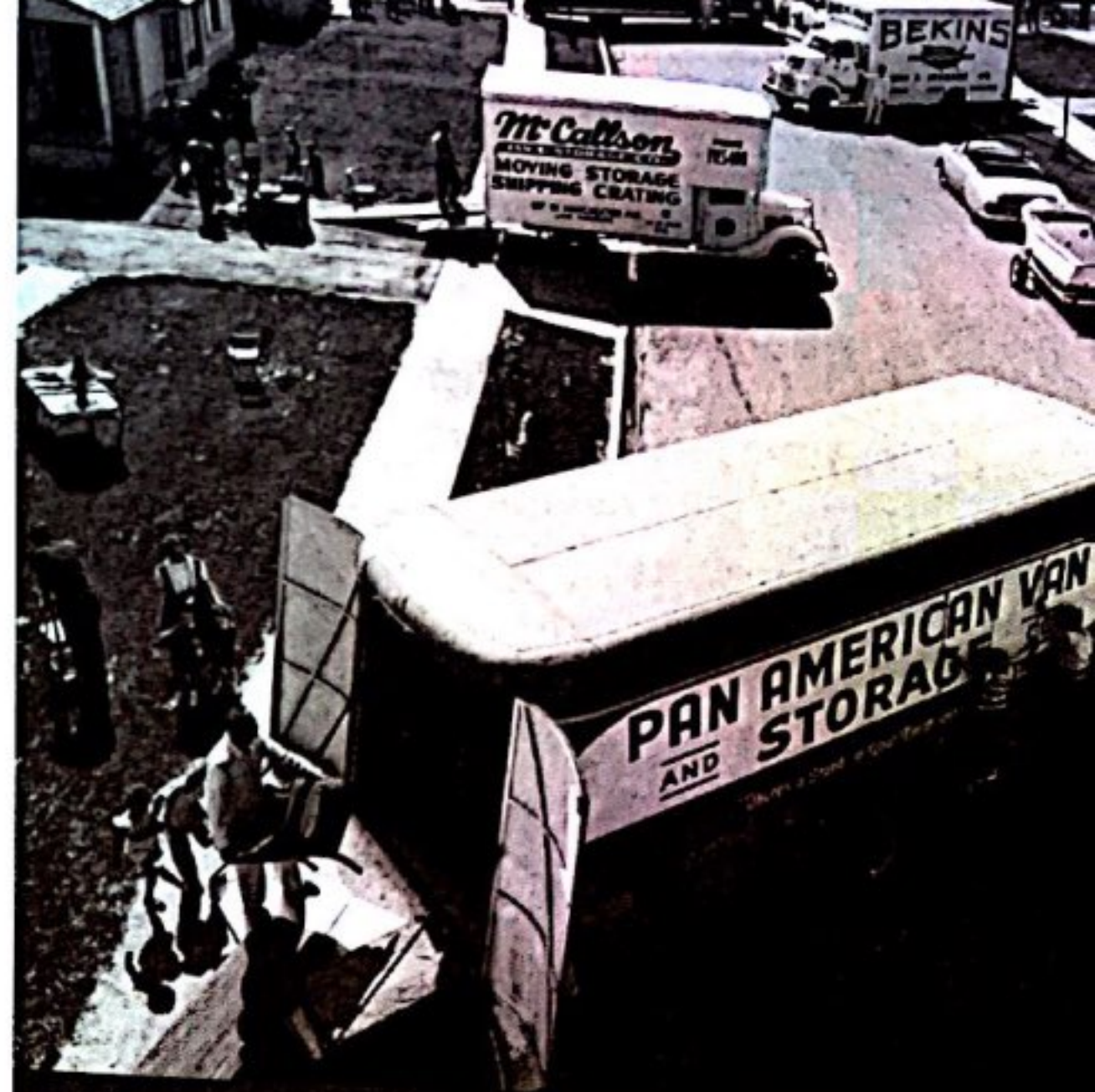



of changing national population distribution. Between 1940 and 1960, more than 40 million Americans moved to the suburbs, one of the largest mass migrations in history. Rural regions suffered the most dramatic decline in population, but people also came by the thousands from older industrial cities, seeking, as one father put it, a place where "a kid could grow up with grass stains on his pants." During the same time period, many older industrial cities lost population.



>> Americans' yearning for a better life after World War II, coupled with innovations in home building, led to an explosion of growth in suburban areas.

 **Interactive Flipped Video**

Mass Culture in the 1950s

Suburban Migration

Causes and Effects of Suburban Growth People flocked to the suburbs in part because the nation suffered from a severe shortage of urban housing. During the depression and World War II, new housing construction had come to a near standstill. At war's end, as Americans married and formed families, they went in search of a place they could call their own.

Fortunately, at this time of peak demand, developers figured out how to build affordable housing in a hurry. William Levitt became a leader in mass producing suburban homes. Entire rows of houses in Levittown, a suburb of New York City on Long Island, were built using the same plan. This method enabled workers to build houses in weeks rather than in months. On the installment plan, buyers could pay \$58 a month toward the cost of a home. Demand for the homes was so great that Levitt built two other Levittowns—one outside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and the other in New Jersey. These houses were ideal for young couples starting out because they were affordable and comfortable. Other developers adopted Levitt's innovative techniques, and suburbs were soon springing up across the country.

>> Objectives

Examine the rise of the suburbs and the growth of the interstate highway system.

Explain the causes and effects of prosperity in the 1950s on consumers.

Discuss postwar changes in family life.

Describe changes in education in the postwar period.

Describe the rise of new forms of mass culture.

>> Key Terms

consumerism
median family
income
nuclear family
Benjamin Spock
Interstate Highway
Act
California Master
Plan
Billy Graham

by the government. State and federal governments constructed thousands of miles of highways that linked the suburbs to cities. New home buyers also benefited from the GI bill and the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), which provided low-interest loans. FHA-backed loans allowed home buyers to pay as little as 5 to 10 percent of the purchase price and to pay off their mortgages over 30 years.

Residents of new suburbs faced the challenge of establishing new towns with churches, synagogues, schools, and police and fire departments. Through these institutions, the suburbanites forged a sense of community. During the 1950s, the suburbs became increasingly self-contained. While suburban residents of earlier generations had depended on the city for entertainment and shopping, the postwar suburban dweller could find a vast array of goods and services in nearby shopping centers.

Interstates Support Migration and Prosperity

Free enterprise was supported by government policy to improve the quality of life in suburban communities. Committed to the idea of easing automobile travel, President Eisenhower authorized the first funding of the interstate system in 1953. Further legislation

Highway Act, which authorized funds to build thousands of miles of highway consisting of multilane expressways that would connect the nation's major cities.

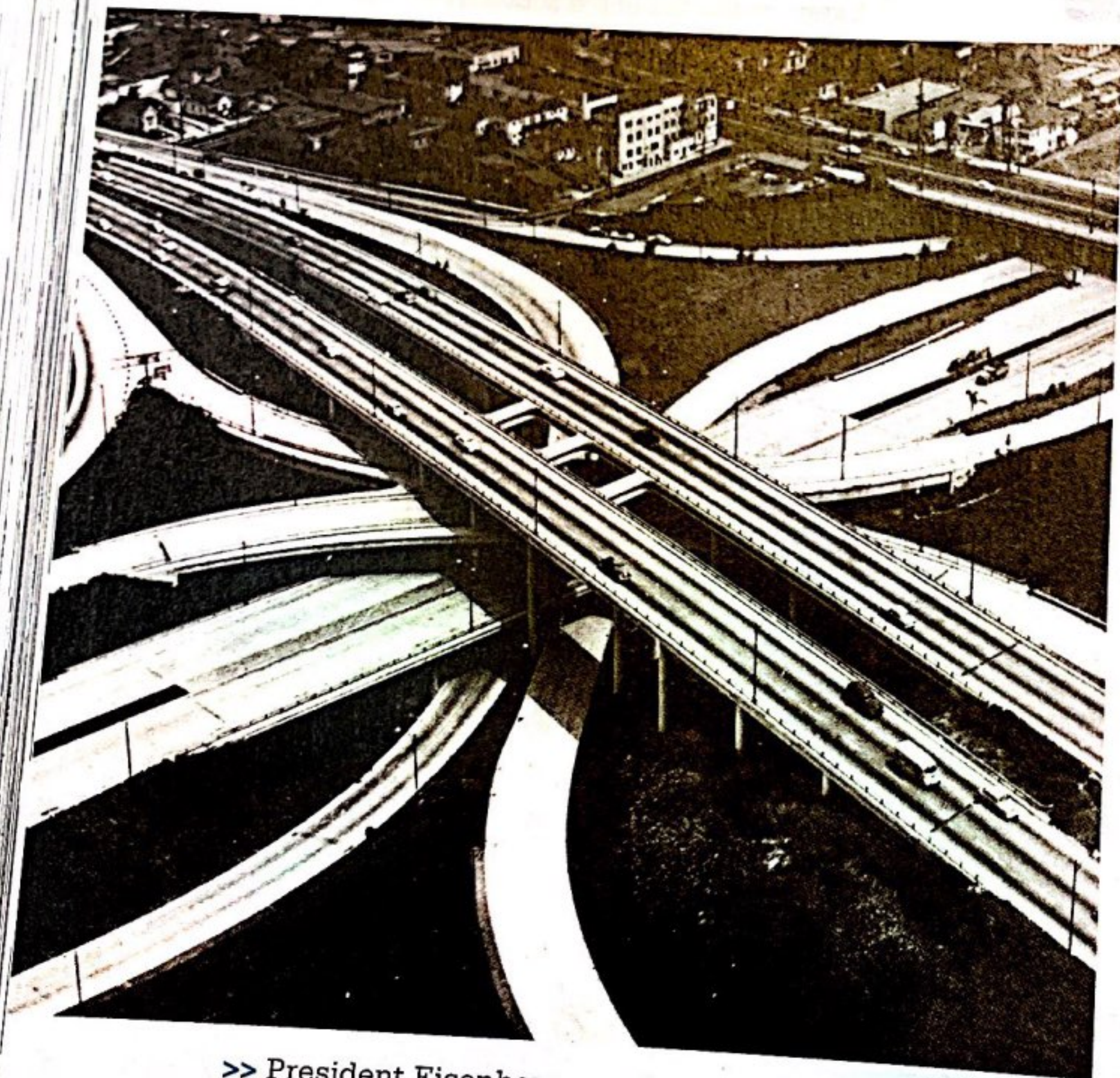
Such expressways, Eisenhower argued, would safely carry the nation's growing automobile traffic, boost economic prosperity, and provide a valuable transportation network to strengthen national defense. This represented the biggest expenditure on public works in history, bigger by far than any project undertaken during the New Deal. In 1956, further recognition of President Eisenhower's role in establishing the massive highway system led to a renaming of the highways. It became the Dwight D. Eisenhower System of Interstate and Defense Highways.

Besides easing commutes from suburbs to cities, highways boosted the travel and vacation industries. Vacationers drove to national parks, to beaches, and to new destinations, such as Las Vegas. With more money and more children, families sought leisure activity. Walt Disney met this demand by building an extraordinary amusement park in California. Disneyland excited the imagination with visions of the future, including make-believe rides in space.

Technological Innovations Lead to the "Car Culture" During the 1920s, automobile ownership had soared in the United States. With the explosion of suburban growth in the 1950s, Americans grew even more dependent upon their cars. The number of registered automobiles jumped from 26 million in 1945 to 60 million in 1960.

These new automobiles tended to have big engines and enormous horsepower. They came with the newest technology, such as power steering and brakes and automatic transmissions. Harley Earl of the Ford Motor Company captured the mood of the 1950s by designing cars with lots of chrome that reminded people of airplanes.

While some suburbanites rode the train or other forms of mass transportation, Americans increasingly depended upon their cars to commute to work. Suburbanites also needed their cars to shop at suburban shopping malls. Entrepreneurs opened fast-food restaurants and drive-in movie theaters, both of which catered to the car culture. While these businesses flourished, many older businesses, often located in older city neighborhoods, struggled to survive.

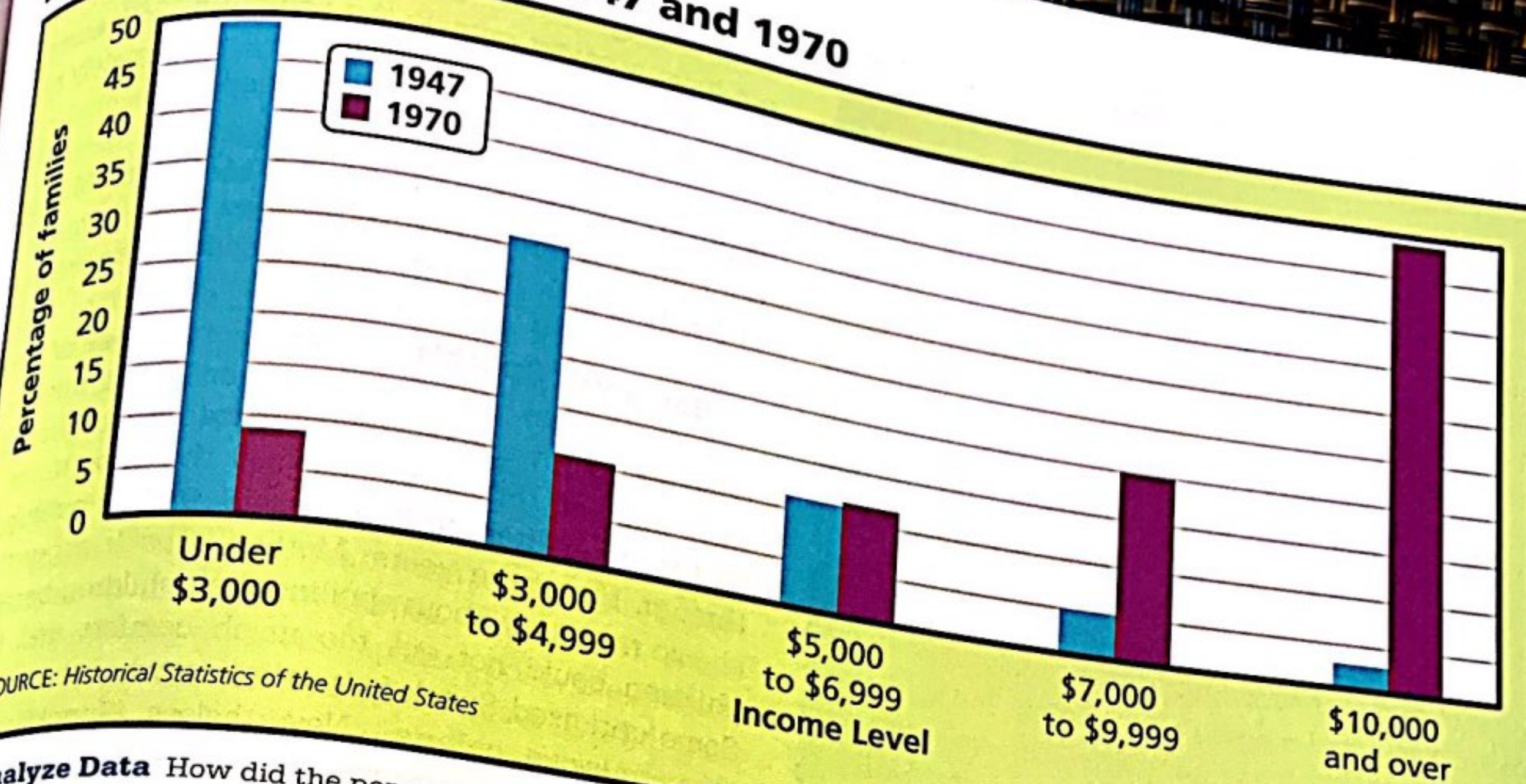


>> President Eisenhower authorized funding of the massive new interstate highway system. One outcome was that new suburbanites could more easily commute by car to jobs in major cities.

 **Interactive Illustration**

? CHECK UNDERSTANDING How did suburban free enterprise benefit from the "car culture"?

Median Family Income, 1947 and 1970



SOURCE: Historical Statistics of the United States

>> Analyze Data How did the percentage change in the top two income brackets shown affect U.S. consumer culture?

Increased Consumption and Consumerism

For much of our history, Americans had been taught to save their money. "A penny saved is a penny earned," advised Benjamin Franklin. However, as the U.S. economy began to boom in the postwar era, Americans were caught up in a wave of **consumerism**, buying as much as they could, much of it on credit. What accounted for this spending spree?

Free Enterprise System Improves Standards of Living One reason Americans spent more was that they had more money to spend. During the 1950s, **median family income**, or average family income, rose from \$3,319 to \$5,417.

The average American family now had twice as much real income as the average family had during the prosperous years of the 1920s. Consumer-oriented companies found new and innovative ways to encourage buying on credit. For example, General Motors advertised its cars with the slogan "Buy Now, Pay Later." The Diner's Club introduced the first credit card.

Technological Innovations Drive New Conveniences Embracing the free-enterprise system, American businesses developed technological and purchasing innovations that improved the standard

of living. Home appliances topped the list of the goods that Americans bought. Families purchased electric washing machines and dryers, refrigerators and ranges. These labor-saving appliances helped transform housework, lessening the physical demands of everything from washing clothes to preserving foods.

With money to spend, easy credit, and new goods to buy, shopping became a new pastime for Americans. Supermarkets, where customers could buy everything from milk to mops, appeared. Shopping centers sprouted all over suburbia.

One product that Americans bought in record numbers was a television. In 1946, manufacturers produced fewer than 6,000 TV sets. Seven years later, Americans purchased 7 million sets, and by the end of the decade, 90 percent of all households owned a television.

? IDENTIFY CAUSE AND EFFECT What were some reasons why consumption skyrocketed in the postwar era?

Families and Communities in the Fifties

American society had been shaken to its core by the mass mobilizations and disruption brought about by World War II. As Americans readjusted to life in

life and community.

The "Ideal" American Family During World War II, many women—including married women with children—had gone off to work in factories. In 1943, women made up 25 percent of the workers in the wartime auto industry. With the war's end, however, most of the women who had entered the workforce returned to being homemakers. Now, a more traditional image of the family took hold, one in which women stayed home and men served as "breadwinners." Women who wanted a career outside the home faced social pressures to rethink their decisions.

During the 1950s, the ideal family was one in which men worked and supported their families and women stayed home and reared their children. In the popular magazines of the postwar era, social scientists and other opinion makers described the **nuclear family**, or a household consisting of a mother and father and their children, as the backbone of American society. For the nuclear family to function smoothly, experts claimed, women had to accept their role as homemakers. Television shows and movies made similar assertions. For example, in the 1955 Hollywood movie *The Tender Trap*, actress Debbie Reynolds declared, "A woman isn't a woman unless she's been married and had children."



>> Women in the 1950s were encouraged to return to traditional family roles by staying home to raise families.

held one third of the nation's jobs. Approximately 70 percent of these women workers were married.

Baby Boom Increases Focus on Children More than in the past, family life revolved around children. Not surprisingly, the best-selling book of the era was Dr.

Benjamin Spock's Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care. Parents bought and read his book because they wanted expert advice on how to raise their children. Spock emphasized the importance of nurturing children, from their earliest days as infants through their teen years. Mothers, Spock suggested, should not worry about spoiling their children because children could not get too much comfort and love. Some criticized Spock for promoting what they called "a permissive culture." Nevertheless, Spock's book remained extremely popular for several decades.

Another sign of the degree to which family life revolved around children was the amount of money parents spent on their children. Some parents defended their spending by arguing that such spending was guaranteed against the recurrence of another depression.

As baby boomers became teens, their impact on the economy and American culture became even more noticeable. While as children they received toys, such as Davy Crockett caps and Barbie dolls, as teens they purchased very expensive items. As *LIFE* magazine observed:

The time is past when a boy's chief possession was his bike and a girl's party wardrobe consisted of a fancy dress worn with a string of dime-store pearls. . . . Today's teenagers surround themselves with a fantastic array of garish and often expensive baubles and amusements. They own 10 million phonographs, over a million TV sets, 13 million cameras.

—*LIFE*, August 31, 1959

Billy Graham Contributes to a Religious Revival The 1950s also witnessed a revival of religion in the United States. Organized religious groups became more powerful and more houses of worship were built. Regular church attendance rose from about 50 million in

of churches and magazines in suburban communities across the country helped to strengthen communities ties. The evangelist **Billy Graham** attracted millions to religious revivals that he held around the nation. Roman Catholic bishop Fulton Sheen effectively used television to reach audiences estimated at 10 million a week. During the 1950s, Congress added the words "In God We Trust" to the dollar bill and "under God," to the Pledge of Allegiance. These additions were aimed at making clear the contrast between the centrality of religion in American society and the atheist basis of communist societies.

Specific Needs Lead to Medical Innovations

During the 1950s, American families benefited from numerous advances in medicine. By 1952, Dr. Jonas Salk was refining a vaccine against polio, the disease that had struck down Franklin Roosevelt and that, in 1952 alone, had crippled tens of thousands and killed 1,400, mostly children. By 1960, the widespread distribution of Salk's new vaccine and an oral vaccine developed by Albert Sabin had nearly eliminated the disease.

At the same time, antibiotics, such as penicillin, came into widespread use.

The antibiotics helped control numerous infectious diseases caused by bacteria, such as whooping cough and tuberculosis. As a result of these medical advances and a better understanding of the importance of diet, children born after 1946 had a longer life expectancy than those born before 1946.

? CONNECT How did the focus on children and teenagers help develop prosperity during the 1950s?

Educational Opportunities and Priorities


As the economy grew, so too did opportunities for Americans to attain higher education. A more educated work force boosted economic productivity. In 1940, only about 15 percent of college-age Americans attended college. By the early 1960s, however, close to 40 percent did. The percentage of Americans who completed high school also rose sharply. "The astonishing growth of education in the late 1940s (and thereafter)," wrote historian James Patterson, "seemed yet another sign that the American Dream was well and alive."

Defense Spending Shapes Education Priorities

New priorities meant that students had expanded opportunities. In Texas, for example, the state



>> In 1954, Dr. Jonas Salk created a polio vaccine. The vaccine was ordered for all American children and was eventually used around the globe to virtually eradicate polio.

 **Interactive Gallery**



>> A combination of more educational opportunities and a large baby-boom population contributed to full classrooms across the nation.

legislature passed laws guaranteeing young people the chance to attend public school through the twelfth grade. Large sums of money were needed to meet the education needs of the baby-boom generation. Most of the funding for education came from local and state governments, but after the Soviet Union launched Sputnik 1 in 1957, many Americans called for more federal funds for education.

In a mood of crisis, Congress quickly approved the National Defense Education Act. Its \$1 billion program was aimed at producing more scientists and science teachers. The act authorized money for loans to high school and college graduates to continue their scientific education.

Education Becomes More Accessible The postwar era saw the stirrings of a movement to make education more accessible. Many states poured funds into their public universities, making it easier for ordinary Americans to attend college. California, for example, established a **California Master Plan**, which called for three tiers of higher education: research universities, state colleges, and community colleges. All of them were to be accessible to all of the state's citizens. Other states also built or expanded their college systems.

On another front, in 1954, the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* that segregated

schools were... However, it would be years before many schools were actually integrated.

? EXPLAIN How did American educational priorities change in the years following World War II?

Television Shapes American Culture

In 1938, when television was still just a curiosity, B. White, author of *Charlotte's Web*, wrote that it "was going to be the test of the modern world. . . . We shall stand or fall by the television." While White's view may have been exaggerated, clearly television has had an enormous impact on American society.

Between 1945 and 1960, Americans purchased television sets at a faster pace than they had bought either radios or cars during the 1920s. The popularity of this new technology threatened the movie industry because families stayed home to watch TV rather than go out to watch movies at the theater.

Although television attracted viewers of all ages, it had a special influence on children. Baby-boom children rushed home from school to watch the *Howdy Doody Show* or the *Mickey Mouse Club*. Children also watched hours of cartoons and shows featuring their favorite superheroes, such as the Lone Ranger. Westerns were especially popular during the 1950s and early 1960s.

Among the most memorable shows were sitcoms about families. Fifty million Americans tuned in each week to watch the *I Love Lucy* show, starring the comedic actress Lucille Ball. Other popular family sitcoms included *Leave It to Beaver*, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, and *Father Knows Best*.

These shows reflected and reinforced the ideal of the 1950s family. None of the family sitcoms had important African American characters. None of the major characters got divorced. Major real-life problems, such as mental illness, alcoholism, and personal depression, rarely, if ever, appeared. Writes David Halberstam, "No family problem was so great that it could not be cleared up within the allotted twenty-two minutes."

Even before television emerged in the 1950s, a mass national culture had begun to develop in the United States. Nationally broadcast radio programs, Hollywood films, and other forms of popular culture had helped erode distinct regional and ethnic cultures. Television sped up and reinforced this process. Americans in every region of the country watched the same shows and bought the same goods they saw advertised.

Television changed political campaigns. During the 1952 presidential campaign, Americans could see the



>> Television gained such popularity during the 1950s that many families got into the habit of watching their favorite shows even while eating dinner.

money could pay more advertising time. The impact of television on elections continues today.

? SUMMARIZE How did television reflect and reinforce the ideal of the nuclear family in the postwar period?

ASSESSMENT

1. **Identify Cause and Effect** Discuss how the religious revival during the 1950s was linked to America's response to communism.
2. **Support Ideas with Evidence** Describe the role television played for children during the 1950s.
3. **Support a Point of View with Evidence** "The astonishing growth of education in the late 1940s (and thereafter) seemed yet another sign that the American Dream was well and alive." —historian James Patterson explains how the increase in the number of Americans finishing high school and attending college supports Patterson's statement.
4. **Summarize** Explain the connection between the prosperity of the 1950s and increased consumerism.
5. **Generate Explanations** Explain the effect that the car culture had on businesses in older inner-city neighborhoods.