

CHAPTER 27 Section 2 (pages 847–855)

The American Dream in the Fifties

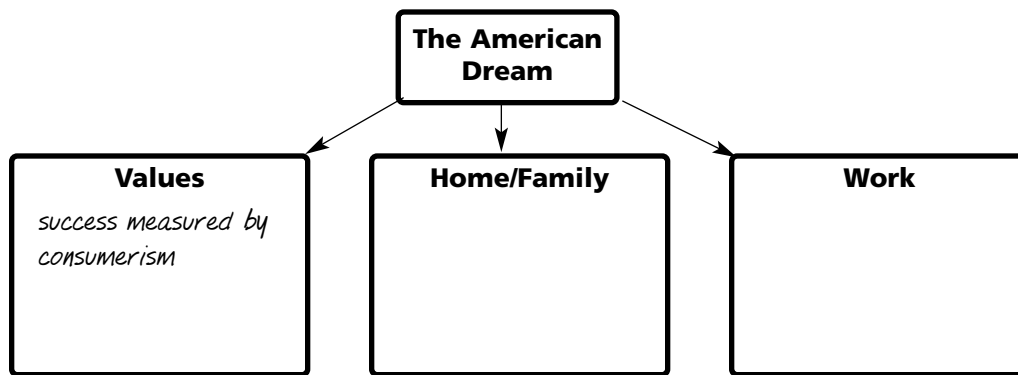
BEFORE YOU READ

In the last section, you read about the postwar boom in the United States.

In this section, you will read how many Americans achieved their dreams of material comfort and prosperity, but some found the cost of conformity too high.

AS YOU READ

Take notes on the chart below. Fill it in with examples of specific goals that characterized the American Dream for suburbanites of the 1950s.



TERMS AND NAMES

conglomerate Major corporation that owns smaller companies in unrelated industries

franchise Company that offers similar products or services in many locations

baby boom Soaring birthrate from 1946 to 1964

Dr. Jonas Salk Developer of a vaccine to prevent polio

consumerism Excessive concern with buying material goods

planned obsolescence Purposely making products to become outdated or wear out quickly

The Organization and the Organization Man (pages 847–849)

What changes took place in the American workplace in the 1950s?

The economy grew rapidly in the 1950s. By 1956, more Americans were *white-collar* workers in offices than were in *blue-collar* factory jobs. White-collar workers were paid better. They usually worked in service industries, such as sales and communications.

Businesses also expanded. They formed **conglomerates**, or major corporations that own smaller companies in unrelated industries. Other businesses expanded by franchising. A **franchise** is a company that offers similar products or services in many locations, such as fast-food restaurants.

These large companies offered well-paying, secure jobs to certain kinds of workers. These workers were conformists, or team players. They were “company people” who would fit in and not rock the boat. Businesses rewarded loyalty rather than creativity. They promoted a sameness, or standardization, of people as well as products. Books such as *The Organization Man* and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* criticized this conformity.

1. What changes occurred in the American work force and workplace in the 1950s?

The Suburban Lifestyle (pages 849–851)

What was life like in the 1950s?

Many Americans enjoyed the benefits of the booming economy. Many worked in cities but lived in suburbs. They had the American dream of a single-family home, good schools, and a safe neighborhood with people just like themselves.

There was an increase in births called the **baby boom**. It was caused by the reuniting of families after the war and growing prosperity. Medical advances also wiped out childhood diseases. **Dr. Jonas Salk** developed a vaccine to prevent polio. Polio had killed or crippled 58,000 children a year.

The baby boom created a need for more schools and products for children. Suburban family life revolved around children. Many parents depended on advice from a popular baby-care book by Dr. Benjamin Spock. He said it was important that mothers stay at home with their children. The role of homemaker and mother was also glorified in the media. But many women felt alone and bored at home.

By 1960, 40 percent of mothers worked outside the home. But their career opportunities usually were limited to “women’s fields.” These included secretarial work, nursing, and teaching. Even if women did the same work as men, they were paid less.

Americans had more *leisure* time. They spent time and money on leisure activities, such as sports. They also watched sports on television and read books and magazines. Youth activities, such as Scouts and Little League, became popular too.

2. What was life like in the suburbs in the 1950s?

The Automobile Culture

(pages 852–853)

Why were cars so important?

Easy credit for buying cars and cheap gasoline led to a boom in automobile ownership. In the 1950s, the number of American cars on the road grew from 40 to 60 million.

A car was a necessity in the suburbs. There was no public transportation. People needed to drive to their jobs in the cities. They also had to drive to

shop and do errands. Therefore, more and better roads were also needed. In 1956, the United States began building a nationwide highway network. In turn, these roads allowed long-distance trucking. This led to a decline in the railroads.

Americans loved to drive. They went to drive-in restaurants and movies. They drove long distances on vacation. Motels and shopping malls were built to serve them. These new industries were good for the economy. But the increase in driving also caused problems. These included stressful traffic jams and air pollution. Many white people left the cities. Jobs and industries followed. This left mostly poor people in crowded inner cities.

3. How did cars change American life?

Consumerism Unbound (pages 854–855)

Why did Americans turn to consumerism in the 1950s?

By the mid-1950s, nearly 60 percent of Americans were in the *middle class*. They had the money to buy more and more products. They measured success by their **consumerism**, or the amount of material goods they bought.

American business flooded stores with new products. Consumers had money to spend and leisure time. They bought household appliances like washing machines, dryers, and dishwashers, and recreational items such as television sets, barbecue grills, and swimming pools.

Manufacturers also tried a new marketing strategy called **planned obsolescence**. They purposefully made products to become outdated or to wear out quickly. Americans began to throw away items in order to buy “new models.” Easy credit, including the introduction of credit cards, encouraged people to buy. Private debt grew.

The 1950s were “the advertising age.” Ads were everywhere—even on the new medium of television. They tried to persuade Americans to buy things they didn’t need. They appealed to people’s desire for status and for a sense of belonging.

4. How was consumerism encouraged in the 1950s?
