

## **The Fifties** **A Decade of Political and Social Transition**

The class will start **IN PERSON ONLY** the week of September 23 and meet for 9 weeks, ending the week before Thanksgiving.

In contrast to the decades preceding and following it, the 1950s are often remembered as an orderly era marked by prosperity for middle-class families, wholesome television shows, and a transition in popular music from Sinatra to Elvis. However, significant events in those years were a precursor to dramatic changes in society and politics that would come later.

Those events include the Korean War, CIA coups in Iran and Guatemala, US involvement in Indochina, the McCarthy hearings, *Brown v. Board of Education* as well as the arrest of Rosa Parks and desegregation in a Little Rock, Arkansas high school, the seeds of second wave feminism, birth of rock and roll, and the growth of television. The seminar will explore these and other topics in light of what led to these events, the cultural mood that influenced them, and how they were a catalyst for what happened in the 1960s.

Participants will research and make a 25-30 minute presentation from a list of topics provided by the moderators. A question and discussion period will follow each presentation.

### **Initial Presentation Topic Ideas**

**Fear of Communism:** Korean War, 1950-1953, sometimes called the forgotten war

- Trial and execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, 1953
- McCarthy hearings in 1953 and 1954
- US involvement in Indochina, starting in 1955

**Presidential Elections:** Eisenhower vs Adlai Stevenson in 1952 and 1956.

**Foreign Intervention:** The CIA and Britain were responsible for the coup that overthrew the leader of Iran in 1953. In Guatemala, the CIA orchestrated a coup in 1954 to overthrow another democratically elected president.

**Civil Rights:** Federal intervention - the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling on *Brown v. Board of Education* and the use of troops to enforce the integration of Little Rock Central High School in 1957.

Activism - The arrest of Rosa Parks in 1955 and the 13-month Montgomery bus boycott that followed, leading to the Supreme Court ruling that segregation on public buses was unconstitutional.

**Early Feminism:** Many women were active on a range of issues, including the birth control pill (e.g., Margaret Sanger) and civil rights. (This could be divided into two topics.)

**Polio:** A 1952 survey found Americans feared only nuclear annihilation more than polio. The Salk vaccine came in 1955.

**Cold War:** Arms race between US and Russia -the hydrogen bomb brought the arms race to a new level. The bomb required new massive computing power.

**Interstate Highway System:** With the development of superhighways across the country, initiated by the National Interstate and Defense Highway Act of 1956, community planning was suddenly geared to the automobile.

**Statehood for Alaska and Hawaii in 1959:** This involved debates in Congress along ideological differences, race, economic interests, the Red Scare, and other issues.

**Conservatism:** William F. Buckley, National Review and John Birch Society.

**Golden Age of Television:** In 1950, 9% of Americans had TVs; by 1959, nearly 90% had them. Its depiction of and influence on American society, especially families, through shows and advertising.

**Birth of Rock and Roll:** While Ricky Nelson et al remained popular throughout the decade, Elvis brought a dramatic shift to popular music.

The moderators will provide additional presentation topic ideas in their “Welcome to the Seminar” email.

### **Suggested Resources:**

The moderators highly recommend *The Fifties*, by David Halberstam (very readable and entertaining).

Other books on the decade include *The Fifties in America*, John C. Super, ed.; *This Is Who We Were: in the 1950s*, by Scott Derks; *America in the Fifties*, by Andrew J. Dunar; *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were*, by Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak.

The moderators can recommend other resources for specific topics.

Please email any questions to our joint email: [j7m4russell@gmail.com](mailto:j7m4russell@gmail.com).