



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
2006 Volume III: Postwar America: 1945-1963

---

## Introduction

The period in American history just after World War II was somewhat overlooked by historians for many years as they focused on the more obviously tumultuous decade of the 1960s. Yet in retrospect we can see that many of the social developments that peaked in the 1960s actually had their roots in the 1950s. Our image of the decade of the 1950s has long been shaped by an image of middle-class family togetherness and conformity through popular television shows like "Leave It to Beaver" and "Ozzie and Harriet." This image is not entirely false. In the period immediately after the war suburbs were created all over the land, and returning veterans and their wives, with help from the federal government through easy financing, flocked to them to begin their new lives as suburban dwellers. The economy soared, in part through the purchase of consumer durables to fill these new homes. Babies were born in record numbers, a further stimulus to the economy. One historian has referred to the period as American High.

Yet surface harmony and good times are not the whole story. Beneath the surface social currents swirled. America had to discover the great racial divide, brought to light in the landmark Supreme Court decision *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka*. African Americans had by no means been complacent about their place in the social fabric, but now they began to organize in protest. Led by the charismatic leader Dr. Martin Luther King, they boycotted the bus system in Montgomery, Alabama, sat in at lunch counters elsewhere, and by the early 1960s had developed as a powerful force for change. It is arguable that the rise of the civil rights movement was the best thing to come out of the 1950s.

Other groups too began to chafe against the constraints of the decade. Young people listened to the voice of Beat writers like Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac and decided that their own lives as the children of the middle class were boring and lackluster. The Beat movement proclaimed that material goods could be set aside in the search for authenticity and what Kerouac referred to as "IT," thus laying the groundwork for the counterculture that emerged to the consternation of parents in the 1960s. And women in their suburban homes began to feel that discontent that Betty Friedan was to document in her groundbreaking study *The Feminine Mystique*. One unit in this seminar, by Joanne Pompano, examines the very early beginnings of the disability rights movement, galvanized by the return of veterans with disabling war wounds from World War II.

If Americans turned inward to domestic pleasures the retreat from the international scene is understandable in light of the virulence of the Cold War during these years. At home the repercussions of the Cold War were felt in a fear of subversion that led to the movement we call McCarthyism after its most notorious prosecutor, Senator Joseph McCarthy. We now know that Soviet spies were indeed at work in this country, but McCarthy went far beyond any evidence to charge hundreds of people, almost all entirely innocent, with subversion. He managed to poison the political atmosphere for years to come.

Perhaps the most overarching unit to emerge from this seminar is one by Mary Lou Narowski. Impressed by the lessons and tools students can learn from newspaper work, she created a unit that will call on each of the students in her classroom to choose one year from the decade of the 1950s and develop for that year a complete newspaper with as many of the features of a regular newspaper as possible.

Teachers in this seminar not surprisingly found their richest source in the civil rights movement. Lucia Rafala began her unit in the time of slavery and moved forward to the 1960s on what she called "The Road to Equality." Kevin Inge focused on the work of Dr. Martin Luther King, emphasizing the ways in which his life and work can teach students important lessons in leadership.

Joseph Corsetti took as his topic "McCarthy v. Murrow," with the intent to challenge his students to think about different political systems and their consequences, and to evaluate, through a mock trial, the evidence McCarthy presented to support his charges. Ascertaining truth also absorbed two other units, one by David Reynolds examining the work of the so-called "New Journalists" of the 1960s and the other by Crecia Swaim, looking at the work of the documentary photographer Dorothea Lange to consider whether photography is the perfect record of reality that is sometimes claimed.

Christine Elmore elected to focus on three individuals of the period whom she sees as agents of change -- Elvis Presley, who turned the music industry on its ear with his new sound, Malcolm X, who challenged white America to live up to its promises and threatened militance if necessary, and Rachel Carson whose seminal work *Silent Spring* inaugurated the environmental movement.

Sean Griffin and Kristen Grandfield both took aspects of writing as the subject of their units. Sean Griffin, recognizing the attraction of fast-paced and active reading to win his students over to poetry, planned a unit that will introduce them to some of the protest poetry of the 1950s and 1960s and then ask them to participate in a poetry slam as a final project. Kristen Grandfield looked to ancient Greek rhetoric for inspiration to coach her students in persuasive writing, using as models famous speeches of the 1950s and 1960s.

Taken together, these units bring to life a period in American history still alive in the memories of students' grandparents, but almost completely unknown to today's elementary and high school students.

Cynthia E. Russett

---

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>