The ‘50s and ‘60s: Decades of Prosperity and Protest

Historians tend to portray the 1950s as a decade of prosperity, conformity, and consensus, and the 1960s as a decade of turbulence, protest, and disillusionment. These stereotypes are largely true, though, as with everything in life, there are exceptions to this perspective. Therefore, the historians’ portrayal of the 1950s and 1960s is accurate for the majority of Americans, though some groups were clearly exceptions.

The 1950s were characterized as a prosperous and conformist decade for many reasons. The first and most widespread of these reasons was the development of the suburbs. As masses of Southern blacks migrated northward to the big cities, more rich and middle-class families left to live in the suburbs to escape the crime, redlining, and blockbusting of the cities. This mass migration later became known as the “white flight” (Document A). The white families that moved into the suburbs were the perfect picture of conformity—living in row upon row of identical “Levittown” houses, with little individuality or distinction. Furthermore, American families of the time often took the form of the “nuclear family” with two parents, two children, and often a pet like a dog or cat. This new “middle class” earned between $3,000 and $10,000 a year and included 60 percent of the American people by the mid-1950s. Fortune magazine described Americans as “a great mass...buy[ing] the same things—the same staples, the same appliances, the same cars, the same furniture, and much the same recreation” (Document C). The new “mass market” that developed in 1950s society was caused by two central reasons.

The first reason that this “mass market” developed was the spread of television. Television had helped to create a “popular culture” that millions of Americans tuned into regularly. By the end of 1950, ninety percent of Americans owned a television, and nearly all owned a radio. Television and radio acted as tools for marketers to dictate the values of American society in order help sell their products. By the mid-1950s marketers spent $10 billion annually to advertise their goods or services on television. Television caused Americans to adopt an image of the “ideal” Americans; in doing so many Americans began to succumb to societal demands. Notably, suburban shopping malls began to replace downtown shops during the 1950s. Middle class white Americans became more sheltered in their sheltered suburban neighborhoods and did not see the poor blacks living in the cities. Isolated from others, many middle class Americans found no reason to dissent and sought to merely enjoy the prosperity of the decade with
mind-numbing conformity.

The second cause of the development of the new “mass market” in 1950s society was the escalation of the Cold War. The Cold War had isolated and demonized Soviets in American society. The political witch-hunt which took place under the lead of Senator McCarthy jailed hundreds of suspected Communist “enemies” for merely exercising their First Amendment rights to freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Americans became afraid of doing anything that might make them the targets of Federal investigation by organizations like the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Newspaper editors and book authors grew afraid of publishing articles critical of the government in fear that they may might be accused of being Communist sympathizers and put in jail. A famous political cartoon from the 1950s shows Senator McCarthy extinguishing the Torch of Liberty (Document B). The fear of foreign ideas and values created by the McCarthyism scare caused a resurgence in American Conservatism during the 1950s. The government encouraged conformity and political consensus followed.

However, not all enjoyed the political and social prosperity of the 1950s. Two thirds of Black American citizens still lived in the South where they continued to suffer the harsh realities of life in a segregated society. Harsh Jim Crow laws continued to govern all aspects of their existence and keep them economically inferior and politically powerless. However, conditions were improved with the landmark decision Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas in 1954 which ruled that segregation in the public schools as “inherently unequal” and thus unconstitutional. This decision was largely accepted throughout the North and even in the Border States, but states in the Deep South organized “massive resistance” to the decision. Southern Senators and Congressmen signed the “Declaration of Constitutional Principles” which pledged unyielding resistance to desegregation. Conflict arose when the governor of Arkansas, Orval Faubus, mobilized the National Guard to prevent nine Black girls from enrolling in a Little Rock High School. Faced with a direct challenge to Federal authority, President Eisenhower was forced to send troops to escort the children to their classes (Document E). It is clear that while the social and political conditions may have been ideal for the majority of middle-class Americans, conflicts and tensions were ever-present for the underprivileged American.

The ‘60s were different from the ‘50s in many important ways. The worsening conditions in the cities, feminism, and the Vietnam War caused the social and political atmosphere to become turbulent and violent. Protests and war riots become commonplace; influential leaders like Malcolm X encouraged bloody protest; and women become increasingly discontent with their futile existences as homemakers. The political and social grievances, it seemed, had caused Americans to adopt a “counter culture” that encouraged a negative view of authority during the 1960s.
The ’60s saw even worse conditions in the cities than the previous decade. As whites continued to leave the cities and move to suburbs the poor city conditions only worsened. With less revenue in taxes, cities fell into disrepair, crime and drug use increased, and cities become “black, brown, and broke.” Blacks began to realize that the pacifist philosophy encouraged by leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. was leading nowhere; conditions remained the same. Radical new leaders like Malcolm X encouraged “Black Power”, also known as Black Supremacy. X believed that “revolution is bloody, revolution is hostile, revolution knows no compromise, revolution overturns and destroys everything that gets in its way...you don’t do any swinging, you’re too busy swinging” (Document F). This violent, confrontational approach to dealing with social problems encouraged political upheaval and unrest. Law enforcement did not ease the situation either as demonstrated by the riot in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963 where attack dogs and fire hoses were turned against protestors, many of whom were in their early teens or younger. Even pacifist Martin Luther King, Jr. was arrested and jailed during the ensuing protests. While in jail, he changed philosophies and joined X in advocating civil disobedience against the law. Hundreds of demonstrations took place across the country during the 1960s from the East coast to the West; the country was truly coursing with the need to protest and be heard. The biggest and most important protest during the 1960s was the March on Washington where more than a quarter million people participated. Protesters demanded passage of better civil rights legislation, the elimination of racial segregation in public schools, and protection for demonstrators against police brutality. However, there were still other political problems that troubled the country during the ’60s.

The Vietnam War was a large point of contention in the minds of Americans during the 1960s. Unsure of the war’s purpose and disillusioned at the enormous human cost, Americans everywhere decried their opposition to the war. President Lyndon Johnson desperately tried to convince the nation that the Vietnam War would “restore world order” and “defend its [Vietnam’s] independence” (Document H). However, many Americans believed that the U.S. should leave Vietnam. The controversy over the war continued to boil because American politicians continued to support the war despite widespread American resentment for the war. Eventually, Nixon would respond to Americans’ wishes through “Vietnamization” of the war. However, there were also social issues that troubled Americans during the stormy sixties.

The fight for women’s rights raged on throughout the ’60s. Women began to feel dissatisfied with the simple lives they currently lived and they wanted change (Document G). Unable to obtain high-paying jobs and equal rights in the workplace, women were living as “second-class citizens” in a country where everybody is supposed to be equal under the law. The struggle for equal political rights was also accompanied by a radical social revolution. The “sexual revolution” was started when the birth control
pill was introduced in the early 1960s. The pill made it easier to avoid pregnancies; thus, women could become more sexually “free.” Gays and lesbians also joined the “sexual revolution” by proudly parading in New York City in 1970. The unprecedented openness of the 1960s was yet another catalyst for controversy, turbulence, protest, and disillusionment in the 60s.

It is clear that the 50s and 60s differ from each other; the 1950s were more conservative than the 1960s; the 1960s were more turbulent and prone to protests than the 1950s. However, there were some clear exceptions to these rules in the 1950s. The important differences between the decades are what make each decade a special chapter in the grand American story.