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Teaching American History  
Assignment 3: Book Review – The Fifties by David Halberstam  
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America in the 1950s conjures up happy images for most people. It was a prosperous time for many. Children and youth seemed to be engaged in positive activities and generally respected their elders. Life was orderly and predictable. The future seemed bright for the nation as a whole and for the majority of Americans. In The Fifties, David Halberstam confirms the reality of many of these positive aspects of the decade. However, through his exhaustive look at the 1950s, he makes clear that much was happening under the surface that made the decade a much more troubling time than is commonly believed.

Economic growth was clearly one of the positive developments of the decade and Halberstam provides excellent details regarding two major causes of this growth – the explosion in the auto industry led by General Motors and creation of new industries fueled by the ingenuity of a few brilliant entrepreneurs. Numerous chapters throughout the book tell the story of how GM came to dominate the auto industry and all of American business. Two men, in particular, played leading roles in establishing the company. Alfred P. Sloan was the chairman of GM who recognized that his company could dominate the market by creating a consumer demand for automobiles by transforming the American perception of cars from one of practical transportation to one of status symbol. Hence the introduction of the Cadillac – the car that was driven by the economically successful class. Harley Earl was GM's creative genius who designed automobiles that got the public's attention. GM capitalized on its strategy of promoting cars that enhanced the consumer's image by beginning the practice of introducing new models to the market each year – “the annual model change, designed to make car owners restless with the cars they owned and eager for new products.” (120) Earl led the department that redesigned GM models each year. His ability to cosmetically enhance GM cars year in and year out was unparalleled in the industry. Earl's creation of the Corvette is interesting. He designed it because his son wanted a Ferrari. Halberstam quotes Earl: “No son of mine is going to drive one of those damn Ferraris,” so Earl simply decided to create a GM model to rival the Italian sports car. (125)

Despite the dominance of GM in American business, the fifties also includes superb examples of entrepreneurs finding niches and creating large businesses, each of

which added to the economic expansion of the decade. The stories of three men exemplify how a person who has a vision and a plan can create a business that may even exceed his original vision. Bill Levitt saw the massive need for housing construction as a place to make his fortune. With the return of American veterans from WWII and the burgeoning middle class, an enormous market for modest new homes existed nationwide and Levitt set out to meet that demand. He used knowledge gained as a member of the Seabees building instant airfields along with insights from touring an old Ford assembly line factory to create an assembly line home building process. He trained his tradesmen to each become expert in one aspect of homebuilding, then set up hundreds of workers to move as an assembly line from site to site in proper order to mass produce houses. Working on hundreds of houses at a time, his crews completed eighteen houses every four hours. Levitt himself and many who learned from him allowed America to create suburbia. On the downside, Levitt would not allow black people to buy into his communities as he wanted to protect the values of his customers' homes. (131-143)

Many people know that Ray Kroc took a small hamburger business and pioneered it into the mammoth fast food chain, McDonalds. Halberstam reviews the rise of McDonalds, but he also sheds light on the actual McDonalds brothers and the interesting story of how the New Hampshire natives recognized the emerging on-the-go lifestyle of many Americans to create a new industry. Their struggle and perseverance is noteworthy. After opening what they hoped would be a profitable fast food restaurant, they recognized there were problems. They analyzed numbers and recognized that they were not fast enough because they offered too many options and workers had to master too many jobs. They closed their business and re-tooled for months before re-opening with a simplified menu that allowed workers to be much more efficient. They achieved their vision of truly fast food. Despite the clear potential that the chain they had created had to grow into a megabusiness, the brothers gladly sold the chain after a number of years to Ray Kroc who took it to the next level. (155-172)

Less well known than Levitt, Kroc and McDonalds is the name Kemmons Wilson. During a trip on which he took his family from Memphis to Washington, DC, Wilson decided to go into the motel business due to his frustration with the motels he found on the trip. It was impossible to know the quality of them before renting the rooms and he and the family always had to get back in the car to go find a place to eat after getting settled.

He recognized that America's travelling populace needed reliable motels along the highways. He determined to create this chain based on a few simple consumer desires: ample sized rooms, no extra charge for children, and a restaurant on site. Like the McDonalds brothers, he had to overcome obstacles. Homebuilders to whom he presented his business plan did not share his vision. Instead, he decided to build one motel at a time, selling each as a franchise once it was established. His business took off after enough Holiday Inn signs were seen on the roadways, helped in large measure by the \$76 billion federal highway spending bill passed in 1956.

Halberstam discusses a number of other good things occurred during the fifties like the great progress in the battle for civil rights for black Americans and the early technological work done in pioneering the precursor to today's modern computer. Another piece of technology that developed rapidly which had an immediate impact on Americans of the era itself, though, was the television. Perhaps nothing had a larger effect on America (both good and bad) in so many ways as the explosion of the influence of television. Throughout the book, Halberstam writes about the influence of television as he discusses such divergent topics as presidential elections, civil rights, popular culture, business, and crime.

One benefit of television since the fifties has been to shed light on the dark side of America to cause Americans to recognize our ills so that we might do something about them. No better example exists than events related to injustice towards black Americans. Halberstam shares excellent behind the scenes stories about Montgomery and Little Rock. The reader learns how John Chancellor recognized the power of the images that he was witnessing at Little Rock and how he "realized that he was watching the Constitution in action" as federal troops enforced judicial and legislative mandates. (687) Visual images broadcast into northern living rooms of black people behaving with dignity being savaged by angry white southern citizens and police advanced the civil rights like never before.

An interesting story focuses on the role of a man named Rosser Reeves in creating television advertising spots for Eisenhower for the 1952 election. Reeves used television to revolutionize TV campaigns. He realized that political speeches could be boiled down to simple catchphrases that could be delivered in thirty second ads and that these spots would have greater impact than any previous campaign strategy. Adlai Stevenson would not lower himself to employing such a tactic. Though Eisenhower was uncomfortable with

advertising, he relented and created a series of spots that may have turned the election in his favor. (225-232) Perhaps the Nixon-Kennedy debate was not really the first time television dramatically influenced a presidential election. The reader is left to discern whether this has been a good or bad change in the process of American politics.

Television also provides an example of the negative aspects of American culture during the 1950s in the scandal involving the game show called *The \$64,000 Question*. Halberstam details how the show revealed much of what was wrong with American culture in two ways: the fact that the greed of the American audience is what fueled its success and all of the sordidness behind how the scandal developed. The show's producers initiated the cheating out of greed as they realized that they could increase their viewing audience by manipulating who won and who lost. In their manipulations they destroyed the lives of two contestants – one who was cheated on the show and one who they convinced to cheat so that he could win. Herb Stempel, who played “the role of the nerd, the square, the human computer,” was allowed to be one of the show's first winners. His previously difficult life suddenly became meaningful as he became a true celebrity. But the show's producers' evolving understanding of the American public led them to recognize that “the show needed a hero in a white hat, a handsome young gladiator to defeat him.” (651) They convinced a handsome Columbia University instructor named Charles Van Doren to overcome his moral misgivings to knowingly accept the correct answers before the show to win and thereby become America's white knight. Stempel was crushed by being portrayed as the unattractive loser who Americans rooted against. After the scandal became public Van Doren was humiliated as he testified before a Congressional committee that was investigating the scandal, he lost his position at Columbia, and devastated his family as shame was brought upon it. (645-666)

Politics presented other examples of problems in 1950s America, some of which are commonly known, but a few of which are not. The destructiveness of Joseph McCarthy is of course related in detail, but Halberstam reveals an accomplice – the media. Many reporters knew from the start that McCarthy was on a witch hunt, but no one spoke up because the story sold newspapers. A Chicago Tribune reporter named Willard Edwards even “helped supply names, did research for speeches, and . . . wrote drafts of some speeches.” (55) Another political story of particular relevance today is the story of the CIA's part in the 1953 coup in Iran. It was executed with Eisenhower's blessing and set a

precedent for future covert activities in Guatemala and Cuba. Kermit Roosevelt, Theodore's grandson, carried out the mission nearly single-handedly. Halberstam discusses the ultimate failure of this effort in light of the Shah's unpopularity which led to the revolution in 1979 (360-369). A third troubling story is how partisan politics was to blame for the exaggerated fear of a nuclear holocaust that Americans were caused by the non-existent missile gap that Democrats publically portrayed in order to put pressure on Eisenhower. Though the Democrats were knowingly deceiving the public regarding the danger of a nuclear attack by a supposedly better armed Soviet Union, Halberstam also lays blame at the feet of Republicans for allowing McCarthy free reign earlier in the decade to characterize the Democrats as weak in the face of the Soviet threat. (700)

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The two greatest values of The Fifties for a history teacher are the stories related within and its thoroughness. It is one of those books that any history teacher would enjoy because of Halberstam's unique ability to weave together divergent stories. Economics, politics, culture, and technology each receive significant attention as Halberstam switches focus chapter by chapter between stories based in each of these general topics. A third of the way through the book, for instance, he devotes one of number of chapters throughout the book to Eisenhower, focuses the next chapter on theater (detailing the lives of Marlon Brando and Elia Kazan), then tells the story behind the production of the Kinsey Report in the next chapter. Moving back and forth between general topics this way maintains the readers' attention as topics do not become stale through too much concentrated attention.

Of even greater value to history teachers is the book's thoroughness. Halberstam truly addresses nearly every conceivable topic about which one could hope to learn. He delves into obviously significant subject matter such as politics, foreign policy, business, and cultural trends, but with amazing depth. Everyone knows that Elvis Presley burst on the scene and changed music forever, for instance, but how many of us know that he was not even aware of his trademark hip gyration in his early career? This new form of music (that was not really new at all – it was readily found in the music of black musicians) emphasized a powerful beat and Elvis subconsciously rotated his hips in order to maintain the beat. (477) Not only does Halberstam provide tremendous detail regarding subject matter that one would expect in a historical book, but he offers a detailed look at topics that one would not expect. For instance, he tells of the efforts of a man named John Rust

to fulfill his dream of helping small farmers by perfecting the invention of the mechanical cotton picker. This invention is of great historical significance because it dramatically accelerated the migration of southern black people to northern cities as the need for labor in cotton fields declined precipitously. Rust is credited with solving most of the problems posed by this new technology, yet only got out of debt in the last two years of his life. John Deere built upon his work and manufactured a machine that was useful only to large farmers who were able to expand their farms by buying out smaller farms. Rust's tremendous sacrifices benefitted neither those he cared for nor himself and caused a seismic demographic change in America as labor was no longer an essential aspect of cotton farming. (442-454) What is impressive about this accounting is not that Halberstam identifies a major cause of the black migration, but that he devotes ten pages to the story of a fairly obscure American who was largely responsible for creating that cause. Halberstam's greatest contribution is the behind the scenes stories like the determination of John Rust and the depravity of the producers of *The \$64,000 Question* that every history teacher will want to relate to our students to put a face on history, to bring it alive, and to present a balanced look at the era.

Coverage of political issues during the fifties is very thorough, focusing mainly on the backgrounds of and conflicts between people such as Truman, MacArthur, Stevenson, Eisenhower, Nixon, Hiss, and McCarthy. The Cold War is discussed in depth ranging from Berlin to Korea to the U-2 to Sputnik to the Bay of Pigs. The two most interesting political stories focus on a lesser known figure and a lesser known event.

Halberstam opines that Robert Taft “was quite possibly the most cerebral politician of his era” (206) and that “by all rights the 1952 Republican nomination belonged to Robert Taft.” (205) History books tell us little of this highly respected senator from Ohio. His story is interesting because it highlights the conflict within the Republican party during the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century between Eastern conservatives and Midwestern conservatives. Despite his father having been President, a brilliant mind, and a name well known nationally at the time, Taft lost the nomination to Eisenhower in large part due to the animosity between these wings of the party.

The American backed coup in Iran in 1953 is of special relevance today and yet it is one of the least understood events of the fifties. Halberstam provides the historical context of the British exploitation of Iran during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and cites America’s basis for concern as the Cold War. The British had exploited Iran’s oil reserves and a left-leaning man named Mohammed Mossadegh became prime minister of Iran, thereby legally deposing the young Shah. Fear of Iran falling under the control of the Soviets prompted the State Department to seek a way of ousting Mossadegh. It worked in tandem with the CIA on a covert plot to make this happen. Working for the CIA, the grandson of Teddy Roosevelt, Kermit Roosevelt, effected the re-installment to power of the Shah with such ease that covert operations in other places of American interest like Guatemala and Cuba followed. The failure of the Shah during the next quarter century to become a respected leader of the Iranian people has clearly had enormous repercussions for American-Iranian relations ever since.