**Social and Economic Life in the 1950s**

**Part I: Society**

**The New “Red Scare”**

After World War II ended, the US and Soviet Union were the world’s two superpowers. We were democratic with a free market economy. USSR was a dictatorship under communism. Just like after World War I, a fear that communism would spread into the U.S. was real. Only this time, there really was a threat because of the strength of the Soviet Union.

When Soviet government official Igor Gouzenko defects to Canada in 1945, he tells them the USSR has spies in the US and they are trying to build an atomic bomb. This starts the Red Scare in our government, leading to the **Loyalty Review Program**, where government workers are interviewed and background checked to try to discover communists within the government.

The **House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC)** was created to weed out commies in American society, with the FBI doing the investigating. But remember that there is nothing illegal about being a communist. Still, if you are exposed as a communist, you are a societal outcast because people don’t trust communists, nor do they want to associate with them, in case they are then accused of being a communist by association. It’s a real witch-hunt.

**The “Red Hunt”**

The Loyalty Review Program looked into the lives of over 1.6 million government workers. A diplomat named Alger Hiss was the first high-ranking government official to get caught up in Red Scare witch hunt. Nothing happened to him, except his reputation was torn apart.

**Julius and Ethel Rosenberg**, on the other hand, died. The Rosenbergs were convicted of providing the USSR with top secret nuclear plans that helped them get the atomic bomb. Ethel’s brother worked at Los Alamos in New Mexico where the bombs were designed and tested. The government paints the Rosenberg’s as the heads of a huge Soviet spy ring. They are executed for treason.

In an attempt to keep tabs on communists in America, Congress passed the **McCarran Internal Security Act.** Remember, there’s nothing illegal about being communist, so this is more an action that is meant to calm the fears of the people that something is being done about these communists. The law requires communists to register with the government, took away their passports (so they can’t go meet with Soviets in another country) and said they could be detained for their beliefs a time of national emergency. It had little impact because, really, if you’re going to be doing bad things, are you really going to register with government so they know who you are and can keep an eye on you? Come on. All the people who registered were law-abiding citizens who happened to be communist.

**McCarthyism (1950-1954)**

In 1950, Republican **Senator Joseph McCarthy** of Wisconsin decides to take advantage of people’s fear of communists in America in order to gain power and further his standing in government, with an overall goal of one day becoming President. So he begins to tell people that the fear of commie spies in government isn’t just “possibly” true, but is true and that the people need to keep electing him to Washington so there will be someone who will truly hunt them down, expose them and protect America. It’s effective, as the people vote for him.

His most famous move was his **“List of 205.”** This is an imaginary list he has of 205 known communists working the **State Department**, which is the part of the government that deals with foreign countries and relations. This is the worst possible place, other than White House, to have commies because they are the ones who get to decide who we do and don’t deal with and have access to a lot of secrets that would be bad if the USSR got their hands on. McCarthy knows that, which is why he chooses State Department to claim this about. It’s another way to promote fear. The List would evolve to supposedly include people outside State Department, but no one ever sees it because he conveniently never has it with him to show the press (newspapers, news shows). This allows McCarthy to put on the list anyone who speaks out against him and accuses of him of using fear to get power. So people don’t stand against him – until he tries to take on the Army.

McCarthy gains publicity through public, televised hearings of possible communists. Mostly they are low-level officials or famous actors/newsmen, etc. The hearings are more like trials in that McCarthy asks questions, doesn’t allow the “defendants” to respond, and just bullies them and makes them look bad and guilty. Again, there’s nothing illegal about being communist, but it can ruin your reputation. But eventually he went after people in the Army. That was a big mistake. He targeted an Army lawyer named Jack Welch who wouldn’t be bullied. Welch went on offensive, blasting McCarthy for his tactics and to suggest that anyone in the military, on the front lines of fighting communism, would be communist is un-American and shameful. McCarthy’s downfall came soon after as now people felt emboldened to challenge him.

**Everyday Life in the 1950s**

[](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKqXu-5jw60)In 1953, the Soviets develop their own Hydrogen Bomb (H-bomb), which enables both countries to now easily destroy the world. The H-bomb is about 10 times more destructive than the most powerful atomic bomb. This heightens public’s fear that the end is coming any day. This starts a run on building of **nuclear bomb shelters** and **fallout shelters** in schools (everybody knows where the school in the neighborhood is) as well as people putting them in their backyards for family use. In schools, like we do fire and tornado drills, kids did **“duck and cover” drills** where they went under desks and ducked and covered. Were told this would help protect from nuclear blast. Yeah, right.

**Part II: Baby Boom and Booming Economy**

**Baby Boomer Generation**

The late 1940s through the 1950s saw a “**baby boom**” in the United States, or a tremendous increase in the number of children born. This came from a variety reasons: soldiers coming back from war and their and their wives being VERY happy to see one another; people getting married younger and having more time to have more children; large families were popular at the time; and improvements in medical care decreased the number of babies lost prior to, and during, child birth. In 1957, there was one baby born every 7 seconds in the U.S., creating the largest generation of people in our nation’s history. **Baby boomers**, as these kids are called, were born generally between 1947 and 1963, and constitute your grandparent’s (unless you have older parents).

**Interstate Highway System**

In the mid-1950s, President Eisenhower authorizes the building of the **interstate highway system**. He realized need for such a system back in the 1930s when he led a convoy of military vehicles across country and the average speed was 6 mph. Hitler actually built the first of the kind in Germany in 1930s, called the Autobahn. We did it in the 1950s to increase the speed of business. Also impactful in social issues and where people lived. We build 41,000 miles of new highways that had no stop signs, traffic lights or intersections, which meant traffic would constantly flow.

The economic impact was huge in that it allowed for long-haul trucking with semis to transport goods, thus decreasing the time it took to ship goods. Time is money, so now shipping goods was cheaper, which meant costs could go down. When costs go down, more people buy goods, which supports jobs. Plus, you needed a lot of people to build the interstates, so that provided more jobs. Once people could get places quickly, they could live farther outside cities and commute to work, so people started to move to the suburbs. This led to a building boom, which created jobs in construction industry. Plus, now people would vacation more, which creates jobs in the tourism industry. The interstate system is one of the most important economic innovations in the last 100 years.

**Demobilization after WW2: Nowhere near as bad as after WWI**

Remember that **demobilization** is the moving of your economy from wartime production to peacetime (opposite of mobilizing economy for war effort). In 1919, after the First World War, the US economy suffered from inflation, unemployment and falling salaries due to the number of people looking for work, which allowed employers to pay less because they could easily fire anyone who complained and hire one of the millions of unemployed soldiers who just came back from war.

However, this time, our economy did not see much of a dip. This was because people learned from WWI and saved up money during the war. They spent very little during World War II, knowing they would need money afterwards in case the soldiers couldn’t find jobs when they returned home. In this way, they would still have money to live on. When the war ended, people went out and spent it, so our production didn’t drop very much.

Additionally, when WW2 ended, we immediately entered the **Cold War**, so our production of military hardware and supplies didn’t really stop. We needed plenty of tanks, bombers, missiles, etc., to prepare for a war that might come against the Soviets, or another communist country. This kept employment at high levels. The **Marshall Plan** also helped to combat negative effects of demobilization because we sent mostly material aid to European countries in the form of food, clothes, industrial goods and equipment to rebuild factories to support those nations’ economies.

**The G.I. Bill of Rights**

The **G.I. Bill of Rights** was passed at the end of World War II to help soldiers ease transition back to civilian life. The government foresaw negative demobilization like after WWI, so it passed this bill. The G.I. Bill offered tuition assistance to encourage young soldiers to go to college. This would mean that they wouldn’t be immediately looking for jobs, so in that way it would alleviate unemployment. It also offered a year’s worth of unemployment assistance. In this way, if you couldn’t find a job, you still have money to spend, which supports jobs and keeps other people from losing theirs because their factories are still producing. Finally, the bill offered low-interest loans to veterans that could be used to buy houses, farms, cars (all big-ticket items) or start businesses. These would all create/support jobs and keep those who currently have jobs working.

**Suburbs boom**

As mentioned earlier, the suburban migration happened at this time. Earlier in this text, I mentioned how the interstate highway system contributed to this boom. Another big factor was the baby boom – people had bigger families and needed SPACE. If you’ve never lived in an apartment, having a loud neighbor next door, upstairs or downstairs, can be a nightmare. Plus, with a bunch of kids, it gets rowdy and loud. You want a space of your own, and a yard for them to go out and play in.

The G.I. Bill’s low-interest loans made single-family homes affordable for most people. Add to the fact that developers started throwing up “cookie cutter” houses that were basically all the same, so cheaper to make because you’re building in bulk (buying supplies in bulk, so getting them cheaper) and there is no customization, which always raises costs. A typical suburban home in the 1950s could be purchased for just under $10,000.