

# Historical Background

## The Post-War Era (1945–1970)

The United States emerged from World War II as the most powerful nation on Earth. Proud of their role in the Allied victory, Americans now wanted life to return to normal. Soldiers came home, rationing of scarce goods ended, and the nation prospered. Despite post-war jubilation, however, the dawn of the nuclear age and the dominance of the Soviet Union throughout Eastern Europe meant enormous new challenges.

In 1945, the United Nations was created amid high hopes that it would prevent future wars. Nonetheless, the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the West began as soon as World War II ended. Armed conflict arose in 1950 when President Harry S. Truman sent American troops to help anticommunist South Korean forces turn back a North Korean invasion. Within our borders, fear of communism fueled the “witch hunts” of the 1950s, unleashing investigations and accusations by Senator Joseph McCarthy that ruined the careers and reputations of many Americans.

### The Complacent Fifties

Americans of the 1950s are sometimes called “the Silent Generation.” Many of them had lived through both the Great Depression and World War II, and they were tired to the bone of sacrifice and conflict. When peace finally arrived, they were glad to adopt quiet ways of living. They wanted to stay at home, raise their families, and enjoy being consumers. They wanted to keep life the way it was for a while.

But the march of technology made complacency impossible. In October 1957, the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, the first artificial satellite to orbit Earth. The Space Age had begun, and the Soviet triumph spurred calls for changes in American education, especially in science and math. President John F. Kennedy, elected in 1960, promised to “get the nation moving again,” and he set in motion an intense national effort to land an American on the moon.



## TIMELINE

1945



1945: The United States drops atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

1945: The United Nations Charter is signed in San Francisco, California.

◀ 1945: World War II ends as Germany and Japan surrender to Allies.

1947: Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* premieres. ▶

1947: The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union begins.

1947: India/Pakistan  
India and Pakistan granted independence from Great Britain.

## The Turbulent Sixties

The assassination of President Kennedy in 1963 was a deeply felt national tragedy. After the assassination came an escalating and increasingly unpopular war in Vietnam. Waves of protest disrupted the country's complacency. Gone were the calm of the 1950s and the high hopes of Kennedy's brief administration. In their place came idealistic but strident demands for an end to the war, progress on civil rights, and greater relevance in education. It was a time of crisis and confrontation, but it also brought genuine progress.

Lasting gains were made in civil rights during these years. In 1954, the Supreme Court had outlawed segregation in public schools, and the Sixties witnessed the continuing battle for racial equality. Tragedy struck again in 1968, however, when civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated. Riots broke out in many cities across the nation.

## Culture and Counterculture

Through the Fifties and Sixties, television continued to spearhead a revolution in mass communication. By 1960, millions of Americans owned televisions, and masses of people shared common electronic experiences of news, entertainment, and advertising. At the same time, groups of Americans sought lifestyles that opposed the prevailing culture. In music, art, literature, occupations, speech, and dress, these Americans resisted the sameness and anonymity that seemed to be consuming the nation's personality.

## Key Historical Theme: Recovery and Rebellion

- During the Fifties, many Americans who had lived through the Great Depression and World War II craved normalcy.
- During the Sixties, many Americans protested against the Vietnam War, racial injustice, and social conformity.

**1948: Israel** United Nations establishes state of Israel.

**1949:** The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is founded to provide security for its member nations. ▶



**1948: Germany** Soviet Union blockades Allied sectors of Berlin.



◀ **1949:** *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller is produced.

**1950**