

Post-War Prosperity

FL **SS.912.A.7.1** Identify causes for Post-World War II prosperity and its effects on American society.

Vocabulary Builder: **prosperity** (pros PAR i tee) *n.* the condition of enjoying wealth, success, or good fortune

When World War II ended, rationing and price controls ended as well. People were afraid that the United States would experience unemployment and recession. Instead, the years following World War II were years of exceptional prosperity.

The GI Bill of Rights

One important reason for the steady prosperity of the decade following World War II was the GI Bill of Rights. This was far more than just college assistance for former military members. It also provided up to a year's worth of unemployment pay for veterans unable to find work. In addition, it provided government loans for former GIs to build homes and begin their own businesses. Millions of veterans took advantage of the financial assistance to attend college. Thanks to the GI Bill, returning veterans had money to spend on homes, education, and consumer products. This spending led to employment opportunities as factories and industries stepped up production to meet growing consumer demand.

The Suburbs

Thanks in part to the GI Bill, new home construction surged in the postwar years. So great was the demand for new homes that builders applied mass production methods to home construction and created mass-produced suburban homes. Each model looked like the one beside it, and all sold quickly. Veterans lost no time in marrying, settling into new homes, and beginning their families. This era of prosperity also produced a great "baby boom" as the number of births in the United States climbed to all time highs during the late forties and through the 1950s.

As factories turned from war production to production of consumer goods, people were able to fill their new homes with these products. Homes needed refrigerators, washing machines, automatic mixers, vacuum cleaners and, of course, an automobile. The automobile allowed workers to live in suburban areas, because they now could commute by car to jobs in the cities. The United States became a nation on the move. As the purchase of automobiles soared, cities, states, and the federal government invested in road construction. The interstate highway system, begun in 1953, was spurred on by the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1955. The American lifestyle incorporated the automobile into entertainment as people visited drive-in movies and ate at drive-in restaurants.

Prosperity

The economy of the United States was not just fueled by consumers within this country. Untouched by the ravages of war, the United States was poised to ship much-needed products to other nations. The Marshall Plan and the Korean War both spurred the U.S. economy with government purchases. During these years, the United States came to enjoy the highest standard of living in the world. In fact, Americans came to expect this high standard of living as an American right. Prosperity, as evidenced by single-family homes in the suburbs, comfortably furnished with the latest appliances, growing families, and a sleek, fast automobile was the new American reality.

Check for Understanding How did the GI Bill of Rights help keep the U.S. economy from unemployment and recession?

Post-War Prosperity Did Not Reach All People



SS.912.A.7.2 Compare the relative prosperity between different ethnic groups and social classes in the post-World War II period.

Vocabulary Builder: *sporadic* (spo RAD ic) *adj.* irregular or occurring at intervals

The prosperity of the post World War II years applied primarily to white, middle-class Americans. Beyond the suburbs, there was another story.

Inner Cities

Middle-class white Americans moved in large numbers to the suburbs to live in their new dream homes. Left behind were older, decaying homes in the cities. At the same time, poor people, particularly African Americans and Puerto Ricans, were moving from the rural South or far-away homelands in search of economic opportunities. These groups filled the places vacated by the prospering middle class. However, as the middle class left the cities, the tax bases were reduced and, as a result, city services began to deteriorate. The result was urban poverty in the cities, while prosperity reigned in the suburbs.

Rural Poverty

In rural areas, independent farmers were finding it increasingly difficult to survive. Life had always been difficult for sharecroppers. They were joined in poverty by farmers who owned small acreages. They could not compete with the large, corporate-owned and managed farms. These groups were joined by other rural poor such as the coal miners of Appalachia.

Hispanics

In the inner cities, Puerto Rican immigrants tried to start new lives. They were often held back by a lack of English and adequate education, making it difficult for them to improve their lives. In the West, migratory farm workers were primarily Hispanics from Mexico. Since farm workers followed the harvest, and were frequently in the United States for only a portion of the year, education for their children was *sporadic*. Furthermore, children often worked in the fields with their parents rather than attending school.

Native Americans

During the post-war years, Native Americans suffered from high unemployment, incomes lower than the national average, and disease. In spite of these difficulties, the government pushed to make Native Americans independent of the government. This was to be accomplished by terminating such benefits as health care. This policy was called the termination movement. The result was economic devastation, not independence, for many Native Americans.

Check for Understanding How did the movement of middle-class Americans to the suburbs contribute to inner city poverty?