

**UNIT 7 The American Dream**  
**Postwar Era 1945 to 1960**

A STEIN SCHOOL  
**FROEBEL**  
BILINGUAL SCHOOL  
Home of the Space Generation



**Historical Introduction**  
**POSTWAR ERA**  
**1945 - 1960**

with **Jim Soto**

# A NEW ERA... OF PEACE?

“We have always held to the hope, the belief, the conviction that there is a better life, a better world, beyond the horizon.”

—FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

The decade of the 1950s often is viewed with nostalgia as a time of well-being and opportunity. However, conflicts had started to emerge in U.S. society as not everyone fit happily into the mainstream image of an American or was allowed to pursue the American dream. The realities of life in the modern postwar world were explored in literature about change, loss, and equality.

How do we define the American dream today?

At the close of World War II, the Allies faced the challenge of keeping the peace in the nuclear age. To ensure Germany and Japan did not rearm, both were occupied by Allied forces after the war: Germany by England, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States and Japan by the United States. War criminals were put on trial in **Nuremberg**, Germany, and Tokyo, Japan, establishing the principle of individual responsibility for wartime acts. To institutionalize a means of working together to promote peace, the **United Nations** was created, and Eleanor Roosevelt helped draft its 1948 **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**.



**United  
Nations**



# AMERICA GOES CONSERVATIVE

Demobilization created problems, as troops returned home hoping to find jobs, many of which had been taken by women and other minorities. To help veterans make the transition, the **G.I. Bill of Rights** was passed, providing pensions, government loans, and education benefits.

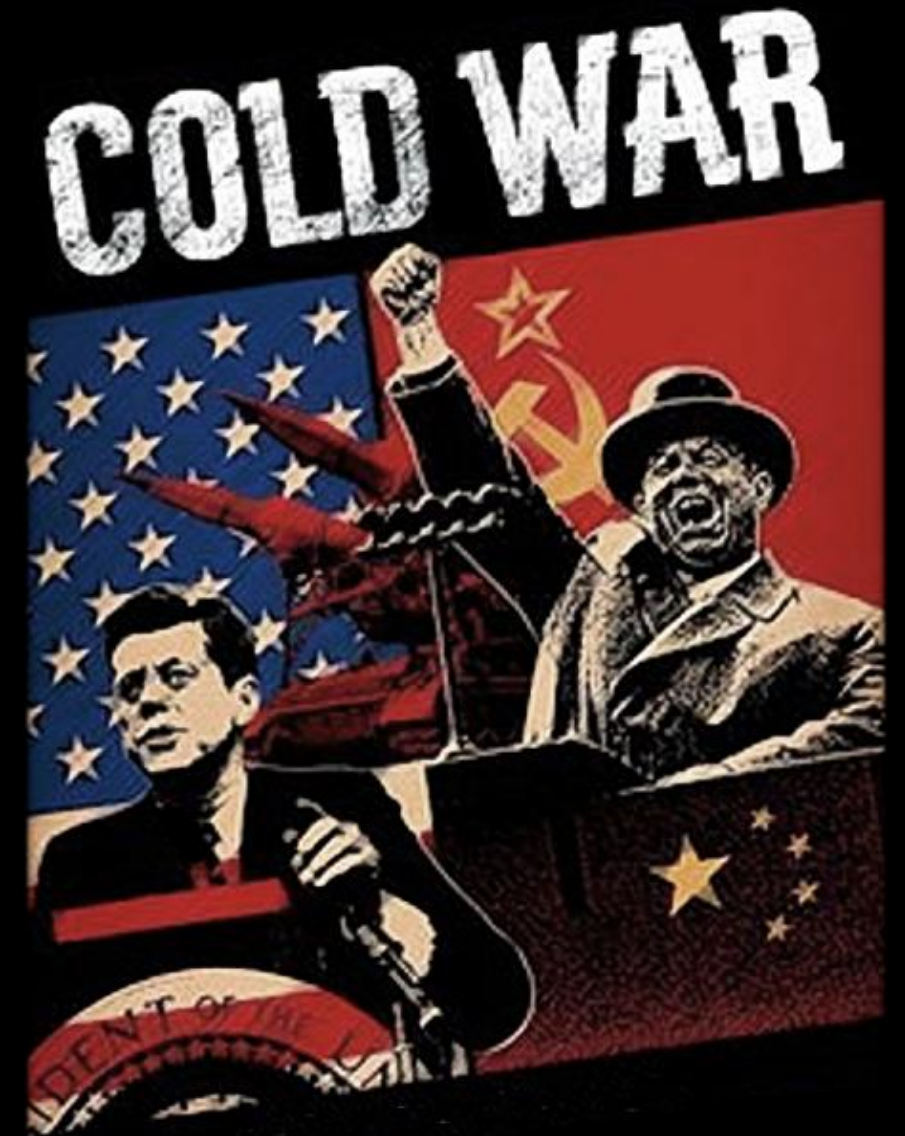




Prices skyrocketed with the lifting of wartime price controls, and millions of workers went on strike for higher wages. The political climate became increasingly **conservative**, with Congress passing antilabor legislation and defeating a civil rights bill.

# THE COLD WAR BEGINS

The postwar ideological, political, and economic tensions between the Soviet Union and satellite nations in eastern Europe, on the one hand, and the United States and western Europe, on the other, created what became known as the **Cold War**, which lasted from 1945 to 1989.







The U.S. aimed at restricting Soviet expansion. The ten-month Berlin Airlift, during which supplies were flown into the city during the Soviet blockade, was an early face-off between these powers. Two other initiatives based on the containment policy were rebuilding free institutions in Europe through a massive economic aid program like the Marshall Plan and creation of the **North Atlantic Treaty Organization** (NATO). The Soviets countered with the **Warsaw Pact** alliance.



The most chilling aspect of the Cold War was the arms race, with U.S. scientists developing the hydrogen bomb and the Soviets testing their own atomic weapons—both spewing radioactive fallout into the atmosphere. As concern grew about the outbreak of nuclear war, schools held routine “duck-and-cover” drills for protection. Additionally, more than one million American families dug fallout shelters in their yards and read manuals on surviving a nuclear attack.





Tensions escalated during the 1940s and 1950s, particularly with the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. Involvement of U.S. troops to support South Korea against Communist North Korea and later its ally Communist China ended in a stalemate. The Korean War stimulated a spectacular rise in U.S. defense spending and growth in what President Dwight D. Eisenhower named the **military-industrial complex**.

# THE RED SCARE AT HOME

Given the conservative political climate and paranoia in the United States and Americans' revulsion against communism, the country was more than ready to listen in 1950 when **Senator Joseph McCarthy** of Wisconsin accused the Truman administration of harboring communists.

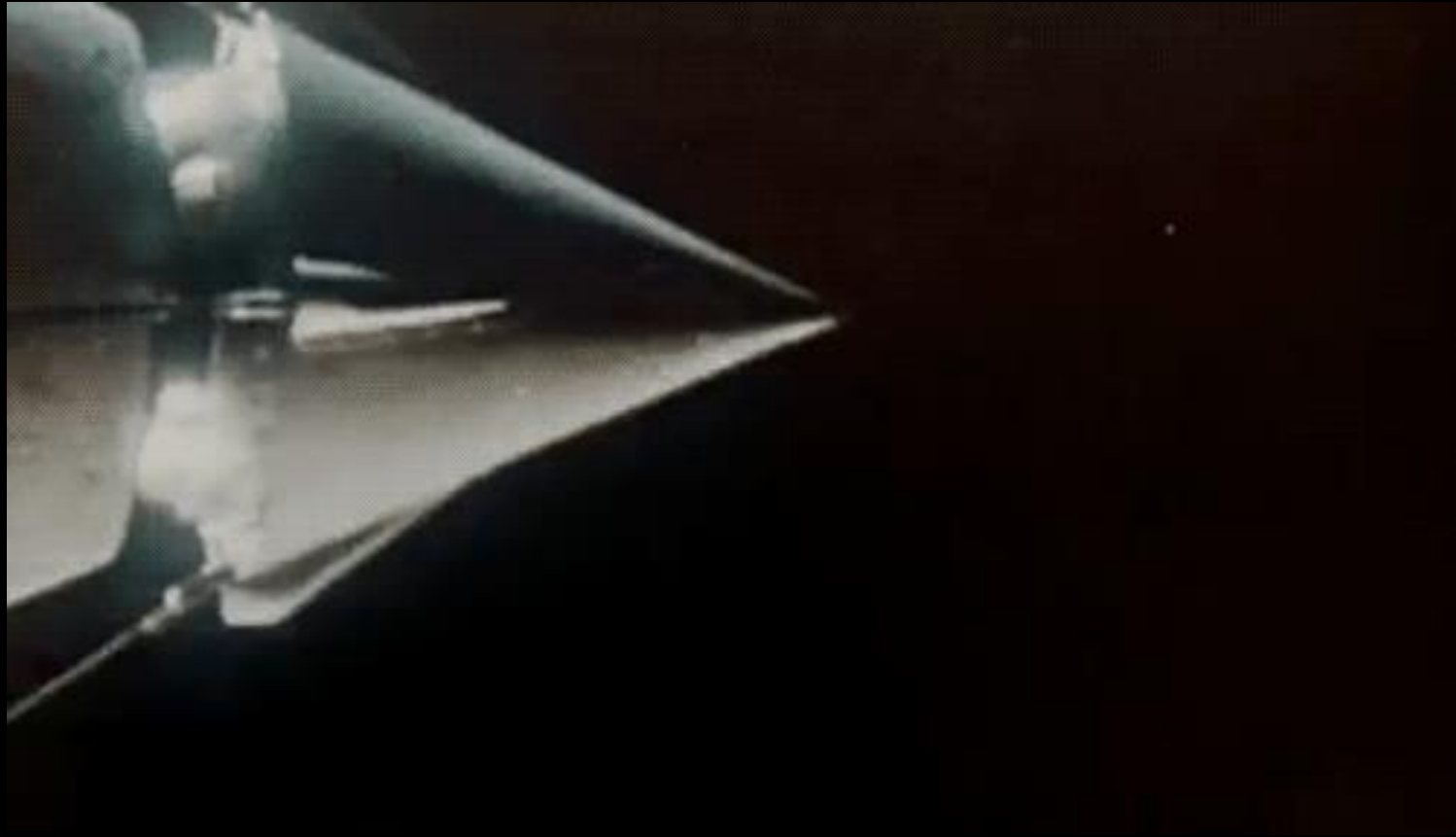


# THE RED MENACE IS REAL!



McCarthy's comments instigated a wave of investigations by congressional bodies such as the **House Un-American Activities Committee**, which interrogated thousands of persons suspected of being Communist party members, among them peace activists, labor leaders, and prominent writers and entertainers. Televised hearings exposed McCarthy's bullying, and finally in 1954, the Senate condemned his tactics.

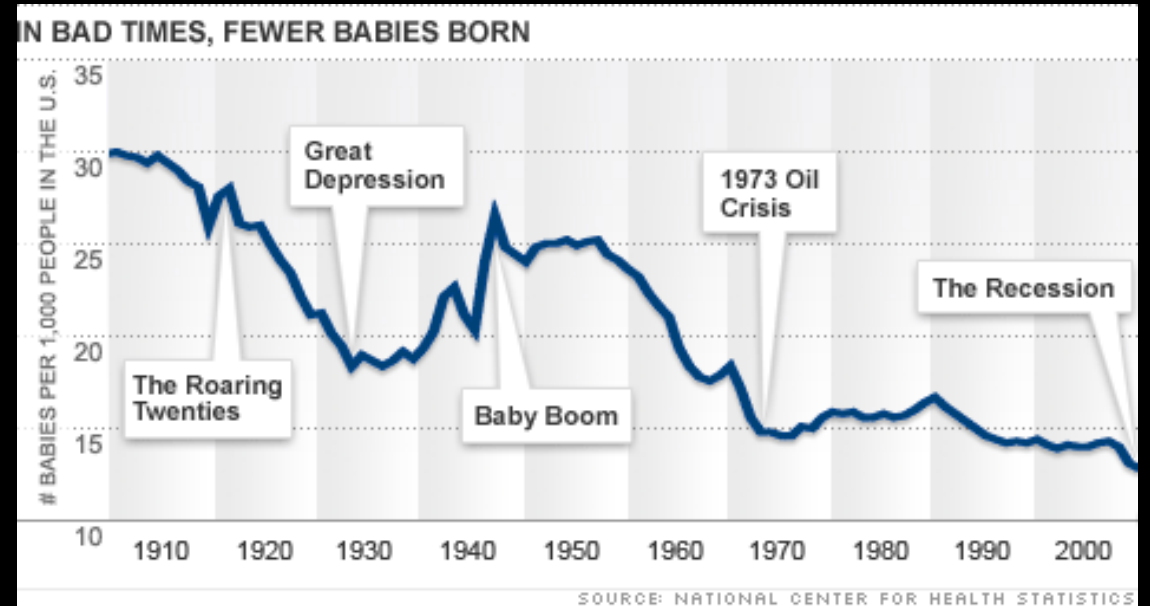




When the Soviet Union launched **Sputnik**, the first orbital satellite, in 1957, the United States feared it was falling behind technologically. Schools were encouraged to strengthen their math and science offerings with funding from the National Defense Education Act. The **National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)** also was created, and the first American satellite, Explorer I, was launched.

# THE DOMESTIC SCENE

By the time Dwight D. Eisenhower was elected president in 1952, the country's economy was strong and employment was high. With the troops returning, many women left wartime work in factories and public services and became homemakers and mothers. During the 1950s, couples married at younger ages and had more children than in previous decades. A literal **baby boom**!





Automation dramatically changed the American workplace, increasing efficiency but reducing the number of workers needed both in factories and on farms. The farming population shrank by almost one-third. At the same time, there was an increase in the number of professional and service jobs. Service positions often were filled by women, and by 1960, women represented one-third of the American workforce.





The new middle-class affluence sent Americans on a buying spree. **Consumerism** bred conformity. **Television**, the new communication and entertainment medium, promoted materialism and the myth of the good life, often reinforcing racial and ethnic stereotypes. Teens expressed their discontent by turning to rock 'n' roll, an adaptation of black rhythm-and-blues music, and attending integrated shows with black and white artists such as **Elvis Presley**, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis and Buddy Holly.

# THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Despite the nation's postwar affluence, its inner cities grew even more poor and racially diverse. Blacks continued the rural-to-urban movement, known as the **Great Migration**, that had begun during World War I. Widespread unemployment forced Puerto Ricans to migrate to the mainland, most settling in New York City. Native Americans were pressured by the Relocation Act of 1956 to leave their tribal lands and move to urban areas. Low-income public housing became the solution.





Activists such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks organized boycotts, sit-ins, and protests against Jim Crow laws and bring attention to the plight of African Americans and fought to end the "Separate but equal" policies that segregated and discriminated against Blacks in the U.S. This was sparked by the landmark Supreme Court decision in **Brown v. Board of Education**, which declared racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional. The movement gained momentum throughout the decade, leading to the passage of the **Civil Rights Act of 1964**, which outlawed segregation in public places and banned employment discrimination.





# THE BEATNICKS



The years after WW2 saw the rise of the **Beat Generation**, a group of writers who rejected conventional social norms and celebrated the counterculture, which had a lasting influence on American literature and popular culture.

# ASSESSMENT

After reading pages 554-560 in your book, complete the following activities:

1. If you had been a public school student in the early days of the Cold War, what would you have thought about the periodically required “duck-and-cover” drills?
2. When Senator Joseph McCarthy, a Republican from Wisconsin, conducted his anti-Communist crusade, he was not acting alone. What public attitudes gave credibility to the Red Scare? From what private-sector groups or government agencies did he likely draw support?



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