

# AMERICA: 1945

Prosperity | Youth Culture | Suburbia

## The richest country in the world

America had not been bombed during the war or invaded, unlike much of Europe and Asia. Instead she had supplied her allies with arms, raw materials, food and loans. The result was that by 1945 America was the richest country in world history. Americans enjoyed a standard of living twice that of British people at the end of the war.

## Fear of depression

However, the depression had cast a long shadow over American society. It only ended with America's entry into the war and many Americans feared that it would resume once again as the war ended.

## Return to isolation

There was a popular desire to withdraw once again from world affairs and to return to isolationism. America had suffered 405,399 war dead, making the conflict the second bloodiest in the country's history after the American Civil War. This fuelled isolationism as returning soldiers and their families enjoyed peace.



## Post war affluence

Many American soldiers, airmen and sailors returned to America, determined to better themselves and enjoy 'the American Dream' of owning their own homes and businesses. They were helped by the passing of the GI Bill in 1944, to help them re-adjust to society when they returned from fighting. It offered them:

- \*Low cost mortgages
- \*Low interest business loans
- \*Funding to go to university

The result was that 2.2 million servicemen went to university and 5.6 million used loans to buy houses and set up businesses. This had a powerful positive effect on the economy for decades to come. However, the law was administered by local officials across America so black servicemen were discriminated against and rarely benefitted from it.

Many Americans were cautious about spending, even though they were experiencing unprecedented levels of wealth and



## Teenage Culture

The generation of young people after 1945 had more

- Leisure time
- Personal spending power from part time jobs.
- Independence

than any previous generation. They were christened 'teenagers' by the American media. There was huge increase in births for twenty years after the end of the war and this resulted in a large market for manufacturers to make products that they wanted. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s teenagers expressed their sense of individuality through the music they enjoyed, particularly the new developing rock n' roll, a fusion of black blues and white folk music.

A new sense of independence and rebelliousness seemed to develop among some (though not all) young people. The media was quick to pick up on this and presented young people often as a threat to the established order. Films like *Rebel Without a Cause* and *The Wild One* worried American parents but the reality was often that teenagers were more conformist and less rebellious than they appeared.

affluence. They had long memories of the depression and feared that it could return.

## Suburbia

Throughout the war, new housing developments had been built outside American cities where land was in plentiful supply. A road network, large numbers of cars and cheap fuel meant that middle class Americans no longer had to live in the centre of cities in order to get to work. Instead they could own their own homes in idyllic surroundings. These new neighbourhoods were called 'suburbia' and grew rapidly because the US Federal Housing Administration offered cheap loans to house buyers which fuelled a housing boom. Suburban developments had their own shopping malls so residents sometimes never really left their new suburbs. Many people criticised the conformity and 'same-ness' of the suburbs, but families who had left the cities often enjoyed a high standard of living. Racism fuelled the development of suburbs as estate agents and lenders made it impossible for black people and minorities to even view a home in a new white neighbourhood. Many wealthier white families left the inner cities for the suburbs to avoid living alongside ethnic minorities.

