**United States History Name:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Does History Repeat Itself? The 1920s and the 1950s Date:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Period:\_\_**

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| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **1920s** | **1950s** |
| **Describe the war that came before each decade** |  |  |
| **Describe the economy during each decade** |  |  |
| **Describe roles for women during each decade** |  |  |
| **Describe the foreign policy of the United States during each decade** |  |  |

**Does History Repeat Itself? – Maybe Not, But It Sure Does Rhyme**

The 1920s and the 1950s seem like identical twin decades at first glance. Both decades were times that the American people tried to forget two life-changing wars. Both decades were focused on high-energy consumerism and materialism. Both decades were strongly anti-communist and fearful of threats to America from the outside and inside. Yet, in spite of the similarities, there are some differences and those differences are important.

First, the similarities. Both the 1920s and the 1950s were focused on escaping the fears of world wars. World War I ended in 1918 and Americans wanted by 1920 to return to “**normalcy**,” as President Harding promised them. They wanted to forget the death and destruction and move on with life. Progressive reform declined in the 1920s—Americans were tired of trying to fix big business and they wanted to do nothing to help unions. The 1950s were similar to the 1920s in the escapism. Many Americans wanted to move on with family life in the 1950s, choosing to live in cookie-cutter homes in the **suburbs**. They had cookie-cutter **baby boom** families—with 3.7 children being the average—and lived in all-white neighborhoods where conformity was valued more than individuality. The reason for such an emphasis on conformity in the 1950s was result of World War II. Americans wanted to move on from that conflict, confident that they had saved the world and brought down evil dictators, and devote themselves to home and family. Memories of the Depression of the 1930s, when nobody could afford the ideal home and family, also helped to motivate them to move to cookie-cutter suburbia.

Second, both decades were rampant times of consumerism and materialism. People in the 1920s could buy automobiles and radios cheaply. Even so, many people in the 1920s went into debt for their purchases, using the **installment plan** to “buy-now-and-pay-later.” Government tax cuts for the wealthy helped to put a lot more money in circulation, although it did create a highly unequal distribution of wealth. Big business boomed in the 1920s, as American manufacturers turned out plenty of cheap products for consumers. The 1950s was similar in its consumerism. Americans, supported by lots of money from the federal government through the **GI Bill** and defense spending, bought cars, homes, and televisions. All the babies they had meant lots of spending on products for children and the building of new schools. With the invention of the **credit card** in 1950, Americans could also “buy-now-and-pay-later” as they stuffed their homes with the latest American products. American businesses, making lots of goods for the American and European markets, saw their profits increase.

Even though the 1920s and the 1950s sound similar economically, there were key differences. Both decades were deeply worried about communism. In the 1919-1920, the “**Red Scare**” gripped America as the government hunted down bomb-throwing anarchists. Americans turned more **isolationist** in the 1920s and tried to keep radicals out of the country through tighter immigration laws. The 1950s was also concerned about communism, but approached the problem quite differently. In America, the second “Red Scare” involved the hunting of spies and commies by **HUAC** and **Joseph McCarthy**. The U.S. even executed two spies in 1953. Most important, in the 1950s, the U.S. did not turn “inward.” The U.S. went out in the world—becoming **interventionist**—and tried to “**contain**” communism around the globe. The Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, the CIA, Brinkmanship, and the Space Race were all part of the global fight to beat the communists.

For women and Black Americans, the 1920s and the 1950s were also different. 1920s women known as **Flappers** challenged social roles by dancing, smoking, drinking, and being promiscuous. Not every woman was a Flapper, but these women rejected traditional views of women. In the 1950s, women were expected to fulfill traditional roles as mothers and wives. They were told that they would be the happiest and most fulfilled in the home, taking care of their children and husbands. For African Americans, the 1920s were a time of strong racism, with riots breaking out in the North because of the migration of southern blacks to find northern jobs. Even so, Black Americans succeeded in celebrating blackness through the **Harlem Renaissance**. The 1950s were a time of strong racism too, but African Americans, fresh from fighting in World War II, turned the **Double-V** campaign into the modern civil rights movement. They demanded an end to Jim Crow laws and called upon Americans to live up to the promises of liberty and equality.

Thus, while the 1920s and the 1950s seem very similar, there are some key differences in how both decades responded to race and gender. “History may not repeat itself, but it sure does rhyme,” Mark Twain once observed. The same could be said of the 1920s and the 1950s.