The beginning of the decade was marked by the Korean War when troops from North Korea invaded South Korea. For the first time Americans went into battle to implement containment.

The war grew out of the division of Korea after WWII. The Japanese were expelled and control of the territory went to the US and Soviet Union as they created two occupation zones separated at the 38th parallel – which ended up being two separate countries because a plan for unification could not be reached.

After learning of the invasion of 90,000 North Korean troops into South Korea, Truman decided to commit ground troops – stating Korea was the “Greece of the Far East.” The US obtained UN sponsorship of a collective effort to repel the attack – while the SU representative was absent from the Security Council. Sixteen nations sent troops to Korea, but the US would furnish most of the personnel and weapons. Truman did not receive a declaration of war from Congress, but Congress authorized the mobilization of troops and appropriated funds to the fight the war. When situation worsened in Korea the president’s opponents called it “Truman’s War.”

Disobeying orders, General MacArthur sent UN forces within 40 miles of China, whereupon 150,000 Chinese troops moved into Korea pushing the Americans back to the southern portion of the peninsula and resulted in the North Koreans recapture Seoul. Under new leadership, the American forces were able to fight their way back to the 38th parallel.

Discontent with the war allowed the Republicans to gain control of the Presidency in 1952. General Dwight D. Eisenhower easily won the presidency – he was immensely popular and won widespread acclaim as supreme commander in Europe leading the Allied forces to victory over Germany.

Eisenhower agreed with the Democratic foreign policy, but deplored the Democrats tendency to solve domestic policies with costly new federal programs.

Pledging to end the war – he kept his word. In 1953 an armistice was reached that left Korea divided just as it had been three years earlier. Truman thought the war was a success for containment, but what Truman and Eisenhower had managed to contain amounted to a world war – involving 20 nations within a single country.
The lesson learned from the Korean War according to General Ridway (McArthur’s replacement), US forces should never again fight a land war in Asia. Eisenhower concurred. Nevertheless, our role in Asia would increase over the next two decades.

Korea had an enormous effect on defense policy. Before the war began, the National Security Council completed a top secret report on the US’s military strength. This document, NSC 68, warned that the survival of the nation required a massive military buildup and the tripling of the defense budget. – Korean War brought about nearly all of the expansion called for in NSC 68. Military spending went from $14 billion in 1950 to $40 billion in 1953 - with defense spending claiming 60 percent of the federal budget.

Military spending helped stimulate prosperity. Productivity increased enormously in the 1950s, a large amount of new products came on the market, and consumption became the order of the day. Many Americans had new homes in the suburbs and higher education was the norm for middle class. Every section of the nation enjoyed prosperity and the west and southwest was no exception. They especially boomed in production, commerce, and population.

Most of the population enjoyed a higher standard of living and led the leading economist John Galbraith to call the US “the affluent society.”

Changes in Farming and Industry
Between 1940 and 1960 output increased while number of farm workers decreased by 1/3. Increases were due to crop specialization, intensive use of fertilizers, and mechanization. Mechanical pickers substituted for human power – a single mechanical cotton picker replaced fifty 50 people and cut the costs of harvesting a bale of cotton from $40 to $5.

Decline in family farms and growth of commercial farming were both causes and consequences of mechanization. Technology also increased industrial production and decreased the number of labor hours needed to manufacture large products – i.e. automobiles, planes. Technology also changed industries – promoted the growth of television, plastics, and other new industries.

Labor Unions enjoyed great success as well – merger of AFL and Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) which improved the bargaining position. Toward the end of the decade the number of workers represented by unions declined – technological advances decreased the number of jobs in heavy industry.

The economy as a whole was shifting – moving to a service economy. Instead of making products more and more workers distributed goods, performed services, provided education, or kept records. These jobs (clerical and service occupations)
intensified the demand for female workers – by the end of the 1950s 35% of all women over 16 worked outside the home – which was twice as many as in 1940, but earned 40% less than men.

SUBURBS
Expanded drastically in the 1950s, one in four lived there by the end of the decade and out of the 13 million new homes built in the 1950s 11 million were located in suburbs.

William Levitt created the factory assembly line process for homes - this would drive down the cost of homes and allowed construction workers to move from house to house performing the same operation on each home. Planned neighborhoods went up throughout the nation – most famous Levittown, New York – the cost of home was under $8,000.

The increase of home ownership was a result of government subsidized home ownership with low interest mortgages through FHA and Veterans Administration as well as allowing interest on mortgages tax deductible. With the passing of the Highway Act 1956 indirectly subsidized suburban development.

As white left the cities for the suburbs – blacks flocked to the cities looking for economic opportunity. Cities were in decline as commerce and industry moved to the south and west. New businesses began to ring cities and shoppers gradually chose suburban malls over downtown shopping. Many of the new jobs were out of reach to the new black residents in the cities.

Rise of the Sun Belt
The rise of the defense industry in the west and southwest spurred economic growth as well as fueled population increases. California’s population doubled after WWII and 1 in 3 workers were employed in the defense industry – making bombers and missiles or other weapons.

The technology of the air conditioner made it possible for industrial development in the south, southwest, and west. Air conditioning meant companies in the south and west did not have to shut down and send workers home when heat and humidity became unbearable, and air quality inside businesses improved as well as homes! On the down
side – air conditioning homes and businesses meant an increase in energy consumption and contributed to pollution.

The Culture of Abundance

Consumer Culture
In the 1950s consumption became the reigning value and essential to individual’s identity and status and satisfaction was achieved through the purchase and use of new products.

4 out of 5 families owned television sets, nearly all had refrigerators, and most owned at the least one car. The number of shopping centers quadrupled between 1957 and 1963.

What spurred this abundance? A population surge which expanded demand for products and boosted industries ranging from housing to baby goods. Consumer borrowing also fueled economic boom, as consumers increasingly made more purchases on installment plans. Diner’s Club issued the first credit card in 1951 – as a result private debt more than doubled during the decade.

Resurgence of the Cult of Domesticity and Religion

In the 50s popular culture and public figures defined the ideal family as a male breadwinner, a full time homemaker, and three or four children. The emphasis on the home and family reflected to some extent the anxieties of the cold war.

Feminist Betty Friedan gave a name to the idealization of women’s domestic roles in her book *Feminine Mystique*. Fiedan criticized advertisers, social scientists, educators, women’s magazines, and public officials for pressuring women to seek fulfillment in serving others.

Along with a renewed emphasis on family life, the 1950s witnessed a surge of interest in religion. By 1960, 63% of all Americans belonged to a church or synagogue and 95% of Americans believed in God. Evangelism took on a new life with the help of TV and Billy Graham crusades. Congress linked religion more closely to the state by adding “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954 and requiring in 1955 that “In God We Trust” be printed on all currency.

Religion calmed anxieties in the nuclear age, while ministers like Graham made the cold war a holy war, labeling communism a great sinister anti-Christian movement. Critics stated the religious resurgence was superficial – that it was basically a desire for conformity and a need for social outlet.
Television Impact on Culture and Politics

In the 1950s fewer than 10% of homes had a television, but by 1960 87% of all households owned a TV. On average, Americans spent more than five hours a day in front of the TV.

Programs projected the ideal family and the feminine mystique into millions of homes. On TV, married women did not have jobs and they deferred to their husbands, though they often got the upper hand through subtle manipulation.

TV affected politics – McCarthy’s reckless attacks were televised nationwide and contributed to his downfall. Eisenhower’s presidential campaign used TV ads for the first time, and by 1960, president – elect JFK remarked “We would not have had a prayer without that gadget”

Television transformed politics in other ways. Money played a much large role in elections because candidates need to pay for expensive TV spots. The ability to appeal directly to voters in their living rooms put a premium on personal attractiveness and encouraged candidates to build their own campaign organizations, relying less on political parties.

TV also had an impact on the consumer culture – commercials for the products of the affluent society. Advertisers spent $10 billion to push their goods. Television dominated leisure time, influenced consumption patterns, and shaped perceptions of the nation’s leadership.

Beatniks – Revolt against Conformity

A small group of literary figures based in New York City’s Greenwich Village and San Francisco. Rejecting mainstream culture – patriotism, consumerism, conventional family life, and discipline, Beatniks celebrated spontaneity and personal freedom – including drugs and sex. Jack Kerouac gave the Beat generation its name in his On the Road book published in 1957. Their rebellion would provide the model for a larger movement in the 1960s.
Bold new styles in art emerged in New York City known as action painting or abstract expressionism. This new art form rejected the idea that painting should represent recognizable forms. Jackson Pollock was the leading artist in this new movement. He poured, dripped, and threw paint on canvases. New York replaced Paris as the center of the Western art world.

African Americans posed the most remarkable challenge to the status quo in the 1950s as they sought to overcome the political and social barriers that were imposed after reconstruction.

In the 1950s a grassroots movement attracted national attention and support of white liberals. The Supreme Court delivered significant institutional reforms, but blacks themselves directed the most important changes. Ordinary African Americans in substantial numbers sought liberation, building a movement that would transform race relations in the US.

**Conclusion**

The tremendous economic growth in the 1950s raised the standard of living for most Americans, resulted in part from the Cold War. One in ten Americans had a job that depended directly on defense spending.

Suburban housing developments sprang up everywhere, interstate highways began to divide cities and connect the country, farms declined in number but grew in size and population and industry moved south and west. Values of ordinary people changed as the economy became more service oriented and the opportunity to buy a wide variety of new products intensified the growth of consumer culture.

The general prosperity and seeming conformity, however, masked a number of developments and problems that Americans would face head on in later years. Although Eisenhower presided over eight years of peace and prosperity, his foreign policy inspired anti-Americanism, established dangerous precedents for the expansion of executive power, and forged commitments that future generations would deem unwise. The 1950s will give way to the turbulence and conflict of the 1960s.