**Urban History Post War-Great Society**

The decade and a half immediately following the end of World War II was one in which middle- and working- class Americans hoped for a better life than the one they lived before the war. These hopes were tainted by fears of economic hardship, as many who experienced the Great Depression feared a return to economic decline. Others clamored for the opportunity to spend the savings they had accumulated through long hours on the job during the war when consumer goods were rarely available.

African Americans who had served in the armed forces and worked in the defense industry did not wish to return to “normal.” Instead, they wanted the same rights and opportunities that other Americans had. Still other citizens were less concerned with the economy or civil rights; instead, they looked with suspicion at the Soviet presence in Eastern Europe. What would happen now that the United States and the Soviet Union were no longer allies, and the other nations that had long helped maintain a balance of power were left seriously damaged by the war? Harry Truman, president for less than a year when the war ended, was charged with addressing all of these concerns and giving the American people a “fair deal.”

**The GI Bill of Rights**

Well before the end of the war, Congress had passed one of the most significant and far-reaching pieces of legislation to ease veterans’ transition into civilian life: the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, also known as the **GI Bill.** Every honorably discharged veteran who had seen active duty, but not necessarily combat, was eligible to receive a year’s worth of unemployment compensation. This provision not only calmed veterans’ fears regarding their ability to support themselves, but it also prevented large numbers of men—as well as some women—from suddenly entering a job market that did not have enough positions for them. Another way that the GI Bill averted a glut in the labor market was by giving returning veterans the opportunity to pursue an education; it paid for tuition at a college or vocational school, and gave them a stipend to live on while they completed their studies.

The result was a dramatic increase in the number of students—especially male ones—enrolled in American colleges and universities. In 1940, only 5.5 percent of American men had a college degree. By 1950, that percentage had increased to 7.3 percent, as more than two million servicemen took advantage of the benefits offered by the GI Bill to complete college. The numbers continued to grow throughout the 1950s. Upon graduation, these men were prepared for skilled blue-collar or white-collar jobs that paved the way for many to enter the middle class. The creation of a well-educated, skilled labor force helped the U.S. economy as well. Other benefits offered by the GI Bill included low-interest loans to purchase homes or start small businesses.

However, not all veterans were able to take advantage of the GI Bill. African American veterans could use their educational benefits only to attend schools that accepted Black students. The approximately nine thousand servicemen and women who were dishonorably discharged because they were gay or lesbian were ineligible for GI Bill benefits. Benefits for some Mexican American veterans, mainly in Texas, were also denied or delayed.

While most veterans received assistance to help in their adjustment to postwar life, others returned home to an uncertain future without the promise of government aid to help them resume their prewar lives. Japanese Americans from the West Coast who had been interned during the war also confronted the task of rebuilding their lives. In December 1944, Franklin Roosevelt had declared an end to the forced relocation of Japanese Americans, and as of January 1945, they were free to return to their homes. In many areas, however, neighbors clung to their prejudices and denounced those of Japanese descent as disloyal and dangerous. These feelings had been worsened by wartime propaganda, which often featured horrific accounts of Japanese mistreatment of prisoners, and by the statements of military officers to the effect that the Japanese were inherently savage. Facing such animosity, many Japanese American families chose to move elsewhere. Those who did return often found that in their absence, “friends” and neighbors had sold possessions that had been left with them for safekeeping. Many homes had been vandalized and farms destroyed. When Japanese Americans reopened their businesses, former customers sometimes boycotted them.

**SUBURBANIZATION**

Even as many Americans remained mired in poverty, many others with limited economic opportunities, like African Americans or union workers, were better off financially in the 1950s and rose into the ranks of the middle class. Wishing to build the secure life that the Great Depression had deprived their parents of, young men and women married in record numbers and purchased homes where they could start families of their own. In 1940, the rate of homeownership in the United States was 43.6 percent. By 1960, it was almost 62 percent. Many of these newly purchased homes had been built in the new suburban areas that began to encircle American cities after the war. Although middle-class families had begun to move to the suburbs beginning in the nineteenth century, suburban growth accelerated rapidly after World War II.

Several factors contributed to this development. During World War II, the United States had suffered from a housing shortage, especially in cities with shipyards or large defense plants. Now that the war was over, real estate developers and contractors rushed to alleviate the scarcity. Unused land on the fringes of American cities provided the perfect place for new housing, which attracted not only the middle class, which had long sought homes outside the crowded cities, but also blue-collar workers who took advantage of the low-interest mortgages offered by the GI Bill.

An additional factor was the use of prefabricated construction techniques pioneered during World War II, which allowed houses complete with plumbing, electrical wiring, and appliances to be built and painted in a day. Employing these methods, developers built acres of inexpensive tract housing throughout the country. One of the first developers to take advantage of this method was William Levitt, who purchased farmland in Nassau County, Long Island, in 1947 and built thousands of prefabricated houses. The new community was named **Levittown**.

Levitt’s houses cost only $8,000 and could be bought with little or no down payment. The first day they were offered for sale, more than one thousand were purchased. Levitt went on to build similar developments, also called Levittown, in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. As developers around the country rushed to emulate him, the name Levittown became synonymous with suburban tract housing, in which entire neighborhoods were built to either a single plan or a mere handful of designs. The houses were so similar that workers told of coming home late at night and walking into the wrong one. Levittown homes were similar in other ways as well; most were owned by White families. Levitt used restrictive language in his agreements with potential homeowners to ensure that only White people would live in his communities.

In the decade between 1950 and 1960, the suburbs grew by 46 percent. The transition from urban to suburban life exerted profound effects on both the economy and society. For example, fifteen of the largest U.S. cities saw their tax bases shrink significantly in the postwar period, and the apportionment of seats in the House of Representatives shifted to the suburbs and away from urban areas.

The development of the suburbs also increased reliance on the automobile for transportation. Suburban men drove to work in nearby cities or, when possible, were driven to commuter rail stations by their wives. In the early years of suburban development, before schools, parks, and supermarkets were built, access to an automobile was crucial, and the pressure on families to purchase a second one was strong. As families rushed to purchase them, the annual production of passenger cars leaped from 2.2 million to 8 million between 1946 and 1955, and by 1960, about 20 percent of suburban families owned two cars. The growing number of cars on the road changed consumption patterns, and drive-in and drive-through convenience stores, restaurants, and movie theaters began to dot the landscape. The first McDonalds opened in San Bernardino, California, in 1954 to cater to drivers in a hurry.

As drivers jammed highways and small streets in record numbers, cities and states rushed to build additional roadways and ease congestion. To help finance these massive construction efforts, states began taxing gasoline, and the federal government provided hundreds of thousands of dollars for the construction of the

interstate highway system. The resulting construction projects, designed to make it easier for suburbanites to commute to and from cities, often destroyed urban working-class neighborhoods. Increased funding for highway construction also left less money for public transportation, making it impossible for those who could not afford automobiles to live in the suburbs.

In the late 1940s, a network of newly constructed highways connected suburban Long Island with Manhattan. The nation’s new road network also served a military purpose; interstate highways made it easier to deploy troops in the event of a national emergency.

Following World War II, the majority of White Americans were members of the middle class, based on such criteria as education, income, and home ownership. Even most blue-collar families could afford such elements of a middle-class lifestyle as new cars, suburban homes, and regular vacations. Most African Americans, however, were not members of the middle class. In 1950, the median income for White families was $20,656, whereas for Black families it was $11,203. By 1960, when the average White family earned $28,485 a year, Black people still lagged behind at $15,786; nevertheless, this represented a more than 40 percent increase in African American income in the space of a decade.

While working-class men found jobs in factories and on construction crews, those in the middle class often worked for corporations that, as a result of government spending, had grown substantially during World War II and were still getting larger. Such corporations, far too large to allow managers to form personal relationships with all of their subordinates, valued conformity to company rules and standards above all else.

Conformity was still the watchword of suburban life: Many neighborhoods had rules mandating what types of clotheslines could be used and prohibited residents from parking their cars on the street. Above all, conforming to societal norms meant marrying young and having children. In the post-World War II period, marriage rates rose; the average age at first marriage dropped to twenty-three for men and twenty for women.

Between 1946 and 1964, married couples also gave birth to the largest generation in U.S. history to date; this **baby boom** resulted in the cohort known as the baby boomers. Conformity also required that the wives of both working- and middle-class men stay home and raise children instead of working for wages outside the home. Most conformed to this norm, at least while their children were young. Nevertheless, 40 percent of women with young children and half of women with older children sought at least part-time employment. They did so partly out of necessity and partly to pay for the new elements of “the good life”—second cars, vacations, and college education for their children.

The children born during the baby boom were members of a more privileged generation than their parents had been. Entire industries sprang up to cater to their need for clothing, toys, games, books, and breakfast cereals. For the first time in U.S. history, attending high school was an experience shared by the majority, regardless of race or region. As the baby boomers grew into adolescence, marketers realized that they not only controlled large amounts of disposable income earned at part-time jobs, but they exerted a great deal of influence over their parents’ purchases as well. Madison Avenue began to appeal to teenage interests. Boys yearned for cars, and girls of all ethnicities wanted boyfriends who had them. New fashion magazines for adolescent girls, such as Seventeen, advertised the latest clothing and cosmetics, and teen romance magazines, like Copper Romance, a publication for young African American women, filled drugstore racks. The music and movie industries also altered their products to appeal to affluent adolescents who were growing tired of parental constraints.

**DESEGREGATION AND INTEGRATION**

Until 1954, racial segregation in education was not only legal but was required in seventeen states and permissible in several others. Utilizing evidence provided in sociological studies conducted by Kenneth Clark and Gunnar Myrdal, however, Thurgood Marshall, then chief counsel for the NAACP, successfully argued the landmark case Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas before the U.S. Supreme Court led by Chief Justice Earl Warren. Marshall showed that the practice of segregation in public schools made African American students feel inferior. Even if the facilities provided were equal in nature, the Court noted in its decision, the very fact that some students were separated from others on the basis of their race made segregation unconstitutional.

The challenge now was to integrate schools. A year later, the U.S. Supreme Court ordered southern school systems to begin **desegregation** “with all deliberate speed.” Some school districts voluntarily integrated their schools. For many other districts, however, “deliberate speed” was very, very slow.

It soon became clear that enforcing Brown v. the Board of Education would require presidential intervention. Eisenhower did not agree with the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision and did not wish to force southern states to integrate their schools. However, as president, he was responsible for doing so. In 1957, Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, was forced to accept its first nine African American students, who became known as the **Little Rock Nine**. In response, Arkansas governor Orval Faubus called out the state National Guard to prevent the students from attending classes. The soldiers turned away the first student to attempt entry, Elizabeth Eckford, leaving the 15-year-old to be followed and threatened by dozens of White adults. A subsequent attempt by the nine students to attend school resulted in mob violence. Eisenhower then placed the Arkansas National Guard under federal control and sent the U.S. Army’s 101st airborne unit to escort the students to and from school as well as from class to class. This was the first time since the end of Reconstruction that federal troops once more protected the rights of African Americans in the South.

School segregation was not only a Southern issue. New York City became a segregation flash point due to significant deficiencies in resources, teacher quality, and services offered to schools serving Black students. In 1957, parent and activist Mae Mallory was the leader of what became known as the **Harlem Nine**, a group of nine mothers who filed suit and kept their children out of school based on inadequate and unequal education. Mallory and the other mothers asked for an “open transfer” policy that allowed them to send their children to schools outside of their district. City officials and local media fought back by declaring Mallory and her group to be unfit parents, but the Harlem Nine eventually won the right to transfer their children. Most importantly, they forced the local court and the New York City Board of Education to declare that segregation still existed in New York City schools.

**The Great Society**

In May 1964, Lyndon Johnson described in detail his vision of the Great Society he planned to create. When the Eighty-Ninth Congress convened the following January, he and his supporters began their effort to turn the promise into reality. By combatting racial discrimination and attempting to eliminate poverty, the reforms of the Johnson administration changed the nation. The **war on poverty**, as he termed it, was fought on many fronts. The 1965 Housing and Urban Development Act offered grants to improve city housing and subsidized rents for the poor. The Model Cities program likewise provided money for urban development projects and the building of public housing.

The Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) of 1964 established and funded a variety of programs to assist the poor in finding jobs. The Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), first administered by President Kennedy’s brother- in-law Sargent Shriver, coordinated programs such as the Jobs Corps and the Neighborhood Youth Corps, which provided job training programs and work experience for the disadvantaged. Volunteers in Service to America recruited people to offer educational programs and other community services in poor areas, just as the Peace Corps did abroad. The Community Action Program, also under the OEO, funded local Community Action Agencies, organizations created and managed by residents of disadvantaged communities to improve their own lives and those of their neighbors. The Head Start program, intended to prepare low-income children for elementary school, was also under the OEO until it was transferred to Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in 1969.

The Johnson administration, realizing the nation’s elderly were among its poorest and most disadvantaged citizens, passed the Social Security Act of 1965. The most profound change made by this act was the creation of Medicare, a program to pay the medical expenses of those over sixty-five. Although opposed by the American Medical Association, which feared the creation of a national healthcare system, the new program was supported by most citizens because it would benefit all social classes, not just the poor. The act and subsequent amendments to it also provided coverage for self-employed people in certain occupations and expanded the number of disabled who qualified for benefits. The following year, the Medicaid program allotted federal funds to pay for medical care for the poor.