**Aim: Was life in the 1950’s good or bad for Americans?**

**Topic: Life in the 1950’s**

**Document #1: Consumerism in the 1950’s**

When World War II was over, people had saved up from both serving overseas and at home (both men and women had an income), and demanded all of the consumer products they could not have the four years of the war and the whole Great Depression. The American economy began to boom! During the war, people and countries could not buy what they needed (rationing). Almost all money and resources went for war goods. After the war, the United States began selling billions of dollars’ worth of replacement goods to other countries. Production and exports meant more jobs and money for Americans. People began replacing worn out goods and burying new ones with the money saved from the war, earned from two incomes and the use of credit cards. In addition, there was a **baby boom** as people returned home, women were happy to see their loved ones again after the war, and with the saved money, people could now afford to have more children. In 1952 the unemployment rate was a historic low of 3.0%. However, for many of the millions of the returning veterans, life was difficult returning home and readjusting to civilian life and civilian jobs after many years overseas. Additionally, as men came home, women, African Americans and Native Americans lost the jobs they gained during the war time boom. Farmers also began overproducing again because of new technological developments. The **G.I. Bill** was passed to help returning soldiers financially, including help with college, homes and loans.

As the economy was growing, America began to change. The economy was strong and post war wages were high, creating an age of **consumerism (buying personal/consumer products);** families bought cars (usually two), refrigerators, radios and televisions. **Shopping Centers** were created and now people could shop where they lived or travel on the highway to major shopping malls in central locations. The car greatly expanded society. The “drive-in” movie was created, but more importantly the wide-spread use of the car changed the American landscape. As more people bought cars, President Dwight D. Eisenhower developed the Interstate Highway System – creating massive highways across the United States. This growth of highways allowed and use of cars allowed families to move out of the city into small towns and **suburbs (towns outside of the city)**. People began to buy homes in the suburbs, communities outside the cities. Builder, William Levitt, began his first big project in 1947 on **Long Island**, where he put up 17,000 new suburban homes. He called this project **Levittown**. In these areas, not only were the houses the same, but people were expected to look, act, and follow the same rules, which is known as **conformity**—Women were expected to go back to tradition roles of **housewives** and more men became **white-collar workers**, meaning that more had jobs as doctors, lawyers, managers, etc. rather than working in factories. African Americans were not allowed to own or rent in Levittown because he feared that if he sold to blacks, whites would not buy. **Shopping centers** with modern department stores sprang up near the suburban housing developments. No longer did consumers have to travel to the city to buy what they wanted. As a result, cities began to decline. In addition, the use of the airplane for traveling allowed people to move and travel faster as well. Due to all of these developments, Americans were buying houses and settling into the suburbs at an unprecedented rate. This also led to the growth of **“The Sunbelt,”** the growth of Californian and Southwestern cities.

**Document #2: Fear and Conformity in the 1950’s**

The Cold War had an important impact on the American home front. The United States became worried about the growing power of the Soviet Union (in the size of the land it was conquering, the size of its army, and its new nuclear weapons and the first Satellite launched into space, **Sputnik**). In order to stay ahead of Russia, the United States began to rebuild its military; creating newer and more weapons and technology (especially nuclear weapons) and racing for space technology. This became known as **the arms race** and **space** race with Russia. With Russia developing the atomic bomb in 1948, society was scared that atomic war could happen at any time. In the late 1950s, a public opinion poll showed that 40 percent of Americans were seriously considering building a bomb shelter to protect from the atomic bomb and radioactive fallout. Major airlines, Detroit automakers, IBM, the phone companies and Wall Street planned employee shelters. A farmer in Iowa even built a fallout shelter for 200 cows! Popular Mechanics magazine published a fallout shelter blueprint for the do-it-yourself bomb shelter. Bomb shelters costing from $100 to as much as $5,000 for an underground suite with phone and toilet were selling like hotcakes in the growing suburban communities. Survival stores around the nation sold air blowers, filters, flashlights, fallout protection suits, first aid kits and water. General Foods and General Mills sold dry-packaged meals as underground rations. In schools, students practiced “duck and cover drills” under their desk and evacuating down to the basements which were built with extra led in case of atomic attack. Also in schools, President Eisenhower signed into law adding “under God” to the pledge of allegiance to help teach kids to be religious (unlike the Communists). Patriotism in schools was an important part of the curriculum as well.

With the memory of World War II splitting up families for four years and nuclear tension and Communist fear setting in, the country longed for and encouraged the return of an ideal family life. The 1950’s, though were also a **conformist society** – everyone and every family was supposed to act and dress and certain “normal way.” Even young students and teenagers were forced to conform, acting and dressing like their parents. In school, women took Home Economics to help them be better prepared for married life, whose main goal was to make the home a place of peace and order where the husband can relax and enjoy himself. Advice in Home Economics classes included: having dinner ready and then cleaning up after dinner, freshening up for the husband came home because he was around single women all day and his wife should look pretty, cleaning before your husband comes home, taking care of children, minimizing noise (washer, dryer vacuum) – do this before he comes home, avoid using the phone before, during, or after dinner, don’t complain to your husband, make him comfortable, listen to your husband, and “make the evening his” – never complain if he does not take you out to dinner or to other places of entertainment; instead try to understand his world of strain and pressure and his need to be home and relax.” This is why the 1950’s was also known as the good old days.

Movies and television shows reflected both the good times, attitudes and the fears. Shows such as “Ozzie and Harriet” and “Leave it to Beaver” showed the family life, wife, husband and two kids and enjoying living in the suburbs, with the wife performing all of the duties of a good wife taught in school. Hollywood also showed the fears of society, producing doomsday films including “Dr. Strangelove: Or How I Learned to Love the Bomb” where America and Russia actually go to nuclear war and destroy the earth. Not to be outdone, television produced its own prime time doomsday. In the premiere episode of the classic series "The Twilight Zone," a young astronaut returns to Earth to discover that a nuclear war has left him, like the Biblical Adam, alone.

**Document #3: “McCarthyism”**

The government created the **Department of Defense** (in charge of the army and defending the nation) and the **Central Intelligence Agency**, **CIA** (which was in charge of gathering information and carrying out top secret missions. The government began investigating Americans and had special Congressional and Senate committees which investigated people and charged them with treason (crimes against the government) and spying. HUAC “black-listed” (put them on lists which said they shouldn’t/couldn’t be hired) many people including Hollywood actors! The most notable trial was when **Julius and Ethel Rosenberg** were convicted in court of giving the Soviets secrets about atomic weapons and sentenced to the electric chair. Senator Joseph McCarthy was a Republican Senator from Wisconsin from 1947-1957. Senator McCarthy began an anti-Communist crusade to investigate American institutions and people to find communists; bringing them before the Senate and interrogating them. Between McCarthy’s Senate Hearings and HUAC’s actions, hundreds of people (including in the State Department) were imprisoned and thousands more lost their jobs (black-listed). **“McCarthyism”** became the term used in describing going after communists and those disloyal to America. When Senator McCarthy tried to investigate the army, Americans began to doubt Senator McCarthy and his evidence. Edward R. Murrow in his news broadcast, “See it Now,” attacked McCarthy. Murrow stated

“*His primary achievement has been in confusing the public mind, as between the internal and the external threats of Communism. We must not confuse dissent (disagreement) with disloyalty. We must remember always that accusation is not proof and that conviction depends upon evidence and due process of law. We will not walk in fear, of one another. We will not be driven by fear into an age of unreason…*

*We proclaim ourselves, as indeed we are, the defenders of freedom, wherever it continues to exist in the world, but we cannot defend freedom abroad by deserting it at home. The actions of the junior Senator from Wisconsin have caused alarm and dismay amongst our allies abroad, and given considerable comfort to our enemies. And whose fault is that? Not really his. He didn't create this situation of fear; he merely exploited it—and rather successfully.”*

McCarthy’s Senate hearings stopped shortly after, and the public and his fellow Senators turned against him (even voting to condemn him in 1954). Today many people compared Joseph McCarthy’s actions to the “Salem Witch Trials,” for the way he accused people and brought them to trial (sometimes unfairly). Arthur Miller wrote *The Crucible* (about the Salem Witch Hunts and Witch Trials) in 1953 as a metaphor for McCarthyism.

**Aim: Was life in the 1950’s good or bad for America?**

**Topic: The culture of the 1950’s**

**Task:**

**Part I:**

**1) Read each development and aspect of life in the 1950’s**

**2) Describe the changes taking place**

**3) Evaluate the impact of the development on American life and culture**

**Part II: Answer the Questions that follow the Graphic Organizer in 3-4 sentences each.**

**Part III: Read Edward R. Murrow vs. Senator Joseph McCarthy and answer the questions that follow.**

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| **Development** | **Describe the changes taking place** | **Evaluate the impact on American life and culture** |
| **#1: American Consumerism** |  |  |
| **#2: Suburban Life** |  |  |
| **#3: The Space and Arms Race** |  |  |
| **#4: 1950’s Conformity** |  |  |
| **#5 Communist Fear and McCarthyism** |  |  |

1. **Why do you think all of these changes were occurring?**
2. **Based on your graphic organizer, was the 1950’s more of a good or bad time for America? Explain.**
3. **What similarities and differences to today’s generation existed? Do you think the 1950’s is more similar or different to today’s society?**

**Activity #2: Edward R. Murrow vs. McCarthy:**

When Senator McCarthy tried to investigate the army, Americans began to doubt Senator McCarthy and his evidence. Edward R. Murrow in his news broadcast, “See it Now,” attacked McCarthy. Murrow stated

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McCarthy’s Senate hearings stopped shortly after, and the public and his fellow Senators turned against him (even voting to condemn him in 1954). He in office a few years later in 1957. Today many people compared Joseph McCarthy’s actions to the “Salem Witch Trials,” for the way he accused people and brought them to trial (sometimes unfairly). Arthur Miller wrote *The Crucible* (about the Salem Witch Hunts and Witch Trials) in 1953 as a metaphor for McCarthyism.

**1) List 3 criticisms by Edward R. Murrow of the McCarthy hearings. Do you agree or disagree with these criticisms?**

**2) Why are the McCarthy hearings compared to the Salem Witch Trials?**

**3) What does Edward R. Murrow mean when he said it wasn’t McCarthy’s fault? Do you agree or disagree?**