



TENSION IN A PEACETIME SOCIETY

(Image: Hulton Archive Collection, 00f/45/arve/g1936/009.)

As World War II came to an end, as veterans returned home, and as victory celebrations subsided, the upheaval caused by the war resulted in prosperity for some, but not for all. Aspirations to achieve the “American Dream” brought forth questions of what that dream was, as well as who had the right to access it. The bravery and sacrifice of soldiers of color, and the efforts of women who served abroad and in the workforce at home, laid the foundation for movements that called for increased access to the rights promised to all citizens. The experiences of those who fought in World War II proved to be a powerful catalyst for social change. The fight to preserve freedom abroad continued at home, and national organized movements for civil rights began to emerge.

Returning veterans came home to a nation experiencing dramatic economic growth and social change. Following the war, the arsenal of democracy that pushed out the military equipment needed to fight World War II shifted to production of commercial and industrial goods sold in both domestic and international markets. This activity helped spark an economic boom that affected the United States in striking ways by greatly expanding the middle class and creating new opportunities for many Americans. Many of these opportunities were designed to help returning veterans establish themselves in a postwar American society, but all Americans felt the effects of this economic prosperity in varying degrees. The booming economy and legislation aimed at helping veterans allowed for increased access to higher education, the ability to purchase homes, and the creation of a new “American Dream.” The opportunities offered by this “dream,” however, had limitations, and the fight for equal access to such opportunities prompted movements for social change that came to dominate the remaining decades of the twentieth century.

Before the war’s end, US politicians became aware of the need for new laws that would help veterans return to a country experiencing dramatic change. One such law that made higher education more accessible than ever before was the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, more commonly referred to as the **GI Bill**. Passed in 1944, the **GI Bill** provided funding to cover tuition and fees for veterans who attended school, including high school,

vocational school, and colleges. This benefit became available to all veterans who served at least 90 days and were honorably discharged. As the funding for tuition was not a form of income, veterans were not required to pay taxes on the benefits, relieving the financial burden that had limited access to higher education for previous generations of Americans. Within 12 years of its passage, almost eight million veterans took advantage of the educational benefits offered by the bill. Roughly 2.3 million WWII veterans used the bill to attend college or university. Through such an opportunity, higher education increasingly became an expected part of life for Americans.

The **GI Bill** did not distinguish between veterans based on race, but that did not mean the benefits of the law were evenly distributed. Often, white school administrators or local government officials directed issuance of the bill’s benefits, meaning many veterans of color were not able to capitalize on its offerings to the same extent as their white counterparts. Historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) did not receive any increase in funding to help support the admission of black veterans, and it is estimated HBCUs had to turn away some 20,000 black veterans who attempted to pursue a higher education through the **GI Bill**. Banks also regularly denied loan applications from black veterans, ensuring the continued financial burden of gaining an education.

Unequal access to the idealized “American Dream” also appeared in the form of housing that emerged in the years following World War II. In 1945, experts estimated that there existed a shortage of around five million homes nationwide. This housing shortage was an issue that dated back to the Great Depression, but with soldiers returning and the postwar economy growing at a rapid rate, the

ONLINE RESOURCES

For additional multimedia resources, visit ww2classroom.org.



Sign advocating housing segregation in Detroit, c. 1942.
(Image: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, fsa 8d13572.)

government sought to solve this shortage by providing a stimulus for the construction of housing developments and subsidizing home ownership. As funding moved toward building suburban infrastructure, families steadily moved outside of cities. Similar to the benefits offered by the **GI Bill**, racial discrimination limited the opportunities for home ownership to black families, resulting in the emergence of suburbs as predominately white communities.

Based on a model created by William Levitt in 1946, known as Levittown, suburbs became the home for a rising number of Americans. In 1940, around 19.5 percent of Americans lived in the suburbs, but by 1960 that number increased to over 30 percent and continued to rise in the decades that followed. As families of the same race and generally the same class came together in these communities, the suburbs helped cultivate a growing amount of homogeneity and conformity that became an expected way of life. The grouping of demographically similar families in the suburbs created an expectation of how families should look and behave. This expectation largely became the basis of a new “American Dream” and became embedded in the broader American culture. As a result, the default presentation of American families in television and film centered on those who were middle class, white, and living in a suburban home.

The prosperity of the postwar economy brought about higher wages that generated a new consumer culture, as well as an increase in the size of American families. With more families moving away from the cities and into suburbs, car ownership rose to make transport between home and work possible. In the late 1940s, roughly half of American families owned a car, but by the end of the 1950s, that number increased to roughly 74 percent. Buying on credit became more common, allowing families to purchase more household goods, including refrigerators, washers, dryers, and other home appliances. Household goods fed a ready market, as a postwar **Baby Boom** led to an unprecedented growth in the number and size of new families. With roughly 72.5 million births from 1946 to 1964, the **Baby Boom** marked the beginning of a new generation in American history. The sharp rise in the population created new and unexpected demands on the economy and on the broader society. Those who fell outside of this “new norm” often faced restricted access to or outright denial of the benefits offered by the postwar economic boom.

The war may have opened opportunities for some, but the demand for equal access to all prompted the formation of organized movements centered on civil rights. The heroism of soldiers of color in World War II, coupled with the Double V campaign that followed, pushed President

Harry S. Truman to issue Executive Order 9981 in 1948, which formally **desegregated** all US armed forces. The order declared that “there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin.” The armed forces may have **desegregated** with Truman’s order, but segregation remained a facet of daily life for people of color in the United States, including many veterans who returned to find themselves still living as second-class citizens. Denied access to the prosperity of a postwar American society to people of color helped fuel the organized demonstrations and legal battles of the Civil Rights Movement. Memberships to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) increased eight times over following the war. Activists challenged racist laws and social practices such as racial segregation in schools, restaurants, and other public spaces. A series of legal victories secured the desegregation of such spaces, and led to federal protection of voting rights with passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The organization and legal successes of the Civil Rights Movement helped inspire additional movements, including a call for increased rights and opportunities for women. During World War II, women famously took on manufacturing jobs to contribute to the war effort. The experience proved life-changing for numerous women, prompting many to remain in the workforce following the end of the war. However, the increasing conformity of suburban life created new expectations in the home that reinforced the notion that men acted as the sole financial provider while women were responsible for maintaining the home and raising the children. Many were happy to return to this role of housewife after the war ended, but such an expectation proved frustrating for others who sought to pursue their own careers and ambitions. In 1949, the French intellectual Simone de Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex*, putting into words the idea of discrimination based on gender. This book proved influential to Betty Friedan, who came to capture the banality and frustration many women felt as housewives in her seminal work, *The Feminine Mystique*. Published in 1963, Friedan’s book helped inform a new movement for women’s rights, one also inspired by and modeled on the movement for the civil rights of African Americans. While this movement made legal gains, the effort to pass an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which would explicitly protect the rights of American citizens regardless of



THERE SHALL BE EQUALITY OF
TREATMENT AND OPPORTUNITY FOR
ALL PERSONS IN THE ARMED SERVICES
WITHOUT REGARD TO RACE, COLOR,
RELIGION, OR NATIONAL ORIGIN.

EXECUTIVE ORDER 9981, ISSUED IN 1948

gender, failed to secure enough support from the states to pass. To this day, the ERA remains two states short of ratification to the Constitution.

The movements demanding greater equality and protected civil rights shared a similar goal: full access to the opportunities that encompassed the “American Dream.” The ability to own a home, to pursue an education, to advance in careers, and to engage fully in American society as a protected citizen became increasingly possible in the years following World War II, but only to a certain portion of the population. The aftermath of the war brought rising attention to such opportunities as well as to the barriers. Who exactly had access to this new dream? The upheaval of the war forced Americans, as a society, to ask this question and brought forth new movements that aimed to rise above those persistent hurdles.



African American civil rights activists march, carrying signs calling for equal rights, integrated schools, decent housing, and an end to bias.
(Image: Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-03128.)