Past as Prologue: The 1950s as an Introduction to the 1960s

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Images of the 1950s are distinct: white middle-class families, suburban homes, backyard barbecues, big American cars with tail fins, Little League and Girl Scouts, peace, prosperity, and harmony. So, too, the images of the 1960s: civil rights sit-ins, urban violence, antiwar demonstrations, Black Power salutes, hippie love-ins, draft card burnings, death and destruction in Vietnam, police riots in Chicago, obscenities, hostilities, killings at Kent State and Jackson State universities.

These decades stand in marked contrast in the collective memory, each reduced to recollections distilled from media imagery and popular stereotypes. The periods recede into history, reflections of the dominant values of their eras rather than accurate representations of the complexity of the times: the harmonious 1950s; the turbulent 1960s. We remember the eras in stark opposition, in snapshots that symbolize values and aspirations unrelated to one another.

As scholars look back at these eras, however, they understand them as complex and interrelated. The obvious tensions and anxieties of postwar America the cold war, fear of the atom bomb, McCarthyism and the specter of the witch-hunt-are easily recalled; they undermine notions of a calm and peaceful era. Questions about race and gender have further demonstrated that the 1950s were not nearly so harmonious for minorities and women. We now understand more clearly the complexities of family life, the pressures on men and women resulting from rigid gender roles, the large numbers of Americans—of all races—who felt left out of the suburban dream of the good life. All these suggest an era far more anxious, questioning, and discordant than do bland images of postwar bliss.

At the other extreme, many events, attitudes, and activities of the 1960s do not seem appropriate in a country torn by discontent and division: the counterculture’s focus on “love,” the hedonistic embrace of new lifestyles, the enthusiasm of the 1968 presidential campaigns of Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy. These intertwine with intense anger over war, assassinations, and turbulence in the streets and on college campuses. Instead of a singular negative picture of society in upheaval, we find a mixed portrait—enthusiasm coupled with hostility, optimism about a "greening of America" jumbled with a view of a quasi-fascist "Amerika." Again, the images depict a decade more complex than the snapshot suggests.

Memory compresses the past, so that it seems that life was pacific at one moment and the nation exploded in the next. Deeper analysis of the two eras reveals continuities between them. At the simplest level, political activities such as the civil rights movement began in the 1950s. Little Leaguers and Girl Scouts of the fifties grew up to become the college students of the sixties. Unhappiness over the prescribed roles white postwar brides were asked to play in their "suburban utopias" was a shared experience for many fifties housewives and proved a crucial impetus for the women's movement of the late sixties. Younger women sought new roles beyond limits that had been drawn for their mothers.

Beneath the surface complacency of American intellectual, social, and cultural life in the postwar years, many critics and iconoclasts offered critical analyses of American life or led their own lives in ways that were shocking to mainstream America. In a society that valued homogeneity, they were attacked as atypical outsiders. But in the 1960s, as nonconformity and radicalism grew more commonplace, 1950s apostates—from political analyst C. Wright Mills to poet Allen Ginsberg—found new audiences, and their work took on new significance.

These decades, then, are more complex, more ambiguous, and more interconnected than popular imagery suggests. The events and perspectives of the sixties did not spring full blown' and brand new into American life. For the 1960s, the 1950s are past as prologue.

The cold war was at the heart of postwar America. Beyond the immediate tensions that developed between the United States and the Soviet Union, the degree to which cold war ideology, imperatives, and necessities permeated American life was extraordinary. The Soviet threat precipitated an enormous buildup in America's defenses. Immediately after World War II the government had scaled back military spending dramatically. Within a few years, however, it had grown to monumental size for a nation not at war. This arms buildup had a significant impact on domestic life as well. No longer protected by the oceans that separated them from
most of the world, and with constant reminders of the perceived Soviet threat, Americans came to believe that nuclear war was likely.

Fears of Soviet bombs raining from the skies were matched by the specter of Soviet agents penetrating the fabric of American society. These supposed subversives were not only spies from the KGB, but American leftists working for Soviet interests. Extraordinary measures were taken to root out the suspected traitors. Investigations into “communist activities” were undertaken by various forces, from congressional committees to internal investigations by universities, school systems, and the entertainment industry. Civil liberties were constricted, thousands lost their jobs, books were banned, passports lifted—all rationalized under the rubric of the domestic fight against communism.

Public trials focused attention on the issue. In 1947 former State Department official Alger Hiss ran afoul of the House Un-American Activities Committee, especially one of its members, California freshman congressman Richard Nixon. Accused of passing secrets to a Soviet agent in the 1930s, Hiss proclaimed his innocence. After two trials, he went to jail for perjury. Nixon moved on to the Senate and the vice presidency, with Eisenhower in 1952. When the Soviets detonated their own atom bomb, cold war panic rose to new heights. Images of pervasive Soviet espionage led to suggestions that America's nuclear secrets had been stolen. Americans Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were charged with stealing one of those secrets. Tried in an atmosphere of intense anticommunism, they were convicted in 1951 and, ultimately, executed in 1953. At their sentencing, the judge not only cited them for espionage and treason, but held them responsible for starting the Korean war illustrating the degree and intensity of anticommunist sentiment by the early 1950s.

In 1950, searching for an issue to spark his reelection bid, Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy announced that he possessed the names of numerous individuals within the State Department who were "known communists." (The actual number McCarthy cited shifted over time as his assertion came under scrutiny.) Seizing upon the most important domestic issue of the first half of the 1950s, McCarthy tossed accusations wildly. His final charge, that the U.S. Army was trying to stop McCarthy's investigation of communist infiltration of American army posts, led to the 1954 televised public investigation known as the "Army-McCarthy Hearings," during which McCarthy's questionable tactics and meanspiritedness were exposed.

Condemned by the Senate, McCarthy faded from public view and died in 1957. But this did not mark the end of anticommunism. Anticommunist prerogatives remained at the heart of American foreign policy—from Cuba to Berlin to Southeast Asia—as well as a central concern of domestic American life. Institutions outside the government-Hollywood, labor unions, school districts, colleges and universities—had moved to follow the federal lead. Throughout the 1950s anticommunism shaped American events in international relations, domestic politics, and local activities. It precipitated a view, reinforced by the tensions of the cold war, that the world was a troubled place populated by agents of foreign powers bent on undermining the beneficence of American life. For student radicals and their generational peers, however, this sensibility had little place in a world in which other issues seemed much more pressing than Soviet expansionism or internal communist subversion.

The second crucial domestic issue of the 1950s proved much more important for the young sixties generation. Beginning in the middle 1950s, the movement for civil rights gained increasing public attention in its effort to end the legalized segregation of the races that existed in a large portion of the country. In the late nineteenth century, institutionalized segregation had created separate facilities for blacks and whites in schools, hotels, waiting rooms, restaurants, restrooms, drinking fountains, and buses. Blacks had been systematically disenfranchised, excluded from juries, and prohibited from marrying whites. Ruling in 1896 that facilities could be "separate" if they were "equal," the Supreme Court had deemed all this constitutional. Legal segregation spread not only throughout the Deep South but into Kansas, southern Illinois, Missouri, Delaware, Maryland, and even the nation's capital.

While movements to attack segregation had begun early in the century, their success was limited until the 1950s. Focusing on education, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund had won a series of small victories in the 1930s and 1940s. Its assault on school segregation culminated in the 1954 Supreme Court decision, Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, which declared school segregation unconstitutional. While southern school districts managed for years to block or stall much of the desegregation of their schools, the decision nonetheless marked both a turning point in civil rights activities and the most impo-tant civil rights decision in the Court's history.

A new consciousness began to grow among many southern blacks. No longer were they willing to tolerate the unpunished physical abuse visited upon them by whites. The brutal murder in 1955 of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till epitomized the situation for many. His two assailants were acquitted by an all-white jury, despite
being identified as Till's abductors. Future civil rights activist Anne Moody recalls, "I was fifteen years old when I began to hate people. I hated the white people who murdered Emmett Till. But I also hated Negroes. I hated them for not standing up and doing something about the murders."

This sense of resistance prompted many blacks to adopt new behavior with regard to civil rights questions. In December 1955 riding home from work on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man. Park's case became the springboard for organization of the black community of Montgomery into collective action to boycott the buses until the situation for blacks improved, and catapulted a young Montgomery minister, Martin Luther King Jr. to national prominence. During the boycott King developed his philosophy of nonviolent direct action as the means for battling segregation. Ultimately victorious over the bus company, the boycott initiated a series of direct confrontations with segregated institutions, often spearheaded by King's newly developed civil rights organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

School desegregation frequently captured national headlines. The 1951 order to desegregate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, led to a clash between state and federal authorities. When mobs threatened the black students and Arkansas governor Orval Faubus called out the National Guard to prevent integration, President Eisenhower sent federal troops to Little Rock to facilitate desegregation and to insure the students' safety. The troops remained stationed in Little Rock for the entire school year.

By 1960, civil rights had become not only the most pressing domestic issue, but one that captured the attention of the young. In it, young blacks and, then young whites found their first real political cause.

Throughout the postwar years, American popular culture, political figures, and social and religious leaders had trumpeted the virtues of contemporary society. No matter what one's class or race, individuals were influenced by a celebration of the domestic tranquility embodied in the white middle-class American family. Traditional gender-differentiated roles of American adults provided the structure within which children matured. Celebrated in popular novels, movies, and, especially, on television, the stereotypic white nuclear family appeared to offer prosperity, harmony, and security for everyone.

The images were continually reinforced. "Situation comedies," developed for the exploding television medium, offered one "typical" American family after another: the Cleavers on Leave It to Beaver, the Nelsons of The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet, the Stones of The Donna Reed Show, and the Anderson clan who believed that Father Knows Best. White, middle-class, and suburban, these television families and countless others created by the media suggested that "real life" was to be found at home, and not at the workplace. In these depictions men served as breadwinners, women stayed home, and children's problems emerged as the major concern of the modern family. Fathers monopolized the earning power of the family as well as the rationality to settle family issues. They would return home from work to find slightly hysterical mothers unable to cope with the latest domestic crisis and calmly settle the matter.

Subsequent analyses suggest that this model of family life was not as widespread as the media made it appear. The number of working wives grew steadily during the 1950s, from 25 percent in 1950 to 32 percent in 1960. Urban families, families of color, poor families, single-parent families, gays and lesbians, and many white, middle-class families shaped their lives by choice or by necessity-differently from the media model. The postwar period witnessed, for example, an enormous migration from the rural south to the urban north and west, necessitating adjustments to urban life for these new arrivals. Working hard, they tried to save so they could move out of the city, hoping to assimilate to mainstream middle class culture. Even while the realities of their lives differed starkly from those depicted on television, the cultural image of a cheerful white, nuclear family shaped their plans and dreams. Those who constructed their lives according to the sanctioned model often found them less fulfilling and more problematic than anticipated. Young people probably rebelled first. Postwar home life had been arranged to serve the new children who populated postwar America at an amazing rate. Thousands of suburban housing developments sprang up, offering many American families the chance to own their own homes. These segregated communities attracted young white couples with small children—working fathers, mothers at home, and kids at school. Parents began to fear that unregulated childhood activities might lead their progeny into the most-feared snare for fifties youth, juvenile delinquency. Structured activities grew rapidly Little League, Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts, Brownies, irl Scouts, music lessons, dance classes, and so on. Mothers became chauffeurs, shuttling children from one activity to another.

Young people will ultimately resist the efforts of adults to shape and control their maturation. The declaration by postwar white youth of their difference, if not their independence, from adults, might be symbolized by Elvis Presley. Hardly seen as a cultural revolution at the time, the emergence of rock 'n' roll in mainstream culture in the middle 1950s, epitomized by the enormous popular success of Elvis, marked the
clearest differentiation between parents and children in the 1950s. Growing out of black music, rock 'n' roll grabbed white teenagers with its youth concerns—dating, cars, sex, school, summer, dancing—and the physical drive of its music. Over the years, rock music would stitch itself into the American cultural fabric first, as a sign of teenage rebellion and then, in the 1960s, of generational difference. When Elvis Presley first appeared on The Ed Sullivan Show, parents looked on aghast as girls swooned. Boys grew their, sideburns longer and slicked their hair into ducktails.

If Elvis was the symbol for white teen rebellion—the one the mainstream media talked the most about—he had his counterparts in the black and Latino communities. For poor and ghetto youths, adolescent issues were joined with concerns about education, after-school work, both parents working outside the home, and lives not represented by "typical" media families. Young people throughout the culture began to question their place and their prospects, albeit in different settings. And everywhere music punctuated the emerging youth cultures. While adults frequently predicted the end of these music "fads;' one singing group symbolically spoke for many young people when they proclaimed "rock 'n' roll is here to stay." The sixties would prove right.

As young people grew older, the assumptions of their parents' lives were subjected to direct questioning. Without the background of depression and war, desire for material possessions and family stability proved much less strong for the younger generation. The virtues of suburban life seemed less appealing, the problems of America more compelling. The only socially acceptable path available to a young middle-class white woman was to become a wife and mother. For teenage girls, the eventual goal was to find a husband. Girls were not encouraged to think of their futures in: terms of work or careers. But many middle-class girls were expected to go to college. In addition, while television and mainstream magazines glorified domesticity, the youth culture and images of movie stars communicated messages about the possibility of feminine sexuality outside of marriage. Finally, women had been joining the labor force in increasing numbers. For working women, accepting or rejecting traditional feminine roles was not a choice. Economic necessity made it much more difficult to conform to the much celebrated life of full-time mom. All these messages competed with narrow notions of femininity that led directly to marriage. Although the change was not yet obvious, girls' links to their families were loosening.

Middle-class men found their assigned roles less than fulfilling. The pressures to provide for their families brought about extraordinary strains. Rates of divorce, alcoholism, heart disease, and other personal and social disorders all increased. Many white middle-class housewives also found their prescribed places stifling and depressing. When Betty Friedan interviewed Smith College alumnae, she found many of them unhappy with their lives despite having achieved most of the goals they had once thought would bring happiness—husband, family, home, affluence. Feeling alone in their disappointment, they rarely spoke to anyone about their concerns, considering it a personal failing rather than the results of narrow expectations for women. Many of their daughters, part of the college-bound generation already questioning the assumptions of fifties America, recognized that following in their mothers' footsteps would not bring them happiness. The oppressiveness of the "feminine mystique" wouldn't be fully articulated and analyzed until the second half of the 1960s, but its effects pervaded all of postwar American life, contradicting popular images of contented domesticity on the suburban homefront.

A white middle-class full-time housewife might be bored, but not many black women were privileged enough to be at home full-time. Most black men never had the opportunity to feel alienated in corporate white-collar jobs because such jobs were not available to them. Even the suburban communities that sprang up in the postwar years were segregated, enforced privately in the North by realtors and bankers rather than by the explicit laws that segregated the South. Class and race perpetuated exclusions while cultural images offered a steady diet of the beneficence of the "goodlife."

Young people—male and female, black and white, poor and prosperous, growing up in this world were ambivalent about reproducing their parents' lives and began to consider other paths to fulfillment. In the early 1960s this took the form of questioning the status quo, leading the way to the decade's social movements. This questioning and search for alternatives created one of the clear divisions between fifties parents and sixties children.

Among the pervasive images of the 1950s is the picture of the American intellectual—in the fifties phrase, "the egghead." In fact, intellectuals became more closely integrated into American life than in any previous era. Directly associated with this rise in intellectuals' prominence was the changing place of the university in American life. In the postwar years, spurred by economic prosperity and the GI Bill, which provided educational assistance to veterans, colleges and universities expanded in size and influence. Along with thousands of new college students, intellectuals, artists, and writers moved to college campuses This coincided
with a shift in intellectual temperament, as well. Once critics standing outside mainstream American life, many intellectuals now became supporters of the direction America was taking. They lent weight to the arguments concerning anticommunism and the cold war. These individuals had become central players in the postwar American consensus.

As with political and social life, intellectual and cultural life offered the same divided sense of surface harmony and subterranean rumblings. Once many intellectuals and artists had reveled in their Bohemianism and marginality. With their postwar respectability came derision for the avant-garde. They greeted new radical cultural eruptions not only with typical mainstream antagonism but with doubts about the authenticity of these endeavors. The most prominent group to endure this derision were the Beats, the coterie of poets and novelists who gathered in Greenwich Village in the late 1940s and early 1950s. With the publication of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956) and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), the Beats gained public attention. They rejected materialism, 9-to-5 jobs, families, monogamy, and respectability, embracing instead explorations of feelings, sexuality, and immediate experience. The mass media dismissed them as self-indulgent, bongo-playing Beatniks (their emergence coinciding with the orbiting of the Russian satellite Sputnik). Many leading intellectuals took equally harsh aim, finding the Beats crude, foolish, and anti-intellectual.

Despite this scorn, Beat life attracted many young people. Living for immediate experience and a disdain for making money, Beats proved to be progenitors of the youth revolts of the 1960s. The sixties counterculture found cultural antecedents in the Beat movement. Allen Ginsberg became an important figure, while Kerouac's books continued to draw youthful readers. Neal Cassidy, the model for Kerouac's hero in *On the Road*, would reappear among the Merry Pranksters who followed novelist Ken Kesey in the drug culture of late sixties San Francisco. There were other rumblings beneath the surface complacency of fifties culture-stirrings either ignored or dismissed by mainstream critics that would find new adherents in the tumultuous world of sixties culture. In 1947 an avant-garde theatrical group, The Living Theatre, was founded by Julian Beck and Judith Malina. Putting on plays in their living room and later in very small performance spaces, Beck and Malina worked in relative obscurity for most of the 1950s. By the 1960s, however, their notions of a radical theater and of pushing the boundaries of art meshed with the emerging cultural vision of the new era. The Living Theatre became one of the most central and infamous artistic institutions of the time.

In the visual arts as well, new modes emerged to contest the prevailing forms. In the late 1950s Pop Art sprang to public attention, and was initially derided as simplistic and silly. Cartoon figures, soup cans, soft sculptures of everyday objects—all these seemed unlikely subjects for artistic representation. Pop Art's creations and its practitioners, especially Andy Warhol, would nevertheless find growing audiences in the 1960s. Warhol's move from canvas to cinema also helped mark the emergence of film as a central independent art form of the decade.

A number of young novelists who began to write in the postwar years found few readers and little critical response, as their work appeared out of touch with prevailing sensibilities. The satiric wartime vision of Joseph Heller in *Catch-22* seemed inappropriate to a public accustomed to the searing realism of World War II novels such as Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* or James Jones's *From Here to Eternity*. By the 1960s, however, Heller's view of war found larger audiences as it connected with contemporary attitudes in general, and with the growing cynicism about Vietnam in particular. Similarly, the offbeat sensibilities expressed in the early novels of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., were confusing to critics and readers in the fifties. Relegated to the science fiction section of bookstores, Vonnegut's view of American life would, like Heller's, acquire increasing numbers of devotees in the new decade.

A different literary corpus grew out of the African-American community: novels and plays that mirrored the growing prominence of racial concerns. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, published in 1952 and frequently cited as the most important American novel of the postwar years, swept across twentieth-century black history, from the segregated South to the black colleges and, finally, to the radical movements of Harlem. James Baldwin's novels explored the northern black experience and homosexuality. On the stage, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* depicted contemporary black family life, while LeRoi Jones's (later Amiri Baraka) *Dutchman*, *The Slave*, and *The Toilet* offered even more searing portraits of American racism.

Throughout the culture of the 1950s we can identify iconoclasts, the critics and artistic movements at odds with prevailing notions of American life. Often viewed as angry or misguided, or ignored altogether, postwar artistic rebels now appear to have represented stirrings of the cultural transformations to come. Some of the practitioners themselves-Ginsberg, Warhol, Beck and Malina, Heller, Vonnegut, Baldwin, and Baraka—would emerge as important figures in sixties culture. In other cases the works would find new and often larger audiences among the young. In body and spirit, these artists had begun to develop perspectives and styles that would attract disciples and audiences in the new decade.
By the early 1960s the postwar consensus had run its course. National and world events, from college campuses to Vietnam, brought many of the basic tenets of American life into sharp consideration. "We are people of this generation" began the Port Huron Statement, the 1962 founding statement of the new left Students for a Democratic Society, "bred in at least modest comfort, housed now universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit. This handful of students- and countless others-women, blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, gays-found little in 1950s mainstream culture and politics to explain inequalities, restrictions, and discontent, or to enable them to analyze the new world. The underground critiques of the 1950s, as well as movements such as civil rights, offered the first hints of new perspectives and new possibilities. The young and some of the old-critics of the 1950s consensus or apostates from it-would join to confront the new realities of the era. And "the sixties" began.