

America Divided

The Civil War of the 1960s

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defense spending and create what Eisenhower, a few days later, called a "military-industrial complex" whose "unwarranted influence" citizens should check. Nevertheless, the budget of the federal government was in balance. America's best-loved modern general had become one of its favorite presidents. Ike left office with a popularity rating of nearly 60 percent.

Dwight Eisenhower's America held sway over a Western world that, since the late 1940s, had been undergoing a golden age of economic growth and political stability in which the lives of ordinary people became easier than ever before in world history.² U.S. political and corporate leaders dominated the noncommunist world through military alliances, technologically advanced weaponry, democratic ideals, and consumer products that nearly everyone desired—from Coca-Cola to Cadillacs to cowboy movies. At home, American workers in the heavily unionized manufacturing and construction industries enjoyed a degree of job security and a standard of living that usually included an automobile, a television, a refrigerator, a washing machine and a dryer, and long-playing records. A generation earlier, none of these fabulous goods—except, perhaps, the car—would have been owned by their working-class parents. TVs and LP disks were not even on the market until the 1940s.

Most economists minimized the impact of the late-'50s recession and predicted that all Americans would soon share in the benefits of affluence. In 1962, after completing a long-term study of U.S. incomes, a team of social scientists from the University of Michigan announced, "The elimination of poverty is well within the means of Federal, state, and local governments."³ Some commentators even



Refueling a B-47, then the world's most advanced warplane, in the early 1950s. SOURCE: Library of Congress

CHAPTER 1

Gathering of the Forces

We have entered a period of accelerating bigness in all aspects of American life.

—ERIC JOHNSTON,
U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 1957¹

Seven years after it ended, World War II elected Dwight David Eisenhower president. As supreme commander of Allied forces in Europe, "Ike" had projected a handsome, confident presence that symbolized the nation's resolve to defeat its enemies. After the war, both major parties wooed the retired general before he revealed that he had always been a Republican.

In many ways, the country Eisenhower governed during the 1950s was still living in the aftermath of its triumph in history's bloodiest conflict. Millions of veterans and their families basked in the glow of a healthy economy—defying predictions that peace would bring on another depression. Years of prosperity allowed many Americans to dream that, for the first time in history, the problem of scarcity—which bred poverty, joblessness, and desperation—might soon be solved. But they also feared that a new and even more devastating world war—fought with nuclear weapons—could break out at any time. Affluence might suddenly give way to annihilation. The backdrop to the '60s was thus a society perched between great optimism and great fear.

As he prepared to leave the White House in the early days of January 1961, Ike was reasonably content with his own record in office. His final State of the Union address, read to Congress by a lowly clerk, boasted of an economy that had grown 25 percent since he entered the White House in January 1953. A recession that began in 1958 had hung on too long; over 6 percent of American wage earners still could not find a job. But, with unemployment insurance being extended for millions of workers, there seemed no danger of a return to the bread lines and homelessness of the 1930s.

Moreover, Eisenhower could claim, with some justification, that his administration had improved the lives of most Americans. During his tenure, real wages had increased by one-fifth, the system of interstate highways was rapidly expanded, and new schools and houses seemed to sprout up in every middle-class community. To counter the Soviet Union, Congress had found it necessary to boost

fretted that prosperity was sapping the moral will Americans needed to challenge the appeal of Communism in the third world. In 1960, the *New York Times* asked, "How can a nation drowning in a sea of luxury and mesmerized by the trivialities of the television screen have the faintest prospect of comprehending the plight of hundreds of millions in this world for whom a full stomach is a rare experience?"⁷⁴

Only the omnipresent Cold War tarnished the golden age for the comfortable majority. Beginning a few months after the end of the Second World War, the United States and Soviet Union had employed both the force of arms and ideological conviction to persuade the vast majority of nations and their citizens to choose up sides. The two superpowers fought with sophisticated propaganda, exports of arms and military advisers, and huge spy services—an ever growing arsenal that burdened the poorer countries of the Soviet bloc more than the prosperous, industrial nations in the West. Since 1949, when the USSR exploded its first atomic bomb, the specter of nuclear armageddon loomed over the conflict.

In preparing for that ultimate war, the overarmed combatants exacted a terrible price. The United States and USSR tested nuclear weapons in the open air, exposing tens of thousands of their soldiers and untold numbers of civilians to dangerous doses of radiation from fallout. Both powers helped quash internal revolts within their own virtual empire—the Caribbean region for the United States, Eastern Europe for the Soviets. In Guatemala and Hungary, the Dominican Republic and Poland, local tyrants received military assistance and economic favors as long as they remained servile. For the U.S. State Department, any sincere land reformer was an incipient Communist; while, on the other side, any critic of Soviet domination was branded an agent of imperialism. The two blocs were not morally equivalent: in the United States, the harassment of dissenters violated the nation's most cherished values, while in the USSR, the routine silencing and jailing of political opponents conformed with Communist doctrine.

By the late '50s, the death of Joseph Stalin and the end of the Korean War had diminished the possibility of a new world war. But anxiety still ran high. The United States, a commission funded by the Rockefeller brothers reported in 1958, was "in grave danger, threatened by the rulers of one-third of mankind." Two years later, Democratic presidential candidate John F. Kennedy warned, "The enemy is the communist system itself—implacable, insatiable, unceasing in its drive for world domination. . . . [This] is a struggle for supremacy between two conflicting ideologies: freedom under God versus ruthless, godless tyranny."⁷⁵ Western European countries were rapidly shedding their colonies in Africa and Asia, and American leaders feared that native pro-Communist leaders would fill the gap.

By the end of the decade, the most immediate threat to the United States seemed to come from an island located only ninety miles off the coast of Florida. Cuba had long been an informal American colony; U.S. investors owned 40 percent of its sugar and 90 percent of its mining wealth, and a major American naval base sat on Guantanamo Bay, at the eastern tip of the island. On New Year's Day, 1959, this arrangement was disrupted: a rebel army led by Fidel Castro overthrew the sitting Cuban government, a corrupt and brutal regime that had lost the

support of its people. At first, the new rulers of Cuba were the toast of the region. The bearded young leader—handsome, well-educated, eloquent, and witty—embarked on a speaking tour of the United States, where he met for three hours with Vice President Nixon.

But Fidel Castro was bent on a more fundamental revolution than American officials could accept. His government soon began executing officials of the old regime and confiscating \$1 billion of land and other property owned by U.S. "imperialists." When the Eisenhower administration protested, Castro signed a trade agreement with the USSR and began to construct a state socialist economy. Anticomunist Cubans, including most of the upper class, began to flee the island. By the time Ike left office, a Cuban exile army was training under American auspices to topple the only pro-Soviet government in the Western Hemisphere.

At the time, communism appeared to be a dynamic, if sinister, force. Since the end of the world war, its adherents had steadily gained new territory, weapons, and followers. U.S. officials were also concerned over reports that the Soviet economy was growing at double the rate of the American system. The other side was still far behind, but the idea that the USSR and its allies in Cuba, China, and elsewhere might capture the future was profoundly disturbing. Another high-level commission announced that the Soviets had more nuclear missiles than did the West. And, in 1957, the USSR launched *Sputnik*, a tiny unmanned satellite that seemed to give them a huge edge in the race to conquer space. All this threatened the confidence of Americans in their technological prowess, as well as their security. The year before *Sputnik*, Soviet premier Nikita S. Khrushchev had boasted, "We shall bury you." It didn't seem impossible.

Responding to the perception of a grave Communist threat, Congress did not question the accuracy of the missile reports (which later proved to be false) or the solidity of the alliance between Moscow and Beijing (which was already coming apart). Lawmakers kept the armed services supplied with young draftees and the latest weapons, both nuclear and conventional (which also meant good jobs for their districts). The space program received lavish funding, mostly through the new National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and positive coverage in the media. Billions also flowed into the coffers of American intelligence agencies. In the third world, any stalwart nationalist who sought to control foreign investment or questioned the value of U.S. bases was fair game for the Central Intelligence Agency's repertoire of "covert actions."

The Cold War also chilled political debate at home. Liberals learned to avoid making proposals that smacked of "socialism," such as national health insurance, which their Western European allies had already adopted. To question the morality of the Cold War sounded downright "un-American." The need for a common front against the enemy made ideological diversity seem outmoded if not subversive.

But not all Americans at the dawn of the decade shared a world view steeped in abundance at home and perpetual tension about the Cold War abroad. "The American equation of success with the big time reveals an awful disrespect for human life and human achievement," remarked black writer James Baldwin in

1960.⁶ Emerging in the postwar era was an alternative America—peopled by organizers for civil rights for blacks and women, by radical intellectuals and artists, and by icons of a new popular culture. These voices did not speak in unison, but, however inchoately, they articulated a set of values different from those of the men who ruled from the White House, corporate headquarters, and the offices of metropolitan newspapers.

The dissenters advocated pacifism instead of Cold War, racial and class equality instead of a hierarchy of wealth and status, a politics that prized direct democracy over the clash of interest groups, a frankness toward sex instead of a rigid split between the public and the intimate, and a boredom with cultural institutions—from schools to supermarkets—that taught Americans to praise their country, work hard, and consume joyfully. Dissenters did not agree that an expanding economy was the best measure of human happiness and tried to empathize with the minority of their fellow citizens who had little to celebrate.

To understand the turbulent events of the 1960s, one must appreciate the contradictory nature of the society of 180 million people that was variously admired and detested, imitated and feared throughout the globe. To grasp how and why America changed economically, politically, and culturally in the 1960s, one must capture something of its diverse reality at the start of the stormiest decade since the Civil War.

We set out a few material facts, benchmarks of what had been achieved and what was lacking in American society. Of course, the meaning of any particular fact depends upon where one stands, and with what views and resources one engages the world.

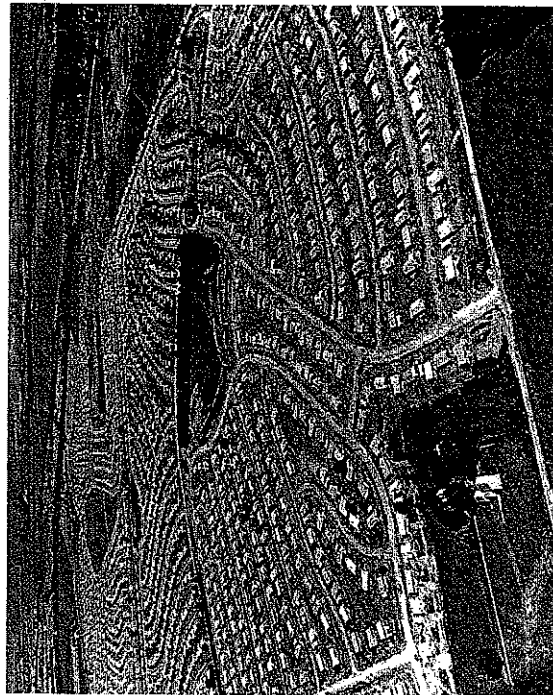
A massive baby boom was under way. It began in 1946, right after victory in World War II, and was ebbing only slightly by the end of the '50s. In that decade, an average of over 4 million births a year were recorded. Teenaged wives and husbands in their early twenties were responsible for much of this unprecedented surge. The baby boom, which also occurred in Canada and Australia, resulted from postwar optimism as well as prosperity. None of these English-speaking nations had been damaged in the global conflict, and most of their citizens could smile about their prospects. Western Europe, in contrast, was devastated by the war, and people remained wary of the future. Economies there recovered quickly and then grew at a more rapid pace than in the United States—but birthrates in England, France, Germany, and Italy still lagged near prewar levels.

Millions of young American families settled in the suburbs—in new developments like Levittown on Long Island and in the previously agricultural San Fernando Valley adjacent to Los Angeles. Large contractors erected acres of tract houses whose inexpensive price (about \$7,000 each) and gleaming electrical appliances almost compensated for the absence of individual character. Hoping to create instant communities, developers also built schools, swimming pools, and baseball diamonds. The federal government smoothed the way by providing low-interest, long-term mortgages, and new highways to get to and from work and shopping centers.

The developers of new malls, however, had only upscale consumers in mind. The huge shopping centers sprouting up outside big cities during the 1950s were invariably located in solidly white and middle-class areas. Typically, they were designed to mimic idealized small-town commercial streets—complete with flower beds, fountains, and ample room for strolling. One mall architect declared that "the shopping center is . . . today's village green." But these ultramodern villages were almost inaccessible to anyone who did not have an automobile. In northern New Jersey, home to the biggest malls in the nation, fewer than one-third of low-income residents owned a car.⁷

Still, millions of men and women who had grown up in crowded urban apartment houses or isolated, agrarian towns now possessed, if they kept up their payments, a tangible slab of the American dream. Tract names like "Crystal Stream," "Stonybrook," and "Villa Serena" lured city dwellers with the promise of a peaceful, bucolic retreat. By 1960, for the first time in U.S. history, a majority of American families owned the homes in which they lived.⁸ Home ownership did seem to require an endless round of maintenance and improvements. "No man who owns his house and lot can be a Communist," quipped developer William J. Levitt. "He has too much to do."⁹

The suburbs were more diverse places than their promoters' publicity suggested. White factory workers and their families joined the migration along with "organization men" who rushed to the commuter train, ties flying and briefcases in hand. Suburbanites tended to live near and socialize with others of the same class.



An aerial photo of Levittown, Pennsylvania, the largest planned community in the United States. source: Library of Congress

Status distinctions by neighborhood, lot size, and the quality of parks and schools defied the notion that every resident of a suburb belonged to the same "middle class."

However grand or humble the house, most Americans were earning enough to pay the mortgage. By 1960, the real hourly wage of manufacturing workers had doubled since the beginning of World War II. The rise in personal income, which occurred despite periodic recessions, was accompanied by a steady increase in the number of women entering the paid labor force. Women over 45 led the way, swelling the professions and the ranks of office workers. The number of married women with jobs had risen since the war. But the family "breadwinner" was still assumed to be male; fewer than 250,000 women with small children worked outside the home.

No matter their circumstances, American women were still expected to become cheerful housewives and mothers. In 1951, *Seventeen* magazine advised its young readers to be "a partner of man . . . not his rival, his enemy, or his plaything. Your partnership in most cases will produce children, and together you and the man will create a haven, a home, a way of life."¹⁰ But the growing number of women in the workforce was beginning to undermine the domestic ideal.

In 1960, CBS televised a documentary about the "trapped housewife," and the *New York Times* described a class of educated women who "feel stifled in their homes. . . . Like shut ins, they feel left out." With more children around, even new appliances didn't lessen the time spent on housework. Family "experts" counseled every wife to help her husband "rise to his capacity." In response, journalist Marya Mannes criticized the suppression of intelligent women by calling up fears of their advancing Soviet counterparts: "We have for years been wasting one of the resources on which our strength depends and which other civilizations are using to their advantage." In 1962, the Gallup Poll reported that, while most women were generally satisfied with their lives, they also wished they had waited longer to get married and were better educated. Only 10 percent said "they would do nothing differently."¹¹

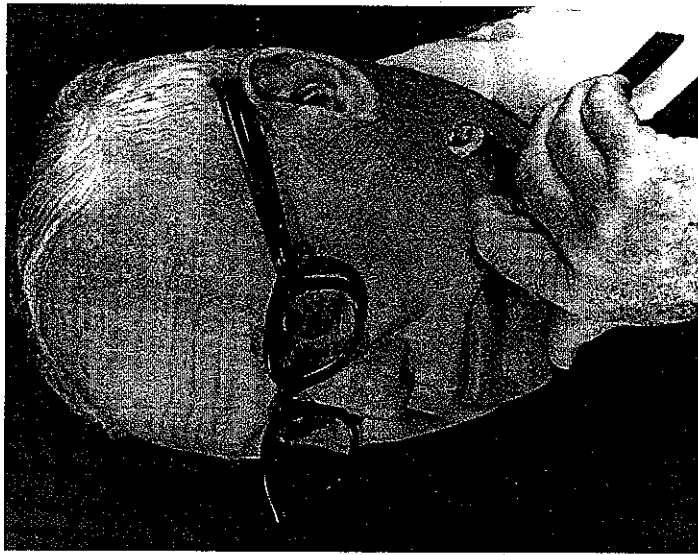
In their bedrooms, some women did enjoy a new kind of freedom. The widely read Kinsey Report on female sexuality suggested that as many as half of all American women had intercourse before marriage and reported that one-quarter of married women had had sex with someone besides their husband. By decade's end, over 80 percent of wives of childbearing age were using some form of contraception; the total was higher among women with at least a high school education. And, in 1960, the federal government allowed marketing of a birth control pill—the first reliable contraceptive that did not interfere with "natural" intercourse.¹²

The spread of prosperity encouraged most citizens to identify themselves with the "middle class." The mass media and leaders in business and government assured Americans that the days of backbreaking labor for little reward were over. Supposedly, getting to and from the job was now more arduous than anything one did while at work. In 1960, *Time* published a cover story entitled "Those Rush-Hour Blues" in which a psychiatrist stated that commuters (their maleness

assumed) actually enjoyed traffic jams and crowded trains. "The twice-daily sacrifice of the commuter to the indignities of transportation satisfied something deep within the husband's psyche," explained Dr. Jose Barchilon. "In modern society, there are few opportunities for the breadwinner to endure personal hardship in earning the family living, such as clearing the forest or shooting a bear."¹³

In reality, for millions of workers—in mines, in factories, and at construction sites—work remained both hard and dangerous. But, thanks to newly powerful labor unions, it was better compensated than ever before. The labor movement helped lift millions of wage earners into the middle class. A third of the nonagrarian labor force was unionized, and smart employers learned that the best way to stave off pesky labor organizers was to improve the pay and benefits of their own workers before unions gained a foothold. Even the barons of the mighty steel industry could not humble Big Labor. In 1959, industry spokesmen announced they would no longer permit the United Steel Workers to block job-eliminating technological changes. But the union called a strike and, after a four-month walk-out, its members prevailed.

Heavy industries like steel were still the core of the American economy. Metals and automobiles produced in the United States dominated world markets—although



George Meany, the first president of the AFL-CIO and a symbol of the power and pragmatism of organized labor. SOURCE: George Meany Memorial Archives

the West Germans were beginning to pose some serious competition. And the technological auguries were excellent. Such new inventions as digital computers and Tupperware were propelling electronics, aircraft, and chemical firms to growth rates superior to those of older companies like Ford and U.S. Steel.

The Cold War was also helping to transform the economic map. Military contracts pumped up the profit margins of such high-tech firms as Hewlett-Packard and General Electric. Opportunity shone on entrepreneurs and skilled workers alike in a vast "Gumbel" stretching from Seattle down through southern California and over to Texas. This was the civilian half of the military-industrial complex Eisenhower had warned about—and it was drawing population and federal money away from the old manufacturing hub in the East and Midwest.

And all over the country, more and more Americans were working in "white-collar" jobs. Gradually but surely, the economy was shifting away from the industrial age toward an era dominated by service and clerical employment. In 1956, for the first time, jobs of the newer kind outnumbered blue-collar ones.

The term "white collar" masked huge differences of pay, skill, and the autonomy allowed a worker on the job. A kindergarten teacher's aide had neither the comfortable salary nor the freedom to teach what and how she liked that most college professors took for granted. And sharing an employer was less significant than whether one managed investments for a huge commercial bank or, instead, handed out deposit slips or cleaned its offices. "My job doesn't have prestige," remarked bank teller Nancy Rodgers, "It's a service job . . . you are there to serve them. They are not there to serve you."¹⁴

In any economy, however successful, there are losers as well as winners. For a sizable minority of citizens, the American dream was more a wish than a reality. State university branches multiplied, as the number of college students increased by 1960 to 3.6 million, more than double the number 20 years before. Yet less than half the adults in the United States were high school graduates.

Lack of schooling did not disqualify one from getting a job in a factory or warehouse, but the future clearly belonged to the educated. Already, a man who had graduated from college earned about three times more than his counterpart who had dropped out at the lower grades. Where union pressure was absent, wages could be abysmally low. In 1960 farm workers earned, on average, just \$1,038 a year.¹⁵ In the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi Delta, many poor residents owned a television and a used car or truck—but lacked an indoor toilet and a year-round job.

The central cities many Levittowners had quit were already on the road to despair. African Americans who moved to the metropolises of the North seeking jobs and racial tolerance often found neither. Black unemployment stubbornly tallied nearly double the rate for whites. Following World War II, black migrants filled up old industrial cities like Detroit and Chicago that were steadily losing factory jobs to the suburbs. Few white settlers on the crabgrass frontier welcomed blacks as prospective neighbors. In 1960, not one of 82,000 Long Island Levittowners was an African American—even though New York State had passed a civil rights law in the mid-1940s.

Out West, Mexican Americans—the nation's second largest minority—were struggling to achieve a modicum of the economic fruits that most whites enjoyed. Less than one-fifth of Mexican-American adults were high school graduates (a lower number than for blacks), and most held down menial jobs—in the cities and the fields. During World War II, to replace citizens drafted into the military, the federal government had allowed U.S. farmers to import workers from Mexico, dubbed *braceros* (from the Spanish word for "arms"). The end of the war alleviated the labor shortage, but the political clout of agribusiness kept the *bracero* program going—and it severely hampered the ability of native-born farmworkers to better their lot.

These problems remained all but invisible in the business and political centers of the East. Outside the Southwest, most Americans regarded themselves as living in a society with only two races—white and black. The federal census did not even consider Mexican Americans a separate group.

A growing chorus of intellectuals blasted the hypocrisies of the era. In their eyes, America had become a "mass society" that had lost its aesthetic and moral bearings. Critic Lewis Mumford condemned suburbia, too broadly, as "a treeless, communal waste, inhabited by people in the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless pre-fabricated foods from the same freezers." Sociologist C. Wright Mills indicted a "power elite" for fostering a system of "organized irresponsibility" in which "the standard of living dominates the style of life."¹⁶ Mills joined with radical economists Paul Sweezy and Seymour Melman in arguing that "a permanent war economy" geared to fighting the Cold War was imperiling democracy even as it promoted growth. But such criticisms did not engage most Americans, for whom private life was all consuming.

Nor did they convince the most powerful politicians in the land. The primary business of government, Democratic and Republican leaders agreed, was to keep the economy growing and the military strong. Conservatives and liberals in both parties squabbled over details: whether, for instance, to fund a new wing of B-52 bombers or more science programs in the public schools. But rarely did any senator question the wisdom of policing the world (as had Robert Taft, the GOP's leading conservative, in the late '40s).

The previous generation of lawmakers had fought bitterly over the social programs of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and Harry Truman's Fair Deal. But the first Republican president since Herbert Hoover accepted a limited welfare state as the new status quo. Dwight Eisenhower wrote from the White House to his conservative brother Edgar, "Should any political party attempt to abolish social security and eliminate labor laws and farm programs, you would not hear of that party again in our political history."¹⁷

By the end of the decade, FDR's party was making something of a comeback. In the 1958 congressional election, Democrats gained their biggest margins since the beginning of World War II. Amid the recession, Republicans who ran against union power went down to defeat in the populous states of Ohio and California.

Liberals in Congress and in such advocacy groups as Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) got busy drafting plans for higher minimum wages, government health insurance for the elderly, and other extensions of the New Deal. Meanwhile, the Supreme Court—headed, ironically, by a chief justice (Earl Warren), whom Eisenhower had appointed—was aggressively expanding the definition of individual and group “rights” to favor demonstrators against racial inequality and persons convicted on the basis of evidence gathered illegally. A public which, according to polls, admired Eleanor Roosevelt more than any woman in the world seemed amenable to another wave of governmental activism.

But despite the Democrats’ surge, the party remained an uneasy coalition of the urban, pro-union North and the small-town, low-wage South. Big city machines, originally established by Irish Catholics, continued to wield a measure of power in the two largest cities—New York City and Chicago—as well as in Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Buffalo. Below the Mason-Dixon line, most whites still voted against the ghost of Abraham Lincoln—although in 1956, Eisenhower, who assured southerners he wanted “to make haste slowly” on civil rights, did win the electoral votes of five former Confederate states.¹⁸ In 1960, the GOP could count only seven congressmen from the South—and virtually no state or county officials. American women had won the vote in 1920 but rarely did they figure significantly as candidates or campaign managers.

Republicans were still the party of Main Street and Wall Street—of American business, large and small, and of voters who cherished the rights of private property and were leery of “big government.” Party allegiance tended to follow class lines. The wealthiest stratum of Americans voted heavily for the GOP, as did most voters with college degrees and professional occupations. Blue-collar workers, particularly those who harbored bitter memories of the Great Depression, favored the Democrats by a 4-1 margin. The legacy of old battles over restricting immigration and instituting Prohibition also played a part. Outside the white South, native-born Protestants tilted toward the Republicans, while Catholics and Jews—who were closer to their foreign-born roots—usually favored the Democrats.

The result of these alignments was a legislative system unfriendly to serious change—whether in a liberal or conservative direction. Key posts in Congress were held by southern or border state Democrats who had accrued decades of seniority: the Speaker of the House, the majority leader of the Senate, and the chairmen of committees with power over tax and appropriations bills. Howard Smith of Virginia, who had first been elected to Congress in 1930, headed the mighty Rules Committee. Smith was able to block most proposals he disapproved from even coming to the House floor. And he despised civil rights bills. Like all but a handful of southern congressmen, Smith represented a district in which few blacks were allowed to vote—and he intended to keep it that way.

Not every southerner was so uncompromising. Both House Speaker Sam Rayburn and Senate majority leader Lyndon Johnson were shrewd Texas moderates who retained their power by balancing demands from different wings of their party. But most southern Democrats and nearly all Republicans routinely united

to defeat new programs to aid big cities, racial minorities, and the poor. The mechanisms of government were purring along nicely, so why disturb them? As even liberal McGeorge Bundy, then a Harvard dean (and soon to become a federal policymaker), intoned, “If American politics have a predilection for the center, it is a Good Thing.”¹⁹

If mainstream politics in the 1950s lacked fire and daring, the same could not be said of popular culture. The postwar absorption with leisure generated a feverish search for new ways to spend all that free time and disposable income. In the past, Americans had fought major battles over who would control the workplace and how to distribute the fruits of their labor. Mass movements of small farmers and wage earners had pressured the powerful to recognize unions, subsidize crop prices, and establish Social Security and a minimum wage. Cultural differences motivated some earlier mass movements, the prohibitionists being a prime example. But after World War II, public conflicts often turned on matters of cultural taste—in music, in styles of dress and hair, slang, drugs, and sexual behavior.

Popular music—especially rock and roll and the rhythm and blues from which it sprang—became a major arena of generational strife. The young people who listened to, danced to, and played rock and rhythm and blues were implicitly rejecting the notion that creativity obeyed a color line. Leaping over racial barriers were such black artists as Willie Mae (Big Mama) Thornton and Chuck Berry, the Mexican-American singer Richie Valens (born Valenzuela), the Greek-American bandleader Johnny Otis (who identified himself as black), the white Southern Baptist Elvis Presley, and the Jewish-American songwriters Mike Stoller, Jerry Lieber, and Carole King. Lieber and Stoller wrote “Hound Dog” for Big Mama Thornton, who made it a hit with black audiences in 1954 before Elvis covered it in 1956—and sold millions of copies.

Established record companies tried to resist the onslaught. National music awards usually went to more innocuous recordings, despite the higher sales of rock. In 1960 Percy Faith’s “Theme from *A Summer Place*,” a string-filled waltz, won the Grammy for best song of the year—beating out Roy Orbison’s “Only the Lonely,” the Drifters’ “Save the Last Dance for Me,” “Stay” by Maurice Williams and the Zodiacs, and Chubby Checker’s “The Twist.” Faith’s music would soon be heard mainly in elevators; while the other songs became rock classics and are still played by disc jockeys throughout the world.

Satire also appealed to growing numbers of adolescents. *Mad* magazine published clever putdowns of advertisements, Hollywood movies, television shows, suburban culture, and the military. Edited by Harvey Kurtzman (who had once drawn cartoons for the Communist *Daily Worker*), *Mad* ridiculed nearly everything that established middlebrow magazines like *Life* and *Reader’s Digest* took for granted—particularly the mood of self-satisfaction. “What, Me Worry?” asked Alfred E. Neuman, the gap-toothed idiot with oversized ears and freckles whose comic image beamed from every issue of *Mad*. High school readers also snapped up novels about alienated youth. One of the most compelling was *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), J. D. Salinger’s tale about a teenager named Holden Caulfield who

drops out of his prep school to wander dyspeptically around New York City. "Phonies," Caulfield called the adults who plagued his unhappy, if materially privileged, life.

Even World War II was becoming grist for farce. Joseph Heller's bestselling 1961 novel, *Catch-22*, signaled a new eagerness to question the logic of established authority. The protagonist, named Yossarian, is an American bombardier in Europe who wants to be grounded after having risked his life flying dozens of missions over enemy territory. But, according to military regulations, he can opt out of the war only if he is crazy. So Yossarian goes to his unit's medical officer, Doc Daneeka, asking to be grounded on that basis.

But the rules don't permit it. "You mean there's a catch?" Yossarian asks:

"Sure there's a catch," Doc Daneeka replied. "Catch-22. Anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn't really crazy. . . . Yossarian was moved very deeply by the absolute simplicity of this clause of Catch-22, and let out a respectful whistle.

"That's some catch, that Catch-22," he observed.

"It's the best there is," Doc Daneeka agreed.²⁰

Some young whites were attracted to a more extravagant style of alienation. They sought refuge among and enlightenment from America's most dispossessed and despised groups—tramps, migrant laborers, black criminals—as well as jazz musicians. In 1957, the novelist Norman Mailer published a controversial essay, "The White Negro," in which he celebrated hipsters of his own race who "drifted out at night looking for action with a black man's code to fit their facts." Mailer romanticized black men who "lived in the enormous present . . . relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body." He predicted that "a time of violence, new hysteria, confusion and rebellion" would soon come along to "replace the time of conformity."²¹

Cultural innovation is usually the province of the young. But prime-time television, perhaps the most significant cultural force in the 1950s, was an infatuation that bridged the generations. During that decade, TV developed from a curiosity into a staple of the American home. By the end of the '50s, close to 90 percent of families owned at least one set, and the average person watched about five hours a day. In 1960, the most popular shows were westerns starring male characters who were strong, violent, and just (*Guns, Smoke and Have Gun, Will Travel* headed the list) and a crime show about the 1920s whose heroes were latter-day gunslingers in suits (*The Untouchables*). Dominating the medium were the three national networks—CBS, NBC, and ABC—whose evening offerings provided the only entertainment experience most Americans had in common.

Not all was right in TV land, however. In 1959, Charles Van Doren, a handsome young English professor who had thrilled viewers with his victories on the quiz show *Twenty-One*, admitted to Congress that the program had been fixed. The show's producer had given Van Doren the answers in advance. President Eisenhower remarked that the deception was "a terrible thing to do to the American people," revealing how strong a grip the relatively new medium had over the

nation.²² The exposé, that same year, of disc jockeys who accepted "payola" (bribes) from record companies for playing their records on the air was, by comparison, a minor matter. Television was admired as clean family entertainment that promoted "togetherness." Rock and roll had an outlaw reputation; one almost expected it to be tarred with corruption.

Sports too had an occasional scandal—college basketball players shaving points or boxers throwing fights. But, in 1960, the world of gifted athletes and their fans was still conducted on a rather simple scale and did not yield large profits. College football got more attention than the grittier professional variety; major league baseball had recently placed its first two teams on the West Coast; and there were a scant eight teams in the National Basketball Association, and only six in the National Hockey League. Although baseball was the most popular spectator sport, the average major league player earned only about twice the salary of a skilled union worker—and seldom, if ever, was asked to endorse a product.

The sports world was more racially integrated than American neighborhoods and schools, yet it too often mirrored the attitudes of the larger society. During the 1960 Cotton Bowl game, a fight broke out after a player on the all-white Texas team called one of his Syracuse opponents "a big black dirty nigger." Syracuse won the game and, with it, the national championship. Magazine headlines about "A Brawling Battle of the Hard-Noses" implied that racist taunts were just part of a manly game.²³

For solace from the imperfections of the secular world, millions of Americans turned to organized religion. A majority of Americans were affiliated with a church or synagogue—the highest total ever. The popular evangelist Billy Graham staged televised revivals in major cities where he preached a fusion between godliness and Americanism. In best-selling books, the Reverend Norman Vincent Peale counseled that "positive thinking" could release the potential for spiritual joy and worldly success that lay inside every Christian soul. Not all Roman Catholics accepted the conservative views of the church hierarchy, but most basked in a new legitimacy secured by the stalwart anticommunism of their bishops and their own rising fortunes. It even seemed possible that a Catholic could be elected president. For their part, many Jews, now relocated to prosperous suburbs, turned to Conservative and Reform synagogues to find a substitute for the vigorous community their parents had found either in the Orthodox faith or in the socialist left. In the "return to God," one could glimpse elements of both the pride and the anxiety emblematic of the United States at the dawn of the '60s.

No area of national life was more highly charged than the relationship between black and white Americans. Racial segregation was still firmly established in much of the United States in 1960. Across the South, thousands of public schools had closed down rather than allow black children to sit alongside whites.

Official racism had many faces—all of them immoral, some also ludicrous and petty. South of New Orleans, a local political boss named Leander Perez told a rally of 5,000 people that desegregation was a conspiracy by "zionist Jews" and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

"Don't wait for your daughter to be raped by these Congolese," warned Perez. "Do something about it now." The next day, a race riot broke out. The city fathers of Montgomery, Alabama, sold off the animals at their municipal zoo rather than obey a court order to allow black people to enjoy them. Meanwhile, in the nation's capital, the *Washington Post* routinely printed want ads that specified, "Stenographer—White, age 20 to 30 . . ." and "Short-order cook, white, fast, exper."²⁴

The movement that would lift this burden—and catalyze many other jolts to American culture and politics—was gathering force in black churches, schools, and homes. Its funds were meager, and it had, as yet, little political influence. But the sounds of hope, preached in an idiom both militant and loving, were swelling up from picket lines outside Woolworth stores in New York City, in the small towns of the Mississippi Delta, and from a Masonic temple in Richmond, Virginia—former capital of the Confederacy.

On New Year's Day, 1960, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. came to Richmond to speak to a mass rally against the closing of the public schools. "It is an unstoppable movement," the thirty-year-old King informed segregationists. "We will wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and in the process we will win your hearts. . . . Nothing is more sublime than suffering and sacrifice for a great cause."²⁵ Before that movement—and King's own life—had run their course, the self-satisfied tones of Dwight Eisenhower's last State of the Union address would seem a murmur of lost illusions. The greatest social upheaval in America since the Civil War was about to begin.

CHAPTER 2

Black Ordeal, Black Freedom

I've got the light of Freedom, Lord,
And I'm going to let it shine,
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!

—TRADITIONAL SPIRITUAL

One morning in July of 1944, a civilian bus driver at Fort Hood, Texas, ordered a black army lieutenant to "get to the back of the bus where the colored people belong." The lieutenant refused, arguing that the military had recently ordered its buses desegregated. MPs came and took him into custody. Four weeks later, the black officer went on trial for insubordination. If convicted by the court martial, he faced a dishonorable discharge—which would have crippled his job opportunities for the rest of his life.

The lieutenant's name was Jackie Robinson. Three years later, Robinson would don the uniform of the Brooklyn Dodgers to become the first African-American in the twentieth century to play major league baseball.

Robinson's bold defiance of racial custom, his appeal to federal authority, and his acquittal by that military court in 1944 all indicated that significant changes were in spin. World War II was a watershed in African-American history, raising the hopes of people who, with their children, would build the massive black freedom movement of the 1960s.

The urgent need for soldiers to fight abroad and for wage-earners to forge an "arsenal of democracy" at home convinced a flood of African Americans to leave the South. Mechanized cotton pickers shrunk the need for agrarian labor just as the lure of good jobs in war industries sapped the will to stay in the fields. Metropolis from Los Angeles to New York filled up with dark-skinned residents—and, after the war, the flow persisted. Between 1940 and 1960, 4.5 million black men and women migrated out of Dixie; African Americans were fast becoming an urban people.

This second great migration (the first occurred during and just after World War I) helped pry open some long-padlocked doors. Before the war, all but a few blacks were excluded from access to good "white" jobs and the best educational institutions. After the war, increasing numbers of blacks finished high school and gained entrance to historically white colleges; the number of African Americans in the skilled trades and in such professions as medicine and administration about . . .