politicians at the time had attacked the labor unions as "soft" on Communism and disloyal to the "American Way." Labor's active support for and participation in the Marshall Plan squashed such accusations.)

## **FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO PROSPERITY – INDUSTRIAL "PEACE" AND THE INTERSTATE HIGHWAY SYSTEM**

A prosperous economy also helped industrial relations. 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.

Developers and construction companies devised new, productive methods for building homes quickly (the balloon frame, for example). And, though critics were dismayed at the uniformity and architectural blandness of the suburbs, most Americans – having survived the Depression and World War II – were more than happy to purchase a reasonably priced, brand new house in a safe, clean neighborhood.

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 19<sup>th</sup> century, this new system of roads stimulated economic development across the nation. Not only did the suburbs grow, but, additionally, more rural and isolated areas began to develop as towns grew up along the interstate highways.

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.) Some later spoke of a “conspiracy” on the part of oil companies and car manufacturers to push the federal and state governments to favor the construction of roads at the expense of public transportation. Undoubtedly, pressure was applied, but it should also be said that the majority of Americans preferred to drive to work in the comfort of their own car than in a crowded train, subway, or trolley. This, remember, was before the days of massive traffic jams, and so one could understand their preference. That said, the heavy reliance on cars and neglect of public transportation proved problematic in the long run as suburbs grew in population.

Constructing a national superhighway system, of course, was a major financial undertaking for the government. Liberals believed that government spending would create jobs and stimulate the economy, and accordingly did not oppose the outlay of funds. Conservatives, however, worried that such a large amount of government spending could unbalance the budget. To win them over, the Eisenhower administration tied the construction of the highway system to national security. A grid of superhighways could facilitate the rapid removal of large numbers of people from

densely populated areas in case of a nuclear attack. Also, US missiles could be easily transported along the highway system so as to protect them from being attacked (a risk, it was argued, if they remained anchored in one place.) These, on the whole, were rather dubious arguments (most missiles, it turned out, could not fit under the planned overpasses that were part of the highway system), but at least they provided politicians with “cover” when making the case for the program to more conservative voters.

## **THE NEW CONSUMERISM**

Once settled with a job, a home, and a new car, 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 soon engaged in an orgy of consumer spending. Beyond typical household goods, appliances, and cars, television became the new “must-have” product by the mid-1950s.

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.

If consumerism was the altar at which Americans worshipped, shopping malls soon became their temples. Suburban shopping centers and indoor shopping “malls” first appeared in the mid- 1950s, and 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.

Malls appeared first in the newly settled suburbs. This brought about a change in shopping habits. Before the advent of the large suburban mall, shoppers traveled into the city to the shopping district or, if they lived in small towns, to Main Street. Shoppers enlivened the public space of cities and towns. Now they drove to privately-owned shopping malls. Suburbs became more self-contained, as there was now no need to travel into the city to go shopping. Conversely, downtown areas began to suffer economically and deteriorate.

Consumerism in the mid-1950s differed from earlier eras in that much of what was bought was a response to “wants” rather than “needs.” If satisfying one’s “wants” also made one patriotic, that was even better. Consumerism also was not simply a

financial exchange – you hand money to the cashier, she hands you the product. It was a “process” – you dreamed about what it would be like to have the item, you got to choose from myriad variations of the item (color, size, etc.) You imagined how others might respond to seeing that you own the item. Consumerism brought status. In a sense, you were buying status, more so than specific items.

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” (or “luxury” for the masses). The “chip and dip” captured the mood – inexpensive goods could nonetheless provide an aura of luxury, sophistication, and “class.”

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.

The obsession with “new, modern” products and new innovations 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 holocaust, 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.

## VACTIONS.... AND FRANCHISES

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.

## AFFLUENCE BASED ON NEW PRODUCTS

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 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.

## AFFLUENCE AND CONFORMITY

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. Their job was not the source of their identity. Rather, many men embraced domestic life, spending more quality time with their growing families.

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.

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.

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.

Indeed, 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.**

One might even argue that 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?

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 expressing

support for the ideology of white supremacy (or 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.”

For example, while returning African American soldiers were eligible for GI Bill benefits – such as a low interest mortgage – more often than not, roadblocks were set up to impede them from getting what was rightfully (and legally) theirs. As a result, African Americans 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.

Even worse, some real estate agents exploited racial and economic fears by engaging in what became known as “block busting.” This simply meant that an unscrupulous realtor would convince a homeowner in an all-white neighborhood who was looking to move out (usually to a nicer neighborhood) to sell his home to an African American buyer at an inflated price. The African American buyer was willing to pay the inflated price because there were very few options for him to move to nicer neighborhoods – restrictive covenants kept him out. The seller, able to make a larger profit, disregarded the concerns of his neighbors who would have opposed his selling to African American. Once the sale was completed, the same realtor would contact other white homeowners in the neighborhood and remind them that property values went down in “mixed” neighborhoods. Hadn’t they better think about selling their home before the value went down? Fearful of losing the equity in their investment, many whites agreed they should probably sell their homes. Then, the realtor would reap the profit by charging a black buyer an inflated price. The neighborhood would become more “mixed” and the cycle would continue until the neighborhood became considered “black.” Once that happened, it became a “high risk” area, and banks were reluctant to give residents loans to, for example, improve or remodel their homes.

In this case, among white homeowners, fear of taking an economic loss may have been more important than personal animosity against African Americans in convincing them to sell their homes. But the result was the same – racial discrimination. Institutional or systemic racism was often fueled by misperceptions that grew out of personal racism. For example, the first African American families who moved into “white” neighborhoods were often wealthier, better educated, and of a higher class than their white neighbors. In a world absent racism, their presence in



the neighborhood should have raised property values. Yet the assumption remained that any African American presence in a neighborhood, as if by some rule of nature, automatically lowered property values. This was a false, but unquestioned assumption upon which banks based their lending policies – and one that victimized black home buyers for decades.

## **THE POSTWAR SOUTH**

If, after World War II, upper middle class white liberals in the North came to see racism and discrimination as wrong, changes in racial attitudes were slower to come to the South. Racism in that region could be more raw, and personal than the polite “institutional racism” one found in the suburbs of northern cities. One instance in particular, however, may have been a catalyst for a change in the federal government’s approach to cases of discrimination.

Isaac Woodard, a World War II veteran, when he returned to his home state of South Carolina, was not received with a hero’s welcome. Instead, during his bus ride home, he was attacked and blinded by a white police officer. When he heard about it, the attack so outraged President Truman (a southerner whose mother had been loyal to the Confederacy during the Civil War), that he changed his views on civil rights and began to mobilize his administration to eliminate segregation and racial discrimination in any way it could. Within two years, Truman had issued an executive order desegregating the nation’s armed forces and had endorsed a strong pro-civil rights plank in the Democratic party platform. That said, little was done in Congress to pass laws against racial discrimination since southern Senators and Representatives blocked any and all attempts to do so.

Even so, many politicians (Republicans and northern Democrats) as well as other government officials worried that segregation and racial discrimination was casting the US in a poor light internationally and undermining 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.)

As a result, Civil Rights activists, aware of the concerns of white politicians, 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. Not all white officials might 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.

In the end, it was not the legislative or executive branch, but the Supreme Court that threw down the gauntlet on civil rights.

### **THE END OF DE JURE SEGREGATION – “SEPARATE BUT EQUAL” OVERTURNED... but de facto segregation remains**

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.

A court ruling is one thing, but enforcing the ruling is quite another. Just as during the Reconstruction years, enforcement fell to the military – often the National Guard, most notably at Little Rock’s Central High School in 1957. Whites refused to comply with the Court’s ruling and so President Eisenhower called in troops to insure black students could attend the white high school. In response, many white southerners pulled their children out of the public schools and instituted “academies” – private schools not subject to the *Brown* decision that remained all white. In time, even private schools would be legally forced to abandon overt racial discrimination, but in the meantime, some public schools, legally integrated, ended up becoming, in fact, largely segregated, with majority black student populations.

That said, our schools today remain segregated. In the north, in cities like Los Angeles and New York, the schools are more segregated than they were in the 1950s. This is due not so much to specific instances of racial discrimination on the part of individuals or school officials, but because of the way schools in the United States are funded and structured. Children go to school in their neighborhoods. The neighborhood tax base funds the schools (through property taxes). Poor neighborhoods, as a result, often have inferior schools. Minorities tend to be economically worse off than whites; they live in less affluent neighborhoods; these schools are underfunded or unable to recruit the best teachers. Again, we see how institutional racism, ingrained in the system, is difficult to combat – even when the letter of the law forbids racial discrimination, the system can produce results that nonetheless appear to be racially unequal.

## INTEGRATION OF PUBLIC FACILITIES AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Segregation of public facilities – public busses, hotels, etc. – began to erode as well in the late 1950s. The Montgomery bus boycott was perhaps the most famous episode in which local African Americans used economic pressure to force desegregation. Without black riders, the bus company's financial position would be compromised, and so local activists made integration of the busses the condition that must be met before they would resume riding the busses.

The boycott, it should be emphasized, was not just about who got to sit where on the bus. More important to the organizers was to improve economic opportunities for blacks – in short, to open jobs to black applicants. Not only did the activists want the busses desegregated, they wanted black drivers to be hired. (And black police officers, fire fighters, government employees, and so on.) Economic justice was a crucial component of the Civil Rights Movement, one that has been downplayed over the years. The 1963 “March on Washington” at which Martin Luther King deliver his famous “I have a Dream” speech was actually called the “March on Washington for *Jobs and Freedom*” (note that “Jobs” came first.)

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, the victory against ideologies based on racial supremacy in World War II, the emerging Cold War, the Supreme Court's *Brown* decision, the impact of the mass media, and the heightened desire of African Americans to partake in the new affluence of postwar society 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.

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.