Introduction

World War II, the Ascendancy of Science, and the Prologue to the Permissive Turn

Images can be deceiving. Once time has passed, the complexities of everyday life are often simplified and idealized. Unfortunately, the price paid for this kind of nostalgia is a profound misunderstanding of past events, and one need look no further than the decade of the 1950s to discover innumerable examples. In the imagination of most Americans, the fifties were a solidly conservative era – we see images of June Cleaver performing housework in pearls, nuclear families inhabiting long rows of near identical tract housing, and glib ad men espousing the benefits of a tailfin on every car and a television in every home. These are the reels of memory that remain with us, perpetuated by retrospective television sitcoms and professors of history alike. Even though a majority of scholars acknowledge the importance of subversive figures like Jack Kerouac, Elvis Presley, and Martin Luther King, Jr., they have been reluctant to depict these individuals – or the movements from which they emerged – as representative of the general cultural trend, preferring instead to re-imagine a bygone world of crew cuts and manicured lawns.

Although scholars readily concede that the 1950s bore witness to the rise of the Beatniks, rock 'n' roll, and the civil rights movement, they are generally quick to characterize these oppositional developments as undercurrents – mere rumblings – that went against the dominant mood. In this way, they are regarded as seeds of discontent sown during the 1950s, only to blossom in the ensuing turmoil of the 1960s.[1]

[1] Chafe, William H. *The Unfinished Journey: America since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 164–5; Evans, Sara. *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York:

It is this divide between the nominally conservative fifties and the socially liberal sixties that has shaped our general understanding of the early postwar years. As Daniel Yankelovich puts it, "The campus upheavals of the sixties gave us the first premonitory sign that the plates of American culture, after decades of stability, had begun to shift."[2] Some observers of the American scene attribute the social changes of the 1960s to a generation gap, others credit the civil rights and antiwar movements, some point to the rise of second-wave feminism, and still others to the formation of a counterculture. Whatever the primary cause, the proposition that a transformation in moral values truly began during the 1960s would appear to be a settled question.[3]

But this is bad narration. It is bad fiction, not fact and certainly not history. Over the years, this complacency narrative has been perpetuated by liberals and conservatives alike. Their analysis is virtually identical – the only difference in the positions they espouse are the values, or the meanings, they attach to the narrative. So when conservatives look back to the 1950s, they see an era of sexual reticence, a time when conservative Christianity was on the march, a halcyon era of order and tradition untarnished by the turmoil that would come. Conversely, liberals often vilify this time for its hypocrisy and repression. In both cases, the Complacency Narrative of the 1950s is held as fact, admitting debate only over the meaning of what happened.

However, this is not so. In establishing the case for the dramatic liberalization of values during the Truman and Eisenhower years, this book points to the emergence of a Permissive Turn. It argues that during the latter half of the 1940s, and continuing throughout the 1950s, the popular ingestion of modern psychology, coupled with significant changes in

Vintage Books, 1979), pp. 3–23; Chalmers, David. *And the Crooked Places Made Straight: The Struggle for Social Change in the 1960s* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1991), pp. xv, 12–14, 168; Diggins, John Patrick. *The Proud Decades: America in War and Peace, 1945–1960* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company), p. 295.

[2] Yankelovich, Daniel. *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), p. 173.

[3] Two exceptions to this general trend can be found in Yankelovich, Daniel. *New Rules* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981); and Frum, David. *How We Got Here: The 70's: The Decade that Brought You Modern Life (For Better or Worse)* (New York: Basic Books, 2002). Although both books treat the 1970s as the time when social upheaval reached its peak, they also see the 1960s as a time of great social change, particularly among the young.

child-rearing and religious practices, constituted an unprecedented challenge to traditional moral constraints.

In the course of relating this story, the succeeding chapters will confront what we might regard as the four great myths of the 1950s – interpretations with which we are all acquainted and the veracity of which we have, generally, taken for granted. These myths – in the order in which they will be addressed – are as follows:

1) The belief that religious piety, as demonstrated by the popularity of Reverend Billy Graham and the climbing rates of church attendance, was on the rise during the 1950s.
2) The proposition that as far as sex is concerned the 1950s were a relatively stable period, and it was not until the 1960s that the sexual revolution actually began.
3) The claim that with the celebration of domesticity and the more general affirmation of "traditional values," the status of women was losing ground or – at best – remaining stagnant in the fifteen years following World War II.
4) The belief that the youth culture of the 1950s represented a vigorous challenge to the values of the adult world.

Although behaviors were loosening during the middle decades of the twentieth century, it is imperative to see these changes not as a tectonic shift, but as an acceleration of trends initiated earlier. Well before the Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925, the rise of science in general, and Darwinism in particular, posed a serious challenge to the intellectual and cultural dominance of traditional Protestant belief. Further undermining the influence of conservative Protestantism was the rise of the Social Gospel movement that had considerable influence before the nineteenth century. Likewise, the enormous success of Freud's celebrated visit to the United States in 1909 bears witness that psychology was making impressive inroads during the earliest days of the twentieth century. Therefore, rather than representing a break with all that came prior, the Permissive Turn imparted momentum to a process that had been unfolding for well over five decades.[4]

[4] In other important areas of life such as sex, consumerism, and popular entertainment, there are compelling reasons to believe that traditional constraints were becoming somewhat more relaxed during the closing years of the nineteenth century. See Meyerowitz, Joanne, "Sexual Geography and Gender Economy: The Furnished-Room Districts of

The World War II experience intensified the challenge to established values: it helped precipitate a collective backlash against sacrifice, and it also imbued the sciences with a prestige that, in turn, expanded the authoritative role of experts. A consideration of each development provides a new way of understanding the sweeping upheavals at work during the latter half of the twentieth century.

Repercussions of the War Effort

In 1945, as hostilities in Europe and the Pacific were drawing to a close and with an artificially large pool of savings available, Americans were in no mood for yet another round of renunciation and denial.[5] After fifteen years of depression and war, struggle and sacrifice, people sought to shake off years of public asceticism by a widespread "renunciation of renunciation."[6]

This pattern was perfectly illustrated by the meat crisis of 1946. Owing to continuing price controls, meat and other foodstuffs remained scarce and expensive. In dozens of cities, consumers staged buyers' strikes – sometimes revolving around chain phone calls and in other instances

Chicago, 1890–1930," in Ruiz, Vicki L. and DuBois, Ellen Carol (ed.), *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History* (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 307–23; Leach, William. *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993); Nasaw, David. *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); Levine, Lawrence W. *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988). Also, as Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg point out, the American family at the turn of the century was experiencing enormous change. "A rapidly rising divorce rate, an alarming fall in the birthrate, a sexual revolution, and a sharp increase in the numbers of women continuing their education, joining women's organizations, and finding employment – each of these worked to transform the middle class family." See Mintz, Steven and Kellogg, Susan, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), pp. 108–9.

[5] Higgs, Robert. "Wartime Prosperity? A Reassessment of the U.S. Economy in the 1940s," *Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 52 (1992), pp. 41–60; and Bureau of Economic Analysis, *Survey of Current Business*, Vol. 74, No. 9 (September 1994), p. 46.

[6] The "sacrifice" of Americans on the home front during World War II requires some qualification. As a result of wartime prosperity, personal income went up significantly. However, due to rationing, shortages, higher taxes, and considerable pressure to buy war bonds, Americans were forced to curtail their consumption. As historian Mark Leff puts it: "In common parlance, sacrifice did not require the suffering of terrible loss. It instead comprehended a range of activities – running the gamut from donating waste paper to donating lives – in which narrow, immediate self-interest was subordinated to the needs of the war effort." See Leff, Mark H. "The Politics of Sacrifice on the American Home Front in World War II," *The Journal of American History* (March, 1991), p. 1296.

around picketing – to protest rising food costs.[7] Public outrage reached such a pitch that President Truman ultimately reversed his policy by gutting the Office of Price Administration (OPA) and terminating price controls on meat. Of all the issues in the congressional races, popular indignation over this issue was perhaps the most intense, prompting Democratic Congressman Sam Rayburn to refer to the 1946 congressional contests as simply the "Beef steak election."[8]

The meat crisis demonstrates that although Americans had dutifully accommodated themselves to wartime shortages, their willingness to continue enduring privations plummeted once Hitler and Tojo were vanquished. For most voters, the meat crisis involved more than the mere search for sirloins and pot roasts. It was symbolic of something larger, for it dramatized the major economic problems of the day: postwar inflation, economic mismanagement, and – above all else – an egregious failure on the part of Democrats to bring a timely end to wartime shortages.

The proliferation of labor strikes in 1946 likewise illustrated a natural frustration with continued sacrifices. Although there had been some labor disturbances throughout the war, union–management relations had been relatively peaceful. However, with the end of hostilities, restraint became more difficult to maintain as real incomes eroded due to rising prices and reduced overtime hours. Accordingly, beginning January 1946, steelworkers left the mills for more than ten weeks. In April of the same year, John L. Lewis launched a crippling strike with approximately four hundred thousand members of the United Mine Workers (UMW) behind him. All told, nearly five thousand strikes occurred in 1946, at a cost of approximately 160 million man-hours of work – four times the previous record.[9]

The combination of the meat crisis and work stoppages – both beginning in the immediate aftermath of World War II – suggests that in 1945

[7] See Jacobs, Meg. "'How About Some Meat?: The Office of Price Administration, Consumption Politics, and State Building from the Bottom Up," *Journal of American History* (December 1997), pp. 910–43; *New York Times*, October 20, 1946 (8:1); October 21, 1946 (2:3, 6); October 23, 1946 (1:1); October 27, 1946 (IV, 8:4).

[8] Jacobs. "'How About Some Meat?" pp. 910–41; Donovan, Robert J. *Conflict and Crisis: The Presidency of Harry S. Truman, 1945–1948* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1977), pp. 235–7; "President: Election Eve Price Retreat," *Newsweek* (October 21, 1946), pp. 31–34; Hamby, Alonzo L. *Man of the People: A Life of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 382–4; and McCullough, David. *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), p. 520.

[9] Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Commerce, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970*, Part I, (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of the Census, 1975), p. 179.

(and possibly as early as 1944, when victory was within grasp) Americans were no longer willing to forgo basic food staples or long-awaited pay raises as a sacrifice to patriotic sentiments. From the perspective of most Americans, they had subordinated their private interests to a larger cause for long enough. Now that the war was won, it was their chance – indeed, it was their right – to catch up on the art of living.

Hastening the renunciation of selflessness was a harvest of corporate advertisements tailored to fit the needs of a long-suffering public. During the latter stages of World War II, when total victory seemed imminent, corporations promoted the prospect of postwar abundance. A magazine advertisement from Nash Motors typified the simple messages that flooded the airwaves and popular publications: "When victory comes Nash will go on . . . from the building of instruments of war to the making of two great new cars designed to be the finest, most comfortable, most economical, most advanced automobiles ever produced in their respective fields . . . And we will build these cars in numbers three times greater than our 1941 peak."[10] This advertisement was quite typical for its time, as dozens of other products, from the Ford Mercury and Sunbeam Coffeemaster, to vacuum cleaners and General Electric ranges, assured consumers that once peace arrived, production lines would flow with new products that surpassed their prewar equivalents in both style and affordability.[11]

A unique combination of forces ensured a high level of advertising during the war years. First, lucrative government contracts brought manufacturing companies high returns for producing war materials, even while limiting the production of consumer goods. As a result, corporations found themselves in a perplexing situation: Although earning record profits, they harbored serious doubts about their economic futures because military spending would eventually decline and consumer loyalty could not be guaranteed. Whereas in 1940 businesses spent only $216 million on radio ads, annual expenditures on radio commercials easily topped $400 million five years later.[12] By advertising so heavily, businesses hoped to encourage brand loyalty, burnish their public image, and heighten the thirst for consumer goods.[13]

[10] *The Saturday Evening Post*, (March 17, 1945), page not numbered.
[11] *The Saturday Evening Post*, (June 23, 1945), pp. 76, 52, 43; *The Saturday Evening Post* (December 1944), pp. 5, 76.
[12] U.S. Department of Commerce, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970, Part 2* p. 797.
[13] Chappell, John D. *Before the Bomb: How America Approached the End of the Pacific War* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), p. 55.

Concentrating on the marvels of technology wrought by warfare, articles in the popular press further fanned the expectations of a postwar boom. Writing in *The New York Times Magazine*, Walter Teague argued as early as 1943 that peacetime progress had "in many respects" been "far outstripped." Due to the war, he explained, "there have been advances in chemistry, in metallurgy, technology, and machinery design which would have needed years at the tempo of peace." Consequently, "American industry, while it devotes all of its plants and manpower to turning out the weapons of this war, is boiling with plans for what it will do when it can get back to its regular job . . . I wouldn't bank on anything being just the same after the war as it was before."[14]

From the perspective of the typical American consumer, the promises of industry still seemed credible if perhaps a little exaggerated. Readers of *The Saturday Review of Literature* learned that because "housing has made more progress during the five years of war than in the two preceding decades," it was perfectly plausible that during the postwar years homes would be "erected on leased land and moved to a new site like the furniture when the lease expires." Regaled with predictions smacking of science fiction, readers were told about "ultra-violet bacterial lamps" that were capable of sterilizing dirty dishes, and new machines that would make cooking "all but automatic."[15] Subscribers to *Better Homes & Gardens*, a monthly magazine directed at middle-class housewives, received a similarly upbeat message. After hostilities ended, the magazine predicted families could expect to tread on scuffless floors, recline on flyweight furniture, relax under bladeless fans, and enjoy warm vacuum-packaged meals "delivered once a day like your milk."[16]

There is some evidence to suggest that consumer desires also changed dramatically during the war. From the moment the war broke out, Americans en masse seemed to accept an ethic of sacrifice. Thanks to their enthusiastic purchase of war bonds, an unprecedented level of savings were acquired – not just in absolute terms, but also as a percentage of their personal income. As the end of the war drew closer, the expectations

[14] Teague, Walter Dorwin. "Is It Just a Dream, Or Will It Come True," *New York Times Magazine* (September 26, 1943), pp. 15, 34.

[15] Kaempfert, Waldemar. "Green Light for the Age of Miracles," *The Saturday Review of Literature* (April 22, 1944), p. 14.

[16] "Quick Looks at Things to Come," *Better Homes & Gardens* (May 1943), p. 22; "Things to Come," *Better Homes & Gardens* (March 1944), p. 30; "Previews of Things You'll Wear, Drive, Eat, and Live with Tomorrow," *Better Homes & Gardens* (October 1943), p. 28.

of many Americans rose accordingly: by fall 1945, a *Woman's Home Companion* poll showed that more than four out of five Americans considered an apartment or even a "used house" to be an unacceptable place to call home.[17]

The reality of American economic might, along with the prospect of a technological utopia and the promise of postwar opulence, exerted a profound effect on the American psyche.[18] On the eve of the U.S. entry into World War II, more than three-fourths of Americans believed "after the present war" the nation would face another depression.[19] However, by spring 1945, six out of ten Americans believed the war would be followed by an extended period (five to seven years) of prosperity, while only 28 percent believed otherwise.[20]

Remarkably, civilian wages rose by an astounding 29 percent during World War II. At no other period in the nation's history had civilian income risen so quickly.[21] However, due to the collective efforts of industry admen and government propaganda, many Americans – apparently believing the band would keep playing – anticipated even sunnier economic times once peace arrived. In short, as the United States came out of World War II, expectations were unusually high, and prosperity came to be seen simultaneously as an opportunity, a right, and an affirmation of the American Way. Needless to say, such an atmosphere had little sympathy for a continued ethic of sacrifice.

Just how did rising expectations contribute to a Permissive Turn – or a more secularized frame of mind? The answer lies in the attitudes they fostered and the values they cultivated. Rising expectations and the rejection of austerity encouraged increasing numbers of people to embrace a materialistic outlook that stressed securing life's pleasures in the "here and now." Reinforcing this development was a consumerist ethos that

[17] Cited from Gitlin, Todd. *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), p. 14.

[18] *Survey by Gallup Organization, April 20–April 25, 1945*. Retrieved August 19, 2008, from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. Online at http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/ipoll.html.

[19] In the Gallup Poll only 14 percent of respondents believed "Prosperity" was likely to follow the war. See *Survey by Gallup Organization, July 31–August 4, 1941*. Retrieved August 19, 2008, from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. Online at http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/ipoll.html.

[20] *Survey by Gallup Organization, April 20–April 25, 1945*. Retrieved August 19, 2008, from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. Online at http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/ipoll.html.

[21] U.S. Department of Commerce, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*, Part I, p. 125.

encouraged Americans to yield to the influence of the popular culture and, in so doing, take less of their cues from their neighbors and family. Indeed, in its catering to the new and the fleeting, its celebration of luxury and discouragement of thrift, its prompting of people to "keep up with the Joneses," and its glorification of style and fashion, a consumerist ethos compelled many to look to the world – and to the ways of the world – as the key to molding behavior, shaping identity, and finding meaning. Although most people did not translate this orientation into a reckless hedonism, it did succeed in nudging large numbers – especially those from the middle class, as well as the millions of adolescents entering the ranks of a consumer-driven youth culture – away from the repressive worldly asceticism that had long undergirded a conservative moral outlook.

The Continuing Liberalization of Values

The enormous faith placed in the possibilities of science helped lead to the liberalization of values in other ways. Besides cultivating a heightened sense of economic optimism, science – or, more precisely, the vast hope placed in the possible applications of science – gave greater cultural authority to "scientific" voices. As a result, various individuals who invoked the authority of science when addressing social questions were better able to challenge the traditional moral framework.

The government led the way in reshaping popular attitudes. Emboldened by wartime success in developing the atomic bomb, perfecting radar, and mass-producing penicillin, federal authorities became the country's chief peacetime patron of the sciences for the first time.[22] Thus, in 1946, Congress created the Atomic Energy Commission, passed the National Mental Health Act, and, four years later, established the National Science Foundation (NSF). In his 1949 inaugural address, President Truman hailed science as one of the leading solutions to the problems of a war-torn world. "Greater production," asserted Truman, "is the key to prosperity and peace. And the key to greater production is a wider and more vigorous application of modern scientific and technical knowledge."[23]

[22] For a discussion of wartime production of penicillin see Neushul, Peter. "Science, Government and the Mass Production of Penicillin," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 1993 Vol. 48 No. 4: 371–95; for a discussion of radar, see van Keuren, David K. "Science Goes to War: The Radiation Laboratory, Radar, and Their Technological Consequences," *Reviews in American History* (Fall 1997), pp. 643–7.

[23] Truman, Harry S. *The Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents*, Hunt, John Gabriel. (ed.) (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 407.

With the increased prestige of science, old stereotypes began to decline and the caricature of the scientist as an absentminded genius impervious to the pressing issues of the day gave way to a more positive appraisal. In the aftermath of Hiroshima, a new image – that of the socially conscious scientist – emerged in the national consciousness. With the creation of the Doomsday Clock in 1947, the editors of *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* were able to solidify their position as an authoritative voice on the Left with respect to issues of international peace. Likewise, physicists experienced a rapid ascent in their social status. Samuel Allison, the scientist who had led the Manhattan Project's Metallurgical Laboratory, recalled how physicists like himself were suddenly "exhibited as lions at Washington tea parties," welcomed at "conventions of religious orders," and "invited to conventions of social scientists, where their opinions on society were respectfully listened to by lifelong experts in the field."[24]

Advances in the social sciences paralleled the ascendancy of the physical and natural sciences, although somewhat more modestly. As Paul Starobin correctly observed, during the latter half of the 1940s "there was a naïve faith that social sciences could be a precision tool to solve the world's problems." Thus, in *An American Dilemma* (1944), a book that sought to end the systematic subjugation of African Americans, the author called for the "reconstruction of society" through "social engineering" grounded in "fact-finding and scientific theories."[25] Instead of turning off readers, such language helped turn *An American Dilemma* into a near-instant social science classic, and elevated Gunnar Myrdal, its lead author, to ever higher levels of celebrity status. Similarly, in 1944, when the American Jewish Committee (AJC) decided to sponsor a series of books on the causes of intolerance and bigotry, it did so under the auspices of its newly created Department of Scientific Research.[26] "Our aim is not merely to describe prejudice, but to explain it in order to help in its eradication," explained the series' editors. "Eradication means re-education, scientifically planned on the basis of understanding scientifically arrived at."[27]

[24] Ibid.
[25] Starobin, Paul. "Word Warriors Destroying Debate in Washington," *The Denver Post* (August 24, 1997), p. 6J.
[26] Svonkin, Stuart. *Jews Against Prejudice: American Jews and the Fight for Civil Liberties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 32.
[27] Adorno, T.W., Frenkel-Brunswik, Else, Levinson, Daniel J., and Sanford, R. Nevitt. *The Authoritarian Personality* (Abridged Edition) (New York: The American Jewish Committee, 1950), p. ix.