

America in the 1950s

Society & Culture

Economic Boom

- 1945-1970s: greatest economic prosperity in the nation's history
- Peaked in the 1960s
- Americans had the most wealth of any people in the history of the world



“GI Bill”

- Officially the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act
- \$ for returning vets for vocational training, tuition for college, low-interest mortgages for homes, etc.
- Helps send more Americans to college than ever before
- By the mid-1950s, 60% of Americans are considered part of the “middle class”



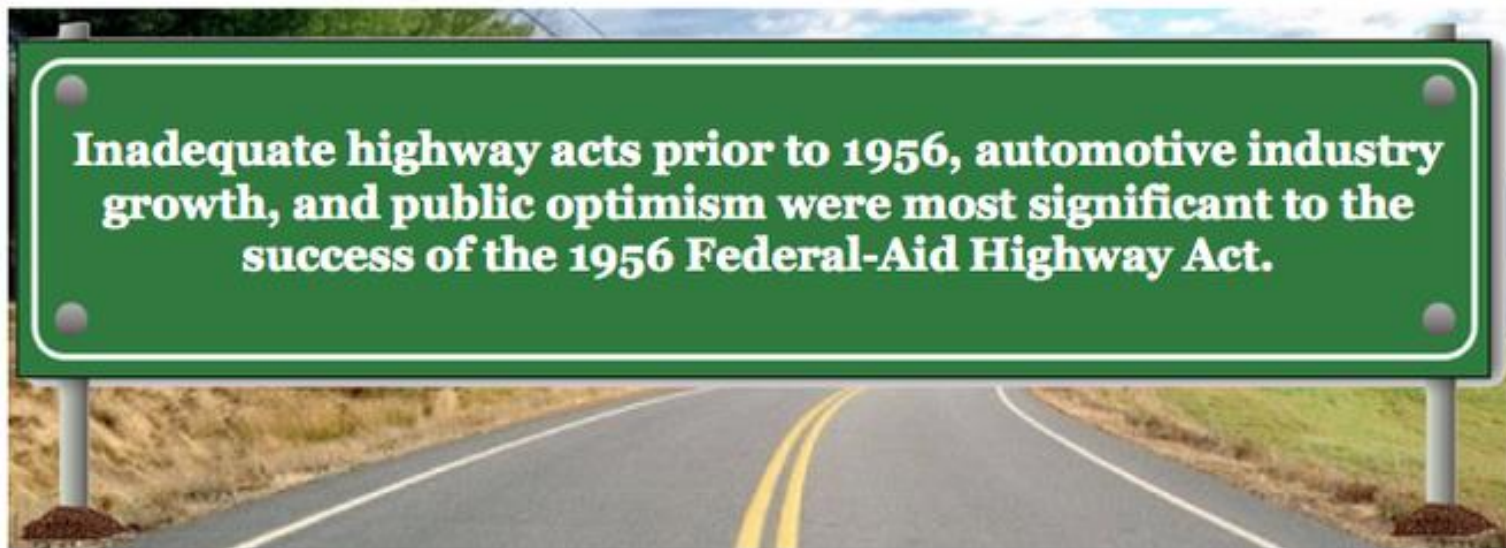
Post-War Prosperity

- People want to enjoy the good life; much like post-WWI
- Prosperity of the 1950s and 1960s is consumer-driven (rather than investment-driven)
- Main-stream cultural image of good life:
 - Owning a house w/ a lawn and a “white picket fence”
 - Married with “2.5-kids”
 - Women return to traditional roles
 - (Retreat from “Rosie the Riveter” & return to the “Cult of Domesticity”)



“Age of the Automobile”

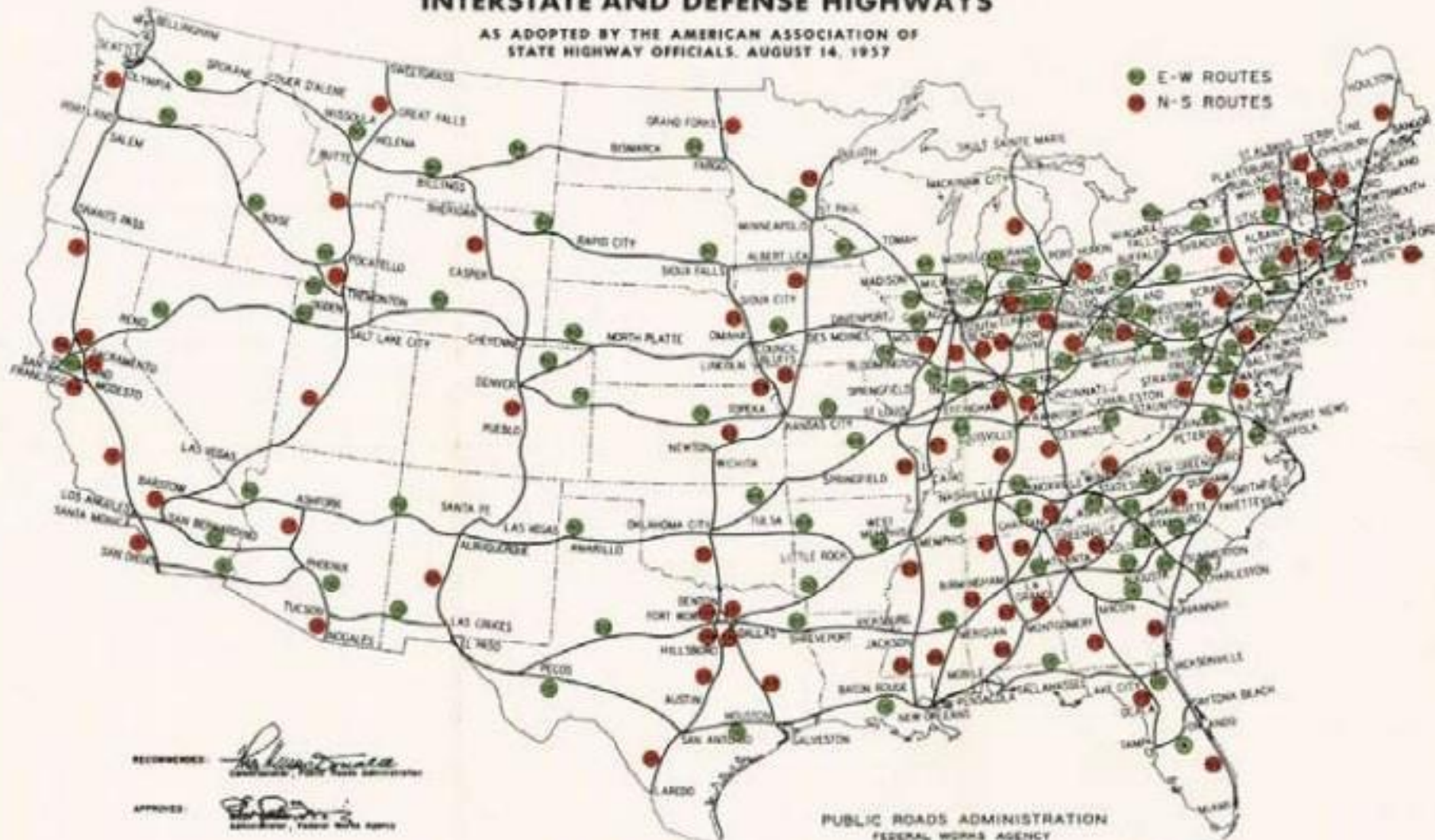
- Federal goal to connect all cities above pop. of 50,000
- Federal Highway Act of 1956: \$25 mil. for new highways
 - Revenue earned by excise taxes
- Cars are affordable to the middle class
- Movement to the suburbs now possible
- “Sunday Drives”
- Tourism becomes a growing industry
- Pollution will become an issue that raises concern



OFFICIAL ROUTE NUMBERING FOR THE NATIONAL SYSTEM OF INTERSTATE AND DEFENSE HIGHWAYS

AS ADOPTED BY THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF STATE HIGHWAY OFFICIALS, AUGUST 14, 1957

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF STATE HIGHWAY OFFICIALS
ALL NATIONAL ROUTES INCLUDE
NUMBERING A, B, C




NATIONAL SYSTEM OF INTERSTATE HIGHWAYS
SELECTED BY JOINT ACTION OF THE SEVERAL STATE HIGHWAY DEPARTMENTS
AS MODIFIED AND APPROVED
BY THE ADMINISTRATOR, FEDERAL WORKS AGENCY
AUGUST 2, 1947

U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE
16-50000-1


Moving to the Suburbs

- More homeowners
- More white families begin moving out of the city to the suburbs (housing communities outside of cities)
 - “Great White Flight”
- “Levittown” (suburb community of “assembly line” made homes) are the epitome of new suburban life


Levittown OFFERS
5 different exteriors, all authentic Cape Cod architecture



The "Lookout"



The "Mariner"



The "Snug Harbor"
(The "Point Pleasant" not illustrated)

every modern city convenience *plus* country comfort **\$8,490**
at down-to-earth cost

compare the structural and necessary features of these remarkable homes, built by Levitt & Sons!

- Spacious lots, minimum 6,000 square feet; mature shrubs, lawns and trees.
- Modern kitchen, with exhaust fan, G-E range and refrigerator, Bendix washer, Tasty stainless steel sink and steel cabinets.
- 2 comfortable, beautiful bedrooms, with choice of color schemes.
- Colored steel tile bathroom, with built-in tub and shower.
- Large expansion attic, with ample room for 2 more bedrooms and second bath.
- York-Shipley Oil Burner, Radiant Heat, Automatic Hot Water.
- Copper piping throughout, Rockwool insulation and fire-resistant Johns-Manville insulating shingles.
- Built-in bookcases, vacation blinds and many other extras, such as ventilated closets.

compare the community advantages only Levittown offers, at NO EXTRA COST!

- 8 fine, modern schools within walking distance.
- 4 complete shopping centers within minutes of your house.
- Fast, frequent transportation — 138 buses daily from Warrington and Hicksville stations.
- 8 supervised championship swimming pools, exclusively for residents.
- Adult education courses.
- Nursery school.
- Softball league.
- Many fully-equipped playgrounds, grass, parks.
- 26 churches and synagogues of every faith.
- Active community center, including theatre group.
- Youth center and organized activities.
- Community library, including mobile van.
- Movie theatres and bowling alleys.
- No through traffic streets, safe for children.
- U. S. Post Office.

Reprinted Courtesy of **JOHN W. Pergola**

Insurance — Real Estate
3475 Hempstead Tpke.
Levittown, N.Y. 11756
PE-S-4636

One of four different styles of the Jubilee



One of four different styles of the Levittowner



Levittown IN 1957



One of five different styles of the Pennsylvania



One of four different styles of the Country Clubber



“Little Boxes”

SHOWTIME
PRESENTS

Television Changes American Culture

TV *happiness shared by all the family!*



Households that own TVs:

- 1950 = 3.9%
- 1960 = 86.7%
- Instrumental in spreading “mainstream” cultural ideals about family, gender roles, morality

A “Time of Conformity”

- Many people sought to be like the main stream cultural ideal
- This leads to an emphasis on materialism
“Keeping up with the Joneses”





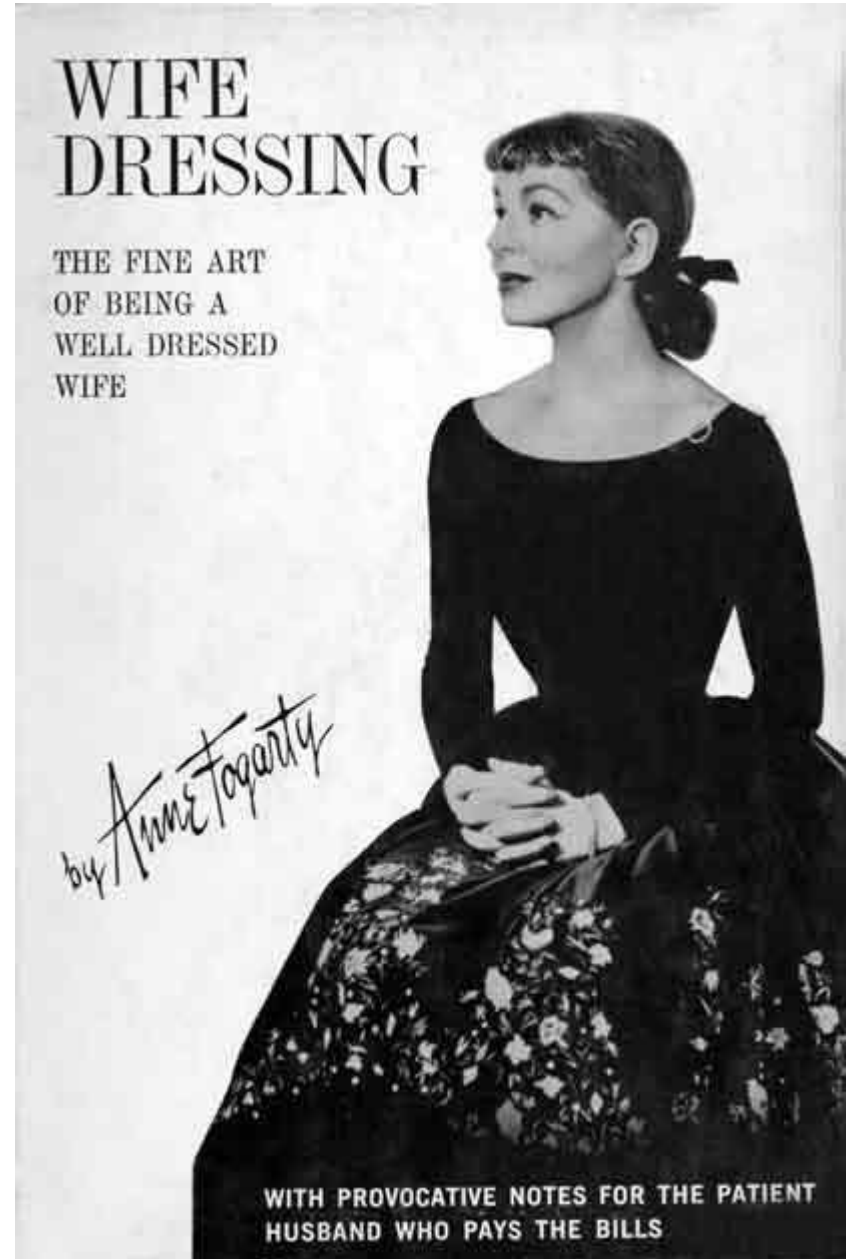
Women at Work

- Women encouraged to “Give your job to a vet!” after WWII
- However, younger women were joining the job force in higher rates than ever before
- Shift to clerical and service work
- Many people needed 2-income households to buy the material goods they felt that they should have



Rebellion

- Despite many Americans “buying-in” to mainstream cultural ideals of the 1950s, many felt alienated by these ideals
- Groups feeling underrepresented/misrepresented
 - Women
 - Minorities
 - Adolescents



- Many women who remained at home felt stifled by their roles
- The abuse of psychotropic drugs increased from WWII until the mid 1960s (Soldiers, beatniks, “Mother’s Little Helpers” for housewives)
- Overprescribed by doctors and a lack of FDA regulation



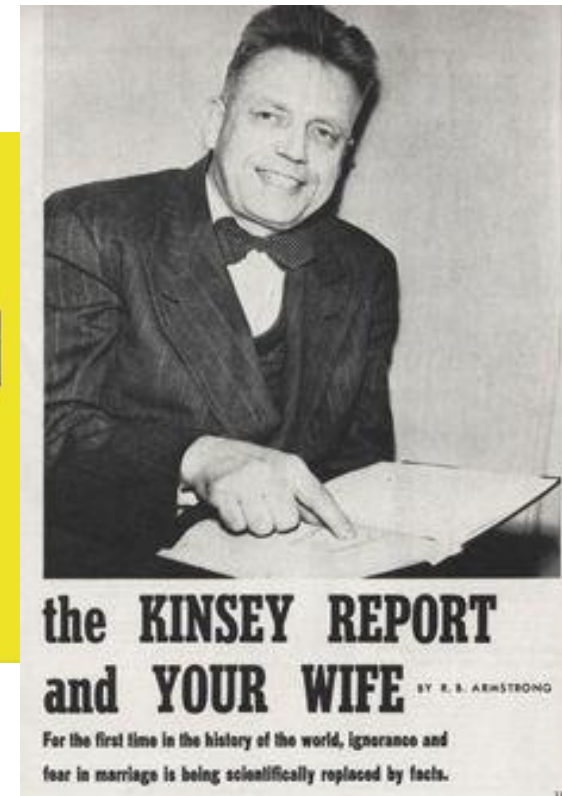
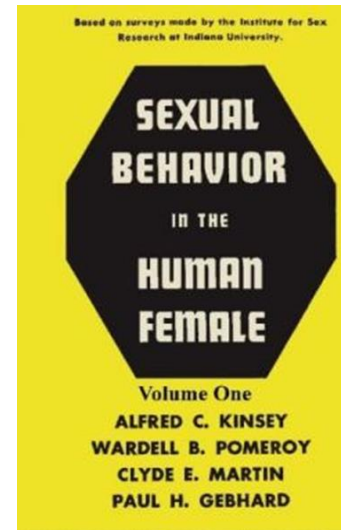
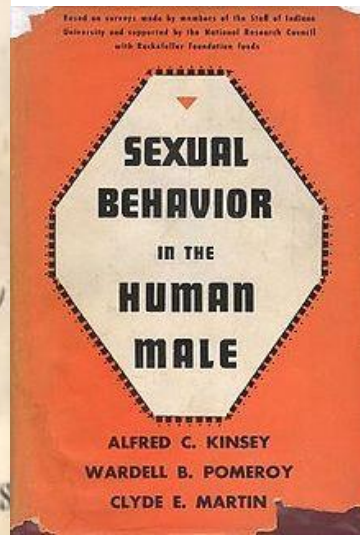
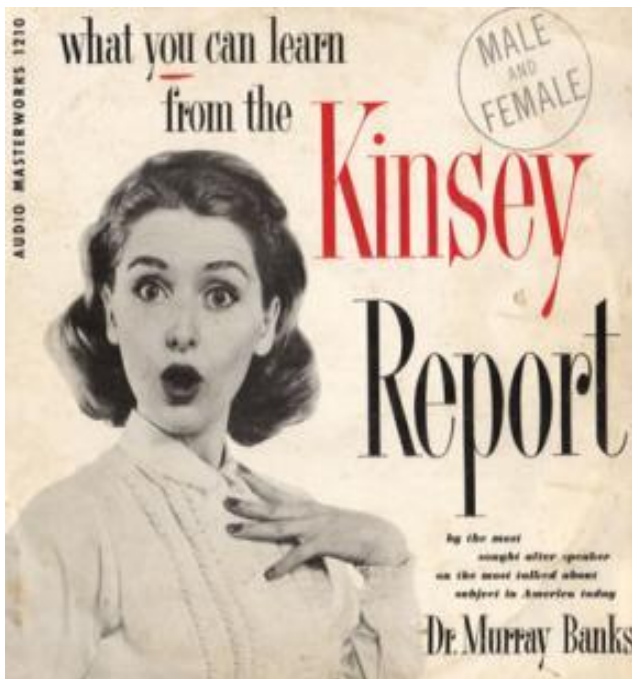
Betty Friedan and the *Feminine Mystique*:

- Subject: “The problem that has no name” aka the lack of fulfillment experienced by many housewives
- The beginning of the women’s rights movement of the 1960s

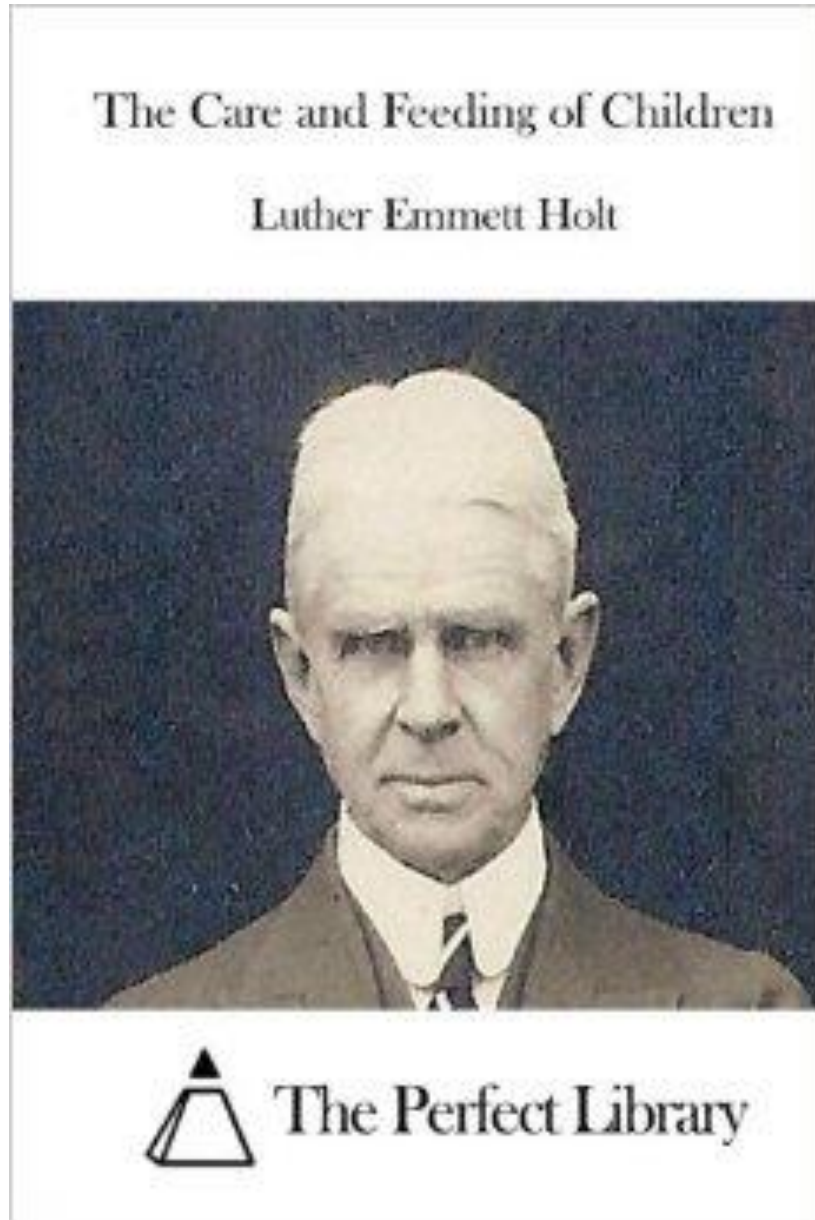


Dr. Kinsey

- Biologist at Indiana University and “father of the sexual revolution”
- Wrote best-selling books about sexual behavior
- Controversial material garnered through interviews
- Later studies would conduct research through experimentation



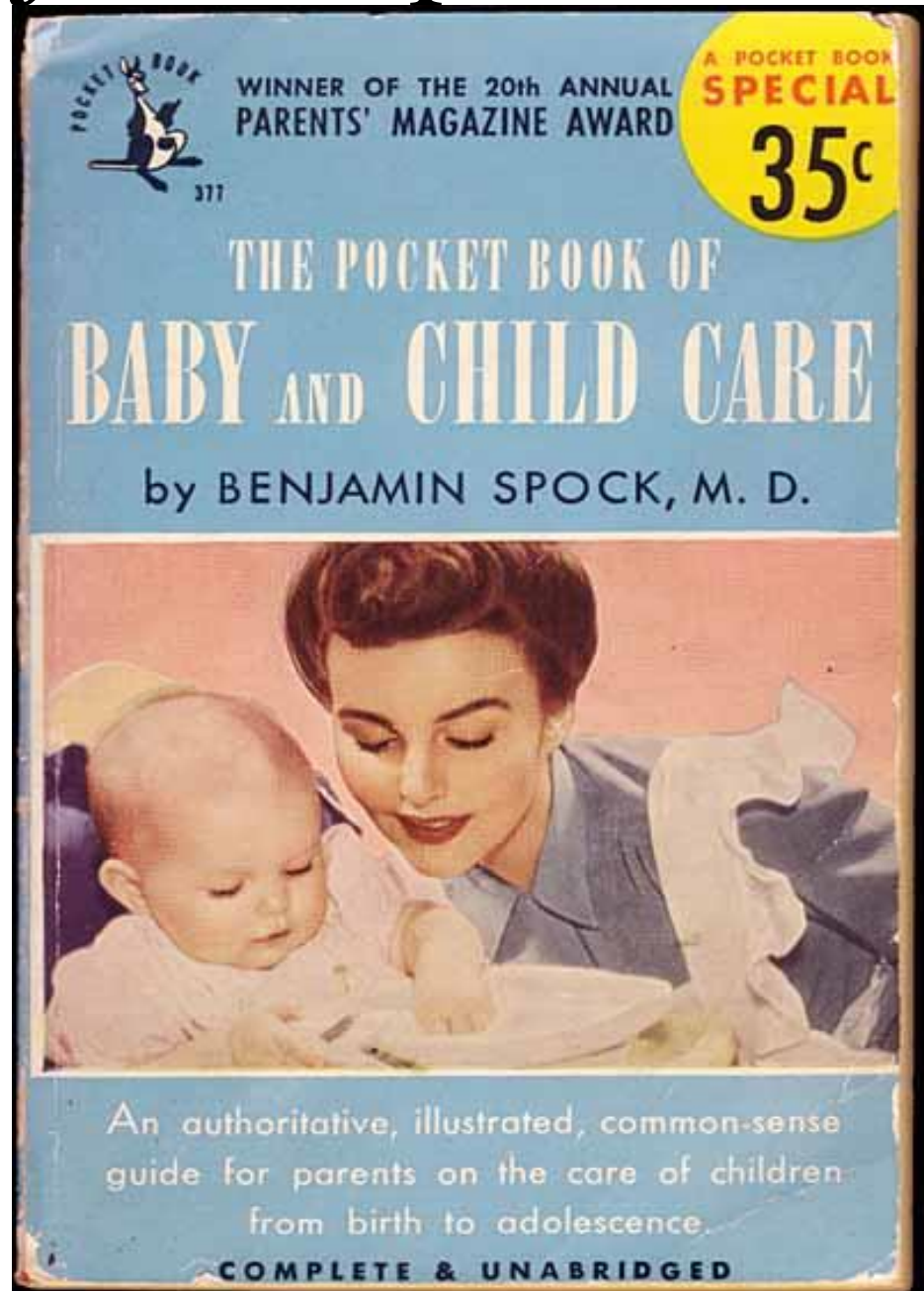
The “Baby Boom” causes new child-rearing theories to circulate



Gone are the “Spare the rod,
spoil the child” days

Dr. Benjamin Spock

- “Baby and Child Care”
- “Parenting” to Spock was more so “mothering”
- Babies need love and comfort, not restriction and harsh discipline
- Advice: “Trust your instinct”
- Pressure on women to stay home and be the caregivers



Teen Conformity



- Many youth sought to emulate the stereotypes of the main stream

← Dressed alike

- Hung out at the soda shop, etc.

Teenage Rebellion



Music

- Term “Disc Jockey” conceived
- “Rock and Roll” is born: an amalgamation of genres - mainly blues and country
- White performers like Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis rise to prominence by emulating the style of black musicians
- Elvis, known as “The King” shocked traditionalists
- Other big names: Chuck Berry, Little Richard, the Big Bopper, and Ritchie Valens

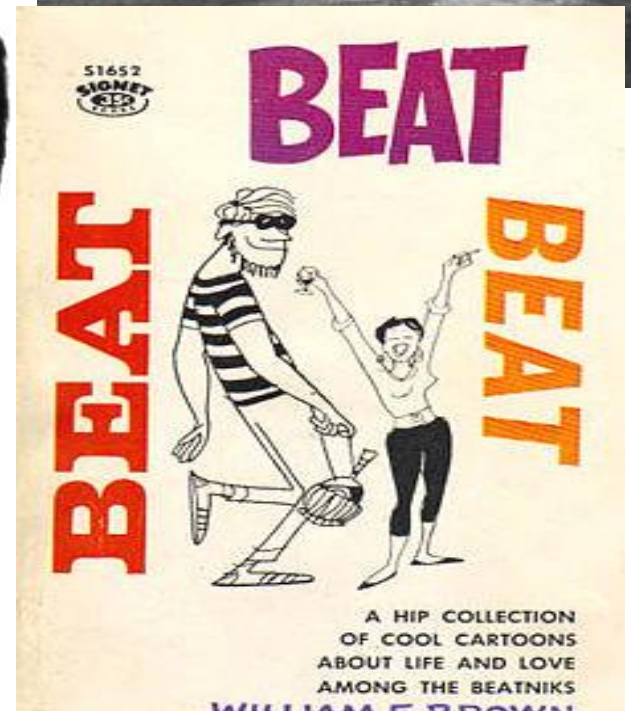


Literature

- Poets and writers who rejected contemporary American society
- Alan Ginsburg — “Howl”
- Jack Kerouac— *On The Road*
- Arthur Miller — *Death of a Salesman*



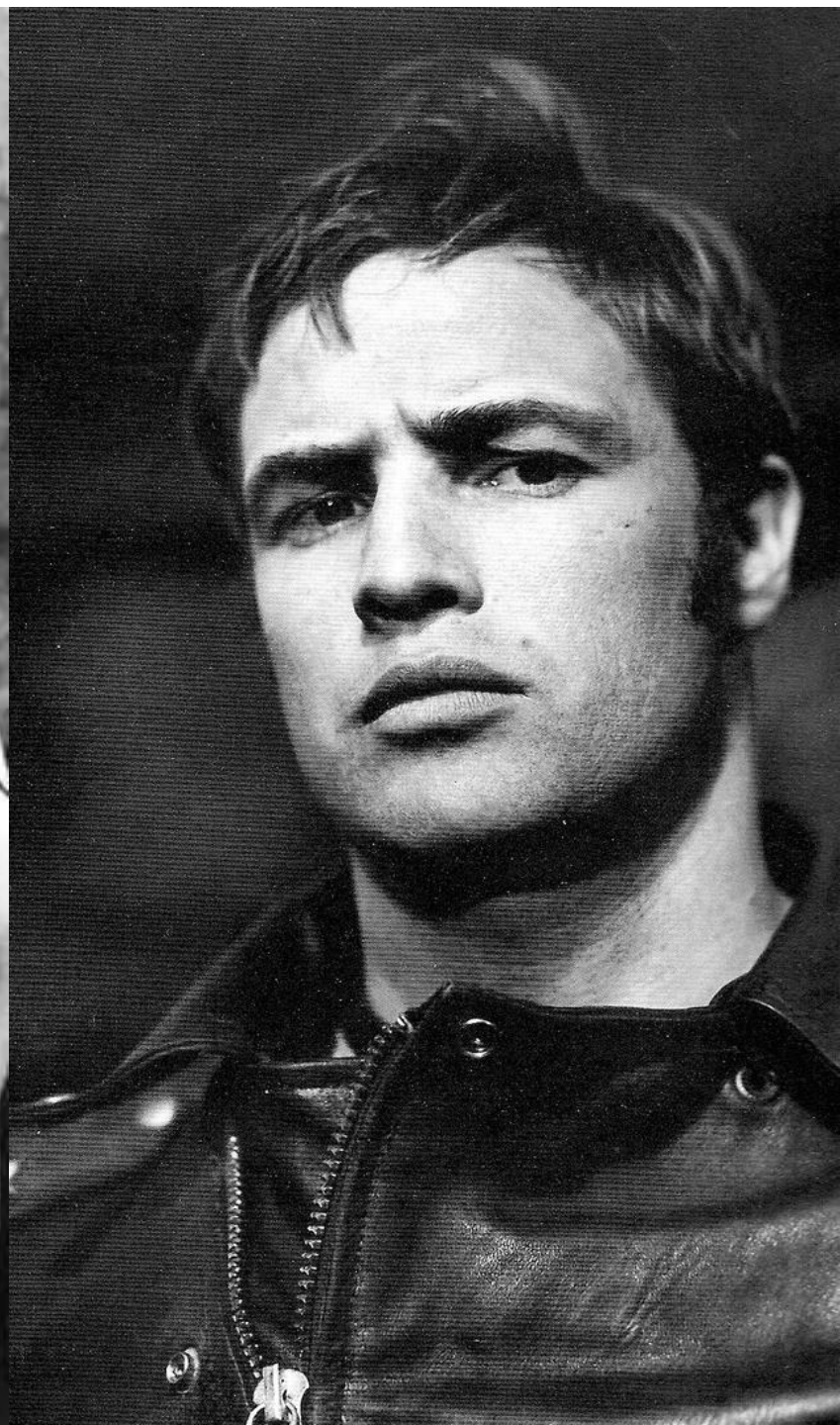
“Beat Generation”



Hollywood Reinforces Morality and Gender Roles

Marlon Brando and
James Dean personified
the “rebel” youth





Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor are type cast into particular roles

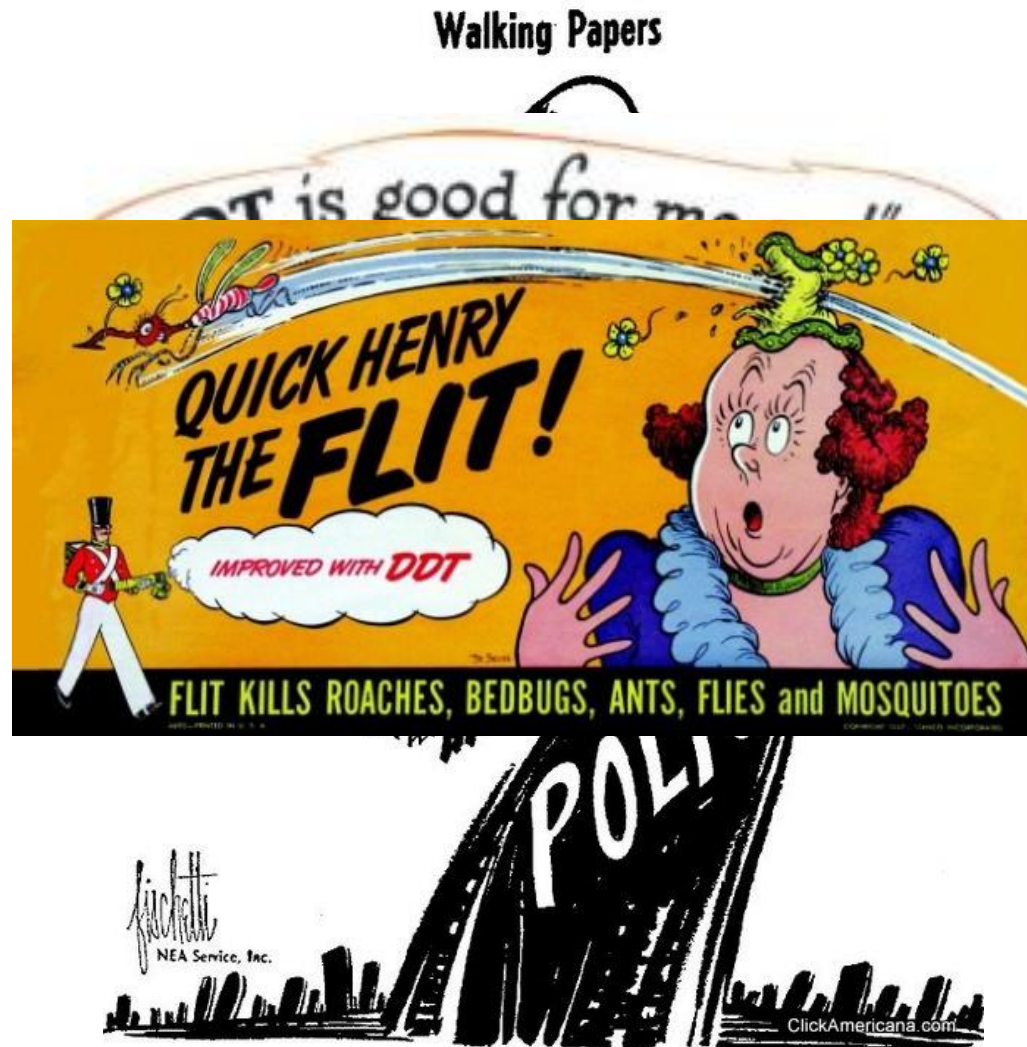


Doris Day and Audrey Hepburn are the archetype of the mainstream ideal “woman”



Science Breakthroughs

- Salk Vaccine—1954 prevents Polio
- DDT— chemical pesticide that protected crops from pests and prevented diseases caused by insects (such as Typhus and Malaria)
 - Later was it found to be toxic to humans and animals



The “H-Bomb”

- Hydrogen Bomb (The “Super”)
- Edward Teller
- 1952
- Increases anxiety and paranoia of nuclear fallout

The Boston Daily Globe
 BOSTON, WEDNESDAY MORNING, FEBRUARY 1, 1953
 HAIL TRUMAN H-BOMB ORDER

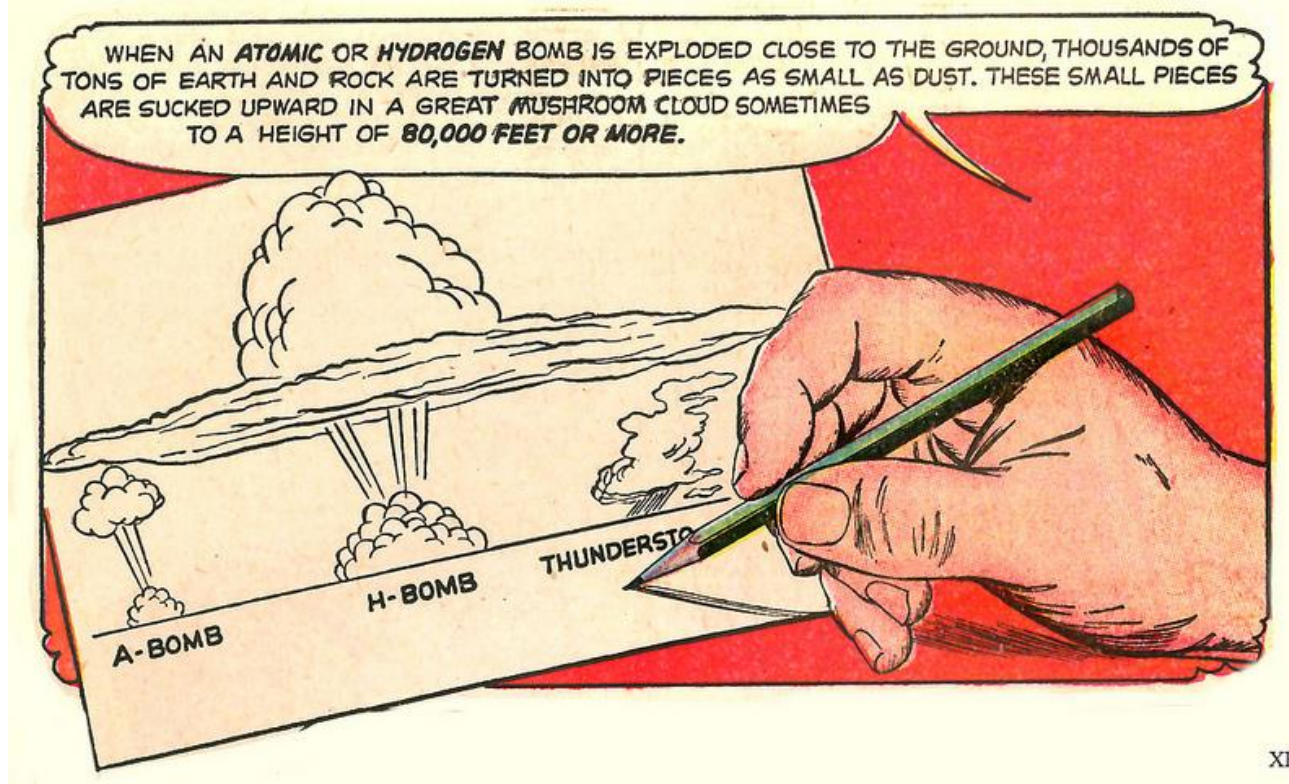
Bishop Wright Appointed to Worcester
 Military, Scientists, Politicians Praise Act
 AEC Indicates Hydrogen Project Already Started

2 Young Girls Die as Sled, Truck Crash
 Lynn Boy Victim in Similar Mishap; Mother a Witness

Heads New Diocese of the County
 Magr. Weldon of New York Named to Springfield See

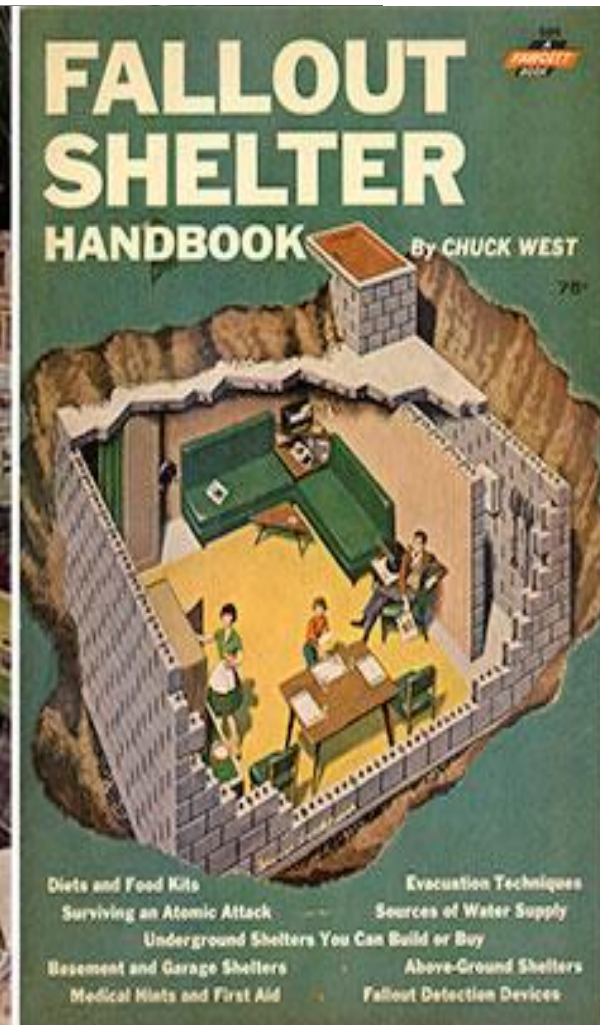
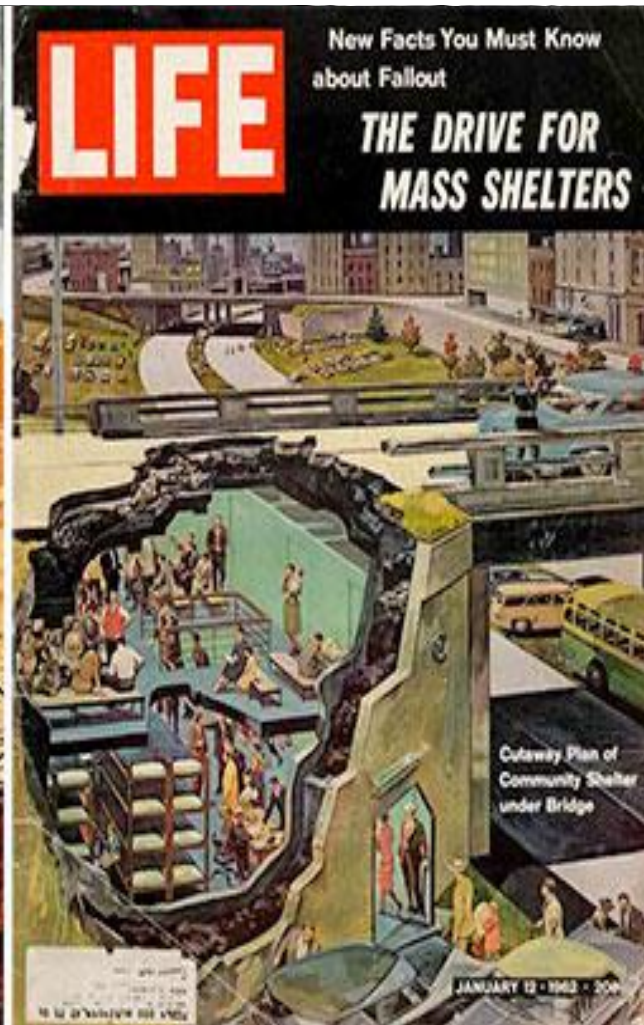
Plan Aerial Guard to Protect Coast of New England
 Washington, Jan. 31 (AP)—The Air Force moved today to set up an aerial guard line around all the nation's major coastal cities.

H-BOMB
 A diagram showing a cross-section of a hydrogen bomb with labels: 'A-BOMB', 'THERMONUCLEAR REACTION', 'THERMONUCLEAR REACTION', 'THERMONUCLEAR REACTION'.



Fallout Shelters

- Fear of nuclear war during the Cold War led many Americans to build private bomb shelters





I have here in my hand a list of two hundred and five people that were known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party and who nevertheless are still working and shaping the policy of the State Department.

(Joseph R. McCarthy)

izquotes.com

Joseph McCarthy & The Second Red Scare

- Republican senator from Wisconsin; 1950 he gave a speech alleging a list of known American communists
- Called on Americans to report suspected communists
- House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) formed to investigate “Enemies from within”
 - “Hollywood Ten”, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, Alger Hiss all came under fire
 - Nixon gains notoriety on the committee
- Modern-day “Witch-hunt”; earned the nickname “McCarthyism” (1947-1957)
- McCarthy’s extreme accusations eventually turned public opinion against him
- “Pinks” would be blacklisted from work, society, etc. for suspected activity