

History 359
American Thought and Culture
Topic: "The Fifties"

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If all you knew about America in the 1950s came from viewing black-and-white "sitcoms" of the time like "Leave It to Beaver" or "Father Knows Best," or from later exercises in nostalgia like "Happy Days," or from parts of the more recent movie "Pleasantville," you might buy into the stereotypes of an innocent, simple, even boring decade of universal prosperity and domestic tranquillity. The reality was much more complex, combustible and interesting than such one-dimensional stereotypes, and this course will give students a chance to look back on that decade in a more in-depth way to begin to understand those complexities. It was indeed a period of unprecedented, ever-widening material "affluence," as millions of Americans, who remembered as children the trials of the Great Depression, entered the middle class and were able to move with their families into new suburbs to pursue long-deferred dreams of the "good life." But it was also a decade of fear and anxiety—the chilliest days of the Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union, involving a bitter war in Korea, nuclear terror and "duck and cover" drills in schools, and a sometimes hysterical search for communists and other traitors at home, personified by the crusades of Senator Joseph McCarthy and the trial and executions of the Rosenbergs. It was a decade of discontent and the rumblings of profound social change, most notably in the area of race relations, led by the efforts of people like Ralph Ellison, Thurgood Marshall, Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And it was a decade of innovation and creativity in culture and the arts, exemplified in the music of Miles Davis and Elvis Presley, the "action" paintings of Jackson Pollock, the writings of Betty Friedan and "Beat" pioneers Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. Now is a good time to look back on this pivotal decade—2004 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the landmark *Brown* Supreme Court Decision and the "birth" of rock n' roll music, a unique American hybrid, in Memphis, Tennessee.

Readings. Students should purchase David Halberstam's book *The Fifties* (1993), which will serve as our basic guide through this event-filled period. Readings will be assigned for discussion each week. Additional readings will also be used throughout the semester.

Grades. Your grade for the course will be based upon FOUR components: a midterm exam (in class, February 17, 30% of your overall grade); an in-class final exam (35%); a term paper (topics and details to be discussed in class, due April 14, 20%); and class contribution, which will include reading quizzes and brief oral presentations (15%).

NOTE: Our class each week will draw heavily from the readings, so it is essential to keep up, prepare and participate each week. Please keep this commitment.

