# 1950s

The 1950s. Cute ladies in aprons with fire-engine-red lipstick making cupcakes. Teenage girls in poodle skirts giggling in ice cream parlors. Men in business suits with Colgate-bright smiles and hair partings so straight they look razor-cut. Suburbs and cars and televisions and apple pies and conformity. Right?

Nope.

These images were complicated by the problems that began simmering under the surface, leading to the various revolutions of the 60s. You think the kind of 50s you imagine could have led Alan Ginsburg to write these lines in 1955?

"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked,   
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix."

Whoa. Here's the real story.

### Early Civil Rights

Truman began making some inroads into civil rights with his convening of the **President's Committee on Civil Rights.**This group called for an end to Jim Crow laws, segregation, and employment discrimination. Plus, Truman de-segregated the armed forces.

Eisenhower appointed **Earl Warren**as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Warren made more inroads for African-American rights than any other justice in history. The biggest deal was **Brown v. Board of Education,**where a black family successfully sued for their daughter's right to attend a white school. This was huge,because de-segregating schools led to the de-segregation of all other public spaces, and it overturned the **Plessy v. Ferguson**("separate but equal") decision of 1896.

Plus, government proved that it was willing to put some muscle into decisions. When Southerners proved uppity about the Browndecision, federal troops were brought in to physically walk the first 9 black students—the **Little Rock Nine,**of Little Rock, Arkansas, to the white school.

Blacks didbegin to make some changes: **Jackie Robinson**entered major league baseball, the first black player. The **NAACP**grew in numbers and started making inroads in court cases against segregation. Unfortunately, as the Southerners say, things moved "as slow as molasses in winter."

The real problem was southern whites, who dug in their heels at every turn and proved they weren't afraid of using violence against blacks to keep them down. One example is the Little Rock Public school: the Arkansasgovernor(oh yeah, this went all the way to the heads of state) ordered the National Guard to bar the doors against the 9 students. Then, when the federal troops came in to escort the students, all the white families responded by pulling their kids out and sending them to private schools.

**Jim Crow laws** required blacks to drink from separate water fountains, ride in separate train cars, sit in the balcony of movie theaters, live in separate neighborhoods, and suffer all sorts of other humiliations. If a black person dared to disobey, they often found white men with sticks, clubs, or guns standing in the front yard. What could be done? Fighting back would only make things worse….

The NAACP began to put a plan into motion. Instead of fighting back, the black population would show its power (which was considerable, at least in sheer numbers) by non-violent acts like resistance and boycotts. **Rosa Parks**(directed by the NAACP—yup, the whole thing was actually planned.) sat in the white section of a public bus and refused to move. She was, of course, arrested…but the point was made, and the movement begun.

**Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,**another organizer, planned the **Montgomery Bus Boycott.**Blacks would refuse to ride public buses until they were allowed to sit wherever they wanted. This was brilliant, since no matter how racist the bus companies were, they still needed money from the community that used them the most.

It worked, too. The case went to the Supreme Court, which mandated that public buses be de-segregated. Success—and no blood shed. This tactic of **nonviolent**or **passive resistance,**based on Gandhi and Thoreau's ideas, was popularized by Dr. King. Only by fighting againstthe idea of blacks as dangerous and working to show their organization, patience, and commitment, would they be able to win their rights.

Students were the ground troops of King's movement. The **Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)**organized sit-ins at lunch counters like in **Greensboro, North Carolina**, and in motels, restaurants, beaches, and other public and private venues. They would sit quietly while mustard, milkshakes, and more disgusting things were poured on their heads, creating images of quiet martyrdom.

The government paid attention. The **Civil Rights Bill of 1957**tried to monitor civil rights abuses through a new wing of the Justice Department. The **Civil Rights Act of 1960**provided for federal inspection of local and state voting records, to make sure blacks weren't being kept away from the polls.

All this was a start, but the 1950s were the spark for the Civil Rights Movement. It would take off, and bear somereal"fruit," in the 60s.

### A Conformist Society

After the war, Americans were ready for some good times. They had lived through a Great Depression and a catastrophic war—wasn't it time for a little rest and relaxation? The economy was in tip-top shape, thanks to the huge boost the war had given it. Plus, thanks to rationing, no one had been able to spend the new money that was rolling in. Once the war was over, those dollar bills started to burn giant holes in people's pockets. It was time to spend.

The consumer revolution of the 1950s left that of the 1920s in the dust. Suddenly, the American middle class seemed huge and wealthy. Now, 95% of homes had electric power. They also had refrigerators, cars, televisions, and record players. The more they had, the more they wanted.Advertisements were splashed everywhere, feeding every desire. Then, of course, if your neighborhad it, youhad to have it too.

It was easy to see what your neighbor had. All you had to do was take a peek into his lawn and nose into his windows. Because more and more Americans were leaving cramped urban apartments for the big houses and lawns in the suburbs. Whites, especially, took this opportunity to leave neighborhoods that were becoming increasingly multiracial.

"**White flight"**relocated millions of whites to the suburbs, established **restrictive covenants**to prevent other races from coming, and left the downtown urban areas for the blacks. Of course, where whites went, most of the money and labor force went—and so business began to follow. Downtown areas became poor, empty slums.

The 1950s "American Dream" ideal involved a "breadwinner" father who worked in some office somewhere. But, of course, this wasn't true—the working-class was still numerous, and they had gotten a lot of power in the war. The pendulum swing back to conservatism, however, knocked them on their knees.

Americans started to frown on strikers. Why did they think they could interrupt production? Production was needed for consumption. Presidents like Truman reacted by threatening military intervention to quash the strikers. Then the **Taft-Hartley Act**was passed, dealing a sucker-punch to unionism. It restricted workers' right to strike, prohibited "**closed shops"**(companies where all workers hadto belong to the union), and gave the government the power to intervene in strikes. Ouch. Labor started backpedaling.

Maybe labor would have had more fans if women had kept their wartime jobs. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case—their role in the new American Dream was to own cute dresses and bake killer apple pies. After all, a "Baby Boom" had happened, so they needed to take care of the kiddos. Child-rearing became a national science, as women swallowed the ideas of **Dr. Benjamin Spock.**Women were told that home-making was a "science" and a venerated profession.

That was all very nice, and it was enough for some women. Others, especially those who had enjoyed college educations, began to feel stifled. Depression became a serious problem. Women who had all sorts of lovely household appliances to do all their work were suddenly wildly bored. Some women even became alcoholics and started popping Valiums, just to deal with those long stretches of time alone in the house, far away in the suburbs.

Not everyone bought into the American Dream. Artists like **Andy Warhol**and **Jackson Pollock**started creating artwork that essentially spat in the face of artistic traditions, seeming random and erratic. You can imagine [many people's reactions to giant canvasses of splattered paint](http://4.bp.blogspot.com/_7KhycggQPQs/TDXoph6invI/AAAAAAAAAb0/0LZ5WTmUheA/s1600/normanrockwell-the-connoisseur.jpg).

Writers like J.D Salinger suggested in books like The Catcher in the Ryethat the conformist culture was making teenagers go nuts. **Beatnik**poets and writers like **Alan Ginsburg**and **Jack Kerouac**wore cute little berets, smoked long cigarettes, and pumped crazy amounts of drugs into their bodies. They called all traditional, middle class Americans "squares" and vowed not to be swept into its boring, conformist vortex.

Lots of people looked at the beatniks and rolled their eyes. They preferred nice-looking advertisements to Warhol's weird, gender-bending artworks and Pollock's angry splatters. They ignored the vodka and pill bottles in their neighbors' trashcans. However, all these were indications of change in the wind: movements involving women, students, African Americans, hippies, artists, and other people bored to tears with the happy little puppet show they felt the 1950s had become.

## Sample Questions

1. All of the following are reasons the labor movement lost power in the 1950s EXCEPT

A) increased emphasis on consumer rather than labor rights  
B) the Taft-Hartley Act  
C) attention diverted to the Civil Rights Movement   
D) fear of communism  
E) economic prosperity

The correct answer is (C).

When things are going well, and everyone feels rich, and most of society cares more about goods than the people who make them…labor movements lose their power. Plus, when working men's movements become associated with communism, labor unions become mighty suspect. All of these things contributed to the decline of the labor movement, and the passing of the Taft Hartley Act—which, of course, made it decline even more. However, none of these things happened because people were more concerned with Civil Rights. That was onething happening in America, but not the mainthing.

2. The Montgomery Bus Boycott succeeded because

A) the bus drivers were primarily African-American  
B) the white community was frightened of potential violence  
C) the entire community became involved  
D) African Americans were the primary bus-riders  
E) the federal government forbid segregation on public transport

The correct answer is (D).

Although we can't say that the entirecommunity became involved (after all, much of it was white—including most of the bus drivers), the Bus Boycott succeeded because it punched the bus companies right in their wallets. It didn't necessarily frighten the white community—after all, no violence was used, and only the wallet was hurt—but it did create concern. It also created action, since the Supreme Court then forced public buses to be desegregated.