I. The Affluent Society

- Converting the economy
  - Economy begins shifting from wartime to peacetime production
    - following war – the “re-conversion years” begin a quarter century of expanding prosperity
    - Government spending under G.I. "bill of rights" stimulates the economy
      - veterans bill helps G.I.s get college education
      - pays for continued medical care
      - loans money for home purchases
    - U.S. also enjoys favorable position in world trade
      - Bretton Woods agreement (1944)--dollar becomes major currency of world
      - weak position of other industrial nations of world
    - Wartime savings and a pent-up consumer demand fuel postwar sales and prosperity
  - During 1950s, the United States enjoys a broad-based, unprecedented level of prosperity
    - By the end of the decade, 60% of American families own a home, 75% own a car
  - The New Industrial Society
    - Government spending continues to stimulate the economy during the 1950s
    - Over half the spending goes to defense--military-industrial complex becomes key part of American economy
    - Government, along with large corporations, underwrites much research and development
      - resulting new technology fuels growth of industry--especially in areas of physics, electronics, and chemistry
      - supplies a host of new consumer goods
        - chemistry--synthetic fabrics for clothes, teflon for cooking ware, formica for counters and floor tiles
        - electronics
          - new toasters, radios, televisions, and air conditioners
          - electric consumption triples during 1950s as Americans begin to see a "better life through electricity"
    - Cheap oil also spurs development with low-cost energy for factories and gas for automobiles
  - Birth of computer age
    - Development of computers is the most important postwar technological revolution
    - 1950s, International Business Machines switch from producing adding machines to computers, spurring use of computers in industry--quickly making IBM one of largest U.S. corporations
    - by the 1960s, computers create a billion-dollar industry, making machines used by government, business, hospitals, and universities
Concentration and consolidation of industry and agriculture
- technological advances hasten growth and dominance of big business
  - most industries controlled by oligopolies (automobile, electronics, chemicals, oil, tobacco, soft drinks, beer)
  - conglomerates and multinationals rise sharply in number
- Corporate America run by conformist executives, not individualistic capitalists
  - safety and continued steady profits key goals of corporate executives
  - William H. Whyte describes mentality of these executives in *The Organization Man* (1956)
    - No longer an emphasis on self-reliance → ability of person to "get along" and "work as a team" become key areas of emphasis
  - in *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), David Riesman argued that the traditional "inner-directed" person (who judged himself on basis of his own values and esteem of his family) was giving way to a new "other-directed" person (who was more concerned with winning approval of larger organization or community)
- Family farms give way to agribusiness--heavy use of machinery, chemical fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides
- Most Americans remain unaware of dangerous chemicals being spewed into water and air until Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* published in 1962
- Labor movement
  - 1955, AFL and CIO merge into one organization
  - militancy of union movement lost, weakened by its successes in winning middle-class advantages for workers
  - proportion of unionize workers declines--partly because automation reduces number of blue-collar laborers
  - percentage of Americans working in public sector (government), white-collar, and service industries grows

II. An Affluent Society
- The distinguishing feature of the post-WWII era was its remarkable affluence
  - after 1950, rising income meant that the mass of Americans, including blue-collar workers, could for the first time enjoy substantial amounts of discretionary income
  - American consumerism stimulated in the 1950s by rising purchasing power, consumer credit (first credit cards issued in 1950), and rapid growth of advertising
  - 1950s, Americans buy 58 million new cars, leading to increased highway fatalities, air pollution, traffic jams, and movement to suburbs
- Government subsidization of suburbia
  - the automobile received vast amounts of public funding and led to the undoing of inner city
  - the building of highways accelerated the process of metropolitan fragmentation by luring factories, warehouses, and eventually corporate headquarters into the suburbs
  - Government policy toward housing had serious implications for the evolution of the cities (though these implications often went unrecognized at the time)
    - the issuance of federally-insured long-term, low-interest loans spurred the abandonment by middle-class whites of older residential neighborhoods in the city
• at same time, rules regulating the distribution of federal subsidies for low-income housing had the effect of keeping poor blacks in the cities
• Federal housing policy, at least to the mid-1960s, hastened the abandonment of older neighborhoods, undermined the urban tax base, and contributed to the racial chasm between the cities and the suburbs
  o In place of the neighborhood, Americans now have a drive-in culture consisting of fast-food restaurants, drive-in theaters, shopping centers, service stations, motels, and mobile homes
• Demographic trends
  o population shifts, as people begin to move from Northeast to South and West--much of this move hastened by widespread availability of air-conditioning
  o "Baby Boom"--1945 to 1960
    ▪ 21 million children born between 1945-1950 alone
    ▪ during 1950s, Americans marry younger, produce more offspring than their parents
    ▪ medical advances reduce childhood mortality
    ▪ population grows rapidly--youngsters under fourteen make up 1/3d of Americans by 1960
    ▪ parents looking desperately for help in raising children in this new world turn to Dr. Benjamin Spock's best-selling Baby and Child Care (1946)
  o in 1960, 1 of 5 Americans live below poverty line--poor include:
    ▪ about half the elderly
    ▪ 1/3rd of rural population, especially migratory workers
    ▪ residents of inner-city slums (displaced rural whites, blacks, Native Americans, Hispanics)

III. Consensus and Conservatism
• Consensus
  o The psyche of the American fifties was one of domestic optimism and international power, underlain with suspicion
  o Americans of 1950s sought consensus--everyone should fit into an "American" mold, those who didn't were seen as dangerous
  o Americans increasingly turn to religion as way of coping with the stresses of the 1950s
    ▪ Church attendance increases
    ▪ Religious figures such as Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale attain star status, mass followings
    ▪ movies with religious themes become big box-office draws (Ten Commandants, Greatest Story Ever Told, Ben Hur)
    ▪ "under God" added to Pledge of Allegiance and "in God We Trust" added to currency
  o School and college enrollments peak during the 1950s
    ▪ education stresses social and psychological adjustment, conformity
    ▪ students of the period become known as "the silent generation"
  o Culture of the fifties--mainstream cinema and TV
    ▪ Hollywood portrays Americans as middle-class whites
      ▪ many works glorify material success and the notion of romantic love
      ▪ those outside the norm are viewed with suspicion and fear
• **movie attendance declines as television begins to grab the attention of Americans**
  - by early 1960s, 90% of households own at least one TV
  - TV Guide becomes best-selling magazine
  - TV programs designed to cater to mass audience--creativity and innovation squelched by networks' drive for profits and fears of McCarthy era
  - TV nurtures consumerism, complacency, racial, gender, and regional stereotypes
  - television becomes important political tool--televised image of political candidates becomes more important than what they stand for--Nixon-Kennedy debates in 1960

• **Elements of disquiet in American culture**
  - Despite efforts to create an American consensus, elements of disquiet and dissatisfaction surfaced during the late 1950s
  - **Sputnik**
    - Oct. 4, 1957, Soviet Union launches Sputnik, first satellite
    - fact that Soviet satellite orbiting world (and U.S.) shakes American confidence and complacency
  - **Youthful rebellion--1950s style**
    - young Americans begin mild cultural rebellion, which parents disapprove
      - boys begin to wear pegged pants, "ducktail" hairstyles; girls begin to wear shorter skirts and bobby sox
      - rock-and-roll becomes new music rage, despite strong parental censure (black music, loosens morals)
      - Elvis Presley and James Dean become cultural icons of youth
    - Beat writers echo growing dissatisfaction of youth
      - Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" (1956), Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957)
      - writers mock the "square," materialistic middle class; romanticize society's outcasts; champion nonconformity, open sexuality, and deeper spirituality (non-Christian)
  - Small group of college students (mostly on West coast) break with the "silent generation"--read and admire Beat writers; protest HUAC, nuclear arms race, and segregation