

Ch. 88 – *Consensus?* 1945-68

Learning Intentions

In this section, you should understand:

- Why these years were regarded as the age of consensus.
- The Red Scare.
- The role of Hollywood and the American Dream.
- The role of Marilyn Monroe.

Age OF *Consensus*

The Age of Consensus

The period from the early 1950s to the mid-1960s is often regarded as an **age of consensus** in American history. The majority of Americans seemed to agree on many of the same things.

The affluence of the 1950s created a growing **optimism** in America about the ending of class, religion and racial divisions. Some talked about a **post-industrial society** which provided a consensus about American society and how it would develop:

- There was a feeling that ethnic divisions were declining - the **melting pot** was working and people were becoming part of the American way of life.
- There was a rise of **patriotism** in the prevailing Cold War conditions.
- Organised **religion** grew stronger.
- There was agreement to **oppose Communism**.
- Many believed there were opportunities to be had for everybody. This was the **American Dream** that hard work was the key to success; that people could improve in society and their children would do better than themselves. America was the land of opportunity. It rested on the idea that Americans could move up in society.

Overall, Americans were **confident** of their place in the world. This confidence was based on American prosperity - the affluent society. The people generally had very little fear of or concern for the future - only their health and the danger of war and the Soviet threat. Americans were **optimistic** - their athletes expected victory; their economists expected economic growth; doctors expected to cure diseases and social problems too could be solved. They expected to be the best in the world.

Economic System

The new economic prosperity was supported by the **New Economics**. *'American capitalism works, and in the years since the Second World War, quite brilliantly,'* said the respected economist John Kenneth Galbraith. Based on the ideas of the English economist, **J M Keynes**, it was felt that **US governments** could manage the economy and end economic depressions. They would keep down unemployment and inflation and create economic growth and prosperity.

The American **free enterprise** (capitalist) system created **abundance**, which would lessen social injustice. They believed the economy would continue to grow and this would satisfy people's needs. They believed it was creating greater equality in society; indeed, everybody was becoming better off. The prosperity of the 1950s was so widespread that some claimed that everybody was now middle class.

No Left Wing

There was **no left wing** (socialism) in politics. No party wanted great social and economic change and supported the interests of the disadvantaged (the poor) against the rich or more powerful groups in society.

There was also consensus in **foreign policy**. Americans believed that foreign affairs were more important than domestic matters. They also believed that the **policy of containment** should be followed everywhere - not only in Europe, but also in South- East Asia. This meant America should intervene wherever necessary to defend the **Free World** against the spread of Communism. Americans now supported **internationalism** over isolationism.

Looking Back

Looking back from the 1960s, people remembered the calmness of the 1950s. In fact, it took the 1960s to show that much of the calmness of class, race and religion of America in the 1950s was superficial. The cracks began to appear openly in the troubled 1960s. Apart from that, not everybody in the 1950s shared the view of harmony and consensus. They pointed to problems with suburban growth and the consumer society. They also pointed to the unspoken poverty, but for most people all this was covered over.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why were the years from the early 1950s to mid-1960s known as the age of consensus (agreement)?
2. Why were people happy with the New Economics?
3. Why did some people say everybody was now middle class?
4. What was the consensus in foreign policy?

The **RED SCARE** *Scare*

The Red Scare

There was a steady build-up of **anti-Communism** in the US after the Second World War. It traced its origins to the **Communist Revolution** in Russia in 1917. The victory of the Communists there created fear in the West and in the US that Communists would take over property and establish a **totalitarian system** of government. Some called it the **Red Menace**.

Even though the US and the Soviet Union worked together during the Second World War, the alliances created to fight Hitler and Japan quickly broke down as the Cold War spread. A series of incidents and events in the late 1940s and early 1950s increased anti-Communist feeling in the US. These gave rise to the belief that the US was **infiltrated** by Communist sympathisers and spies:

- Six hundred **US government documents** were found in a raid on the office of a Communist magazine in America.
- Canada announced it had caught a **network of spies** working for the Soviet Union.
- Truman played up the **fear of Communism** to get congressional support for the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan and to set up the National Security Council to advise on security matters. By exaggerating the Communist threat abroad, Truman heightened fears about Communists in America.

The Red Scare

- Truman also passed **Executive Order (EO) 9853** to get federal Loyalty Boards to remove employees if *'reasonable grounds existed for the belief that the person involved is disloyal to the government of the US'*. States passed their own anti-Communist laws and employees had to take loyalty oaths or lose their jobs.
- The development of the **first Soviet atomic bomb** in 1949, the **takeover of China by Communists** and the beginning of **the Korean War** in 1950 all heightened tension in relation to Communism.
- The main **newspapers** - the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* - and **magazines** - *Time* and *Newsweek* - were strongly anti-Communist. Their message was that America was losing the Cold War.
- The **Catholic Church** in America was strongly anti-Communist. So also were the **Protestant Evangelical preachers** such as **Billy Graham**. He preached that, *'The world is divided into two camps! On the one side we see Communism has declared war against God, against Christ, against the Bible, and against all religion...'*
- The **Internal Security (McCarron) Act 1950** was passed - all Communist organisations had to register and no Communist could be employed in defence projects.

KEY CONCEPT: PUBLIC OPINION

The views and attitudes of the people. This is measured in elections or in between elections in opinion polls. In a democracy, political parties have to get elected so they have to pay attention to public opinion.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was:
 - a. The Red Menace
 - b. The Red Scare
2. List some of events that gave Americans the idea that their country was infiltrated by communists. Who encouraged the spread of anti-Communism?

HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee)

As part of the growing fear of Communism, the HUAC began hearings in 1947 to investigate subversive activities in the US. Witnesses were asked, *'Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?'* Witnesses were also expected to *'name names'*, that is, give names of other alleged Communists. Witnesses could not plead the **Fifth Amendment**, which says nobody has to implicate (connect) himself or herself to a crime. The Committee took the view that this was an admission of guilt. Gradually the constitutional rights of Americans were being whittled away.

HUAC and Hollywood

In 1947, and again from 1951-54, HUAC concentrated on **Hollywood**. HUAC claimed Hollywood was infiltrated by Communists. They disliked the influence movies had over **public opinion**. Actors and actresses who failed to co-operate were blacklisted and some were jailed.

In 1947, the **Hollywood Ten** refused to discuss their political views with HUAC. They were jailed for terms of four to 10 months for contempt of Congress. They were supported by prominent Hollywood actors and actresses who formed the **Committee for the First Amendment** (which guaranteed free speech in the US Constitution). But very soon a public backlash saw support for the Ten disappearing. Some towns boycotted films in which supporters of the Ten appeared. On one occasion, stones were thrown at the screen when Katherine Hepburn, one of the Committee for the First Amendment, appeared. Under this pressure, Hollywood producers and directors withdrew support from the Ten, who were often blacklisted during the 1950s.

Between 1951 and 1954, 90 actors, actresses, producers and directors were questioned by HUAC. The Committee cited over 300 people in Hollywood as Communists, and these were blacklisted by the studios. They looked with suspicion on anybody with **liberal views**.

Even the actors' union, the **Screen Actors' Guild**, headed by Ronald Reagan, later US President, co-operated in '*naming names*' and blacklisting alleged Communists.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was the HUAC?
2. Why did the HUAC question actors and actresses?

The Hiss Case

One of the HUAC members was **Richard Nixon**, later President of the US. Nixon rose to fame over the **Alger Hiss** case. Hiss was a graduate of two of America's most famous universities and he served in the State Department, where he had been one of President Roosevelt's closest advisers. He was brought before the HUAC in 1948, where he denied he had been a Communist. But constant cross-questioning by Nixon, who was supplied with information by the FBI, broke Hiss down. Hiss was later charged with perjury and found guilty, and Nixon became a national hero.

The Hiss case encouraged people to believe that Communists could be found in high places. This was reinforced when **Julius and Ethel Rosenberg** were arrested for spying. They were part of a spy ring which passed **atomic secrets** to the Soviet Union. The Rosenbergs were tried, found guilty and executed by electric chair in 1953.

KEY CONCEPT: LIBERALISM

Liberalism was the political belief that was concerned with personal freedom and social progress. Liberals favoured gradual reform of political and economic matters. US liberals favoured government intervention in the economy.

Effects of the Red Scare

Education too was affected by the Red Scare. Some feared that schools and universities would be used for Communist propaganda. They warned about the 'little Red schoolhouse' and wrote articles saying that 'your child is their target'. In high schools, **600 teachers** lost their jobs because they were accused of being Communists; blacklists ensured they did not get jobs elsewhere. HUAC demanded reading lists from universities and colleges, and some university lecturers who were alleged to be Communists were fired.

The Red Scare affected **other aspects of American** life in the 1950s and 1960s. **Movies** and **books** reflected the main thinking. Some wartime films had praised Soviet resistance to the German invaders. Now in the Cold War, Hollywood wanted to confirm its loyalty. Communists were portrayed in 50 films and many documentaries as traitors and spies. *The Iron Curtain, I Was a Communist for the FBI* and *My Son John* were examples of films where the Communists or Reds were uncovered and defeated. Books reinforced this thinking.

Effects of the Red Scare

Civil liberties suffered, particularly **free speech**. Federal workers faced severe loyalty tests. They could be brought before Boards to answer for their views, and dismissed if *'reasonable doubt'* existed about their suitability. The FBI, headed by **J. Edgar Hoover**, was virulently anti-Communist. The organisation kept records on suspected Communists, used surveillance and tapped phones. They leaked information about the activities of 'subversives' to the press, which heightened tensions.

All these actions generated an **atmosphere of fear**. Librarians took books off their shelves in case they would come under suspicion themselves. People were afraid that innocent comments would be reported to the FBI. **McCarthyism** was the high point of the Red Scare. The overall feeling of fear helped McCarthy to maintain his position for so long and, in the end, he was largely responsible for his own downfall.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was the Hiss case?
2. How were the following affected by the Red Scare:
 - a. Education
 - b. Movies
 - c. Books
 - d. Civil rights

THE ROLE OF HOLLYWOOD AND THE AMERICAN
DREAM

Hollywood - The American Dream

The American film industry was dominated by Hollywood. The studio system which grew up in the 1920s and 1930s controlled both the production (making) and the distribution (showing) of films. Movies enjoyed huge audiences up to and including the Second World War.

However, after the war, the studios declined. But Hollywood still held its attractions. For many there was still the desire to go to Hollywood to become a **star**. For most people it was an illusion because very few reached stardom. However, Hollywood continued to have great appeal, and stories of actors and actresses, such as **Marilyn Monroe**, who made it to the top inspired others.

The **success story** was also the theme of many Hollywood films, which needed a **good ending** to satisfy popular taste. Hollywood made everybody's dream come true - some called it the **Dream Factory**.

Decline and Change

But Hollywood went through huge changes in the 1950s and 1960s. This was brought on by:

- Declining ticket sales due to television.
- Government anti-trust laws.
- Suburban living and new forms of leisure.

Declining sales led to a cutback in production: box office receipts declined from over \$1.6 billion in 1946 to \$1.3 billion in 1956 - a drop of nearly 20 per cent. The revenue (income) of the 10 leading companies fell by a quarter, while profits fell by three-quarters.

The number of people employed in Hollywood - the majority were craftsmen - fell from over 22,000 in 1946 to 13,000 in 1956. Actors, writers, directors and producers were taken off long-term contracts.

Hollywood was also affected by the **anti-trust lawsuit** against the studios by the US government. In 1948, the **Supreme Court** ruled that the studios could not control both production and distribution. This forced the studios to sell off their cinemas and to stop the practice of block booking and price fixing. This created a boom in **independent productions**. The major studios provided the money and studio space for independent directors and handled their films afterwards.

Attack on Hollywood

The **HUAC** (House Un-American Activities Committee) hearings also affected Hollywood. The hearings, which were hunting for Communists in Hollywood, led to the blacklisting of actors, actresses and others. The HUAC hearings, along with McCarthyism and the general Red Scare, eliminated **liberalism** in Hollywood. They also affected the **content** of movies. Prior to this, some films showed an interest in social problems, and some of them were box-office successes. But after the hearings, film producers were rarely involved in social comment. Instead, Hollywood emphasised **pure entertainment**. They also produced some anti-Communist films - about 50 were made in the late 1940s and early 1950s - but they were not successful.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What were the attractions of Hollywood and what was the Dream Factory?
2. How and why did Hollywood decline in the 1950s?

The Star System and New Technology

While there were **fewer movies** in the 1950s, the quality was still maintained. *From Here to Eternity*, *On the Waterfront*, *Bridge over the River Kwai* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* all became classics. There were also some outstanding Westerns, such as *High Noon*, *The Searchers* and *Shane*.

Hollywood developed the **star system** in the 1920s and 1930s to sell their movies. The lives and actions of movie stars were given great publicity. In the 1950s, male stars such as Cary Grant, Robert Mitchum, James Stewart, Gary Cooper and Marlon Brando were matched by the female stars such as Marilyn Monroe, Grace Kelly, Debbie Reynolds, Lana Turner and Doris Day.

Hollywood also tried to innovate. They tried to give the audiences '*something television can't*'. The first of these was improved **colour** (colour was already used in the 1930s) - next came **Cinerama** and **3-D**. But these had short-term success, and could not compare with the success of **CinemaScope**. The huge costs of production and the new technology which could not be afforded by smaller companies ensured that Hollywood was still dominated by **about 10 major companies**.

Foreign Markets

But Hollywood also looked for other markets. It increased its sales **abroad**, particularly as most of the European film industry had collapsed during the Second World War. Hollywood was encouraged by the US government, which saw American films as important **propaganda** weapons during the Cold War - 'ambassadors of goodwill', in Truman's words. Very soon the major companies began to **invest abroad** in genuine locations and to take advantage of lower labour costs and tax benefits. In 1949, Hollywood made 19 films abroad; in 1969 it made 183. Not surprisingly, Hollywood films dominated much of the Western European market. By the 1960s, half of Hollywood's revenue came from abroad. This compensated for declining revenues at home.

KEY PERSONALITY: MARILYN MONROE

Marilyn Monroe, Hollywood sex symbol of the 1950s, was born **Norma Jean Mortenson** in 1926 to a single mother. Her mother's single status and mental illness meant that Marilyn spent many of her early years in **orphanages** and **foster homes**. *'The whole world around me at the time was kind of grim. I had to learn to pretend in order to ... block the grimness,'* she said. One of her foster parents encouraged her, *'Don't worry Norma Jean. You're going to be a beautiful girl when you grow big.. an important woman, a movie star.'* Monroe herself said Jean Harlow, star of the 1920s, was her idol.

Monroe experienced a **failed teenage marriage**. But she was spotted by a photographer while working in a factory during the Second World War. He advised her to join a modelling agency. By 1947, she had appeared on the cover of 33 national magazines. She was spotted by 20th century Fox, one of the big studios, and **changed her name to Marilyn Monroe**. However, for the next few years she only got small parts in movies. It was at this time that she also posed nude for a calendar.

Gradually, however, her career took off in the early 1950s. She starred in a series of hits such as ***Niagara***, ***The Seven Year Itch***, ***Gentlemen Prefer Blondes***, ***Bus Stop*** and ***Some Like It Hot***. *The Seven Year Itch* had the famous skirt-blowing scene. She was partly helped by the controversy surrounding her earlier nude appearance in a calendar. Hollywood exploited this to achieve **sex-symbol status** for her.

KEY PERSONALITY: MARILYN MONROE

Monroe, however, had an **unhappy life**. Her second marriage to **Joe DiMaggio**, a former baseball star, was a failure which only lasted a year. *'I didn't want to give up my career, and that's what Joe wanted me to do most of all.'* A third marriage to playwright **Arthur Miller** was also a failure and ended in divorce. She also had affairs with other movie stars, such as **Robert Mitchum** and **Frank Sinatra**. There were also reports of affairs with **President John F Kennedy** and his brother, **Robert**.

Marilyn Monroe suffered two miscarriages while married to Miller. She was also taking **tranquilisers**. She was sometimes difficult to work with and had a record of being late for work.

On 4 August 1962, she died from an **overdose** of sleeping pills. Controversy still surrounds her death. Even without any evidence, many believe that the US government was involved to cover up affairs with Robert and JFK. Her fame continued long after her death. Indeed, her death contributed to that fame. In 1999, she was named the Number One Sex Star of the Twentieth century. Elton John composed *'Candle in the Wind'* as a tribute to her.

She once said, *'I knew I belonged to the public and to the world, not because I was talented or even beautiful, but because I had never belonged to anything or anyone else.'*

Some Benefits from Television

Even though Hollywood suffered from declining audiences due to television, television provided **benefits** in other ways. Small independent production companies made low-budget programmes for television, usually half an hour in length. The series *I Love Lucy* was the most successful example of this.

Hollywood soon realised it had to **co-operate** with the new medium, television. The major companies began to show regular filmed programmes. By the end of the 1950s most of the prime-time shows came from Hollywood. This replaced live broadcasting on TV.

Hollywood also supplied old **feature films** and **shorts** for television. Older films became features of **movie nights** on the main television channels. Very soon networks competed with each other for film rights. In 1966, ABC paid \$2 million for *Bridge on the River Kwai*. When it was shown on ABC in September 1966, it created history by having an audience of 60 million.

By the 1960s, television had become an important **market** for movies. Indeed, film projects were now assessed partly on their potential for television. Television distribution usually took place about 18 months after films were shown in the cinemas.

Some Benefits from Television

There was also the **made-for-television movie**, which relied on low-budget production costs. In this way advertising covered the costs of production. By the late 1960s, there was a glut of films being shown on television so that film companies and television networks suffered losses. This resulted in companies cutting back operations. Ten years later, Hollywood was making half the number of films it made in the 1960s.

By the 1970s and 1980s, huge prices were being paid by the networks for the television rights to show films such as *Alien* (\$15 million). By the end of the 1970s, pay TV, cable, satellite and video provided outlets for Hollywood productions. As well as this, new **marketing techniques** tried to exploit other areas of leisure. Books and soundtracks as well as the merchandising of toys, games and clothing all created new income for Hollywood.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What changes did Hollywood introduce?
2. How did television provide benefits to Hollywood and the film industry?