Civil Rights and the 1950s: Crash Course US History #39

Crash Course: U.S. History
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=====Introduction: Consensus Culture=====

Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course US History and today we're going to look at one of the most important periods of American social history, the 1950s. Why is it so important? Well first because it saw the advent of the greatest invention in human history: television.

Mr. Green, Mr. Green! I like TV, by the way you're from the future. How does the X-Files end, are there aliens or no aliens?

No spoilers, Me From the Past! You're going to have to go to college and watch the X-Files get terrible just like I did.

So it's mostly important because of the Civil Rights movement. We're going to talk about some of the heroic figures, like Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks, but much of the real story is about the thousands of people you've never heard of who fought to make America more inclusive. But before we look at the various changes the Civil Rights movement was pushing for, we should spend a little time looking at the society that they were trying to change.

The 1950s has been called the period of consensus and I suppose it was, at least for the white males who wrote about it, and who all agreed that the 1950s were fantastic for white males.

Consensus culture was caused first by the Cold War - people were hesitant to criticize the United States for fear of being framed a Communist - and second by affluence. Increasing prosperity meant that more people didn't have as much to be critical of. And this widespread affluence was something new in the United States.

Between 1946 and 1960 Americans experienced a period of economic expansion that saw standards of living rise and gross national product more than double. And unlike many previous American economic expansions, much of the growing prosperity in the 50s were shared by ordinary working people, who saw their wages rise. To quote our old friend Eric Foner, "By 1960, an estimated 60 percent of Americans enjoyed what the government defined as a middle-class standard of living."

And this meant that an increasing number of Americans had access to things like television and air-conditioning and dishwashers and air travel. That doesn't really seem like a bonus. Anyway, despite the fact that they were being stuffed into tiny metal cylinders and hurdled through the air, most Americans were happy because they had, like, indoor plumbing and electricity.

(Crash Course Intro)

=====Suburbanization and the Middle Class (2:01)=====

The 1950s was the era of suburbanization. The number of homes in the United States doubled during the decade, which had the pleasant side effect of creating lots of construction jobs.

The classic example of suburbanization was Levittown in New York, where 10,000 almost identical homes were built and became home to 40,000 people almost overnight. And living further from the city meant that more Americans needed cars which was good news for Detroit where cars where churned out with the expectation that Americans would replace them every two years.

By 1960, 80% of Americans owned at least one car and 14% had two or more. And car culture changed the way that Americans lived and shopped. I mean they gave us shopping malls and drive-through restaurants and the backseat make out session. I mean, high school me didn't get the back seat make out session, but other people did. I did get the Burger King drive through though, and lots of it.

Our whole picture of the American standard of living, with its abundance of consumer goods and plentiful services, was established in the 1950s. And so for many people this era was something of a golden age, especially when we look back on it today with nostalgia, but there were critics even at the time.

So when we say the 1950s was an era of consensus, one of the things we're saying is that there wasn't much room for debate about what it meant to be an American. Most people agreed on the American values: individualism, respect for private property, and belief in equal opportunity. The key problem was that we believed in equal opportunity but didn't actually provide it.

But some people were concerned that the cookie cutter vision of the good life and the celebration of the middle class lifestyle was displacing other conceptions of citizenship. Like the sociologist C. Wright Mills described a combination of military, corporate and political leaders as a power elite, whose control over government and the economy was such as to make democracy an afterthought. In the lonely crowd, sociologist David Riesman criticized Americans for being conformists and lacking of rich inner life necessary to be truly independent. And John Kenneth Galbraith questioned an affluent society that would pay for new cars and new missiles but not for new schools.

And we can't mention the 1950s without discussing teenagers, since this was the decade that gave us rock 'n' roll and rock stars like Bill Haley and the Comets, Buddy Holly and the Crickets, and Elvis Presley and his hips.

So you might have noticed something about all those critics of the 1950s that I just mentioned. They were all white dudes. Now we're going to be talking about women in the 1950s and 1960s next week, because their liberation movement began a bit later. But what most people call the Civil Rights movement really did begin in the 50s.

=====Civil Rights Movement (4:25)=====

While the 1950s where something of a golden age for many blue and white collar workers, it was hardly a period of expanding opportunities for African Americans. Rigid segregation was the rule throughout the country, especially in housing, but also in jobs and in employment. In the South, public accommodations were segregated by law, while in the North, it was usually happening by custom - or de facto segregation.

To give just one example, the new suburban neighborhoods that sprang up in the 1950s were almost completely white and this remained true for decades. According Eric Foner, “As late as the 1990s, nearly 90 percent of suburban whites lived in communities with non-white populations less than 1 percent.”

And it wasn’t just housing. In the 1950s, half of black families lived in poverty. When they were able to get union jobs, black workers had less seniority than their white counterparts so their employment was less stable. And their educational opportunities were severely limited by sub-standard segregated schools.

Now you might think the Civil Rights Movement began with Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott or else Brown v. Board of Education, but it really started during World War II with efforts like those of A. Philip Randolph and the soldiers taking part in the

Double-V crusade. But even before that, black Americans had been fighting for civil rights. It's just that in the 1950s, they started to win.

So, desegregating schools was a key goal of the Civil Rights movement. And it started in California in 1946. In the case of Mendez v. Westminster, the California Supreme Court ruled that Orange County, of all places, had to desegregate their schools. They'd been discriminating against Latinos. And then, California's governor, Earl Warren, signed an order that repealed all school segregation in the state.

=====Brown v. Board of Education - Mystery Document (5:57)=====
That same Earl Warren, by the way, was Chief Justice when the landmark case Brown v. Board of Education came before the Supreme Court in 1954. The NAACP Legal Defense Fund under the leadership of Thurgood Marshall had been pursuing a legal strategy of trying to make states live up to the ruling in Plessy v. Ferguson that required all public facilities to be separate but equal.

They started by bringing lawsuits against professional schools like law schools, because it was really obvious that the three classrooms and no library that Texas set up for its African American law students were not equal to the actual University of Texas's law school.

But the Brown case was about public schools for children. It was actually a combination of 5 cases from 4 states, of which Brown happened to be alphabetically the first. The Board of Education in question incidentally was in Topeka, Kansas, not one of the states of the old Confederacy, but nonetheless a city that did restrict its schooling by race.

Oh, it's time for the Mystery Document? The rules here are simple. I read the Mystery Document. If I'm wrong, I get shocked.
Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children. The impact is greater when it has the sanction of the law, for the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the negro group. A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn. Segregation with the sanction of law, therefore, has a tendency to [retard] the educational and mental development of negro children and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racial[ly] integrated school system.
Stan, the last two weeks you have given me two extraordinary gifts and I am thankful. It is Earl Warren from Brown v. Board of Education. Huzzah!

Justice Warren is actually quoting from sociological research there that shows that segregation itself is psychologically damaging to black children because they recognize that being separated out is a badge of inferiority. Alright, let's go to the Thought Bubble.

=====Montgomery Bus Boycott - Thought Bubble (7:50)=====
The Brown decision was a watershed but it didn't lead to massive immediate desegregation of the nation's public schools. In fact, it spawned what came to be known as "Massive Resistance" in the South. The resistance got so massive, in fact, that a number of counties, rather than integrate their schools, closed them. Prince Edward County in Virginia, for instance, closed its schools in 1959 and didn't re-open them again until 1964.

Except they didn't really close them because many states appropriated funds to pay for white students to attend "private" academies. Some states got so into the resistance that they began to fly the Confederate Battle flag over their state capitol buildings. Yes, I'm looking at you, Alabama and South Carolina.

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama and got arrested, kicking off the Montgomery Bus Boycott that lasted almost a year. A lot of people think that Parks was simply an average African American working woman who was tired and fed up with segregation, but the truth is more complicated.

Parks had been active in politics since the 1930s and had protested the notorious Scottsboro Boys case. She had served as secretary for the NAACP and she had begun her quest to register to vote in Alabama in 1943. She failed a literacy test three times before becoming one of the very few black people registered to vote in the state. And in 1954, she attended a training session for political activists and met other civil rights radicals. So Rosa Parks was an active participant in the fight for black civil rights long before she sat on that bus.

The Bus Boycott also thrust into prominence a young pastor from Atlanta, the 26 year old Martin Luther King, Jr. He helped to organize the boycott from his Baptist church, which reminds us that black churches played a pivotal role in the Civil Rights Movement. That boycott would go on to last for 381 days and in the end, the city of Montgomery relented. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So that was, of course, only the beginning for Martin Luther King, who achieved his greatest triumphs in the 1960s. After Montgomery, he was instrumental in forming the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, a coalition of black civil rights and church leaders who pushed for integration. And they needed to fight hard, especially in the face of Massive Resistance and an Eisenhower administration that was lukewarm at best about civil rights.

=====Conclusion (9:52)=====

But I suppose Eisenhower did stick up for civil rights when forced to, as when Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus used the National Guard to prevent the integration of Little Rock's Central High School by 9 black students in 1957. Eisenhower was like, "You know, as the guy who invaded Normandy, I don't think that's the best use for the National Guard." So, Eisenhower sent the 101st Airborne Division (not the entirety of it, but some of it) to Little Rock, Arkansas, to walk kids to school. Which they did for a year.

After that, Faubus closed the schools, but at least the federal government showed that it wouldn't allow states to ignore court orders about the Constitution. In your face, John C. Calhoun. Despite the court decision and the dispatching of Federal troops, by the end of the 1950s fewer than two percent of black students attended integrated schools in the South. So, the modern movement for Civil Rights had begun, but it was clear that there was still a lot of work to do.

But the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement shows us that the picture of consensus in the 1950s is not quite as clear-cut as its proponents would have us believe. Yes, there was widespread affluence, particularly among white people, and criticism of the government and America generally was stifled by the fear of appearing to sympathize with Communism.

But there was also widespread systemic inequality and poverty in the decade that shows just how far away we were from living the ideal of equal opportunity. That we have made real progress, and we have, is a credit to the voices of protest. Next week we'll see how women, Latinos, and gay people added their voices to the protests and look at what they were and were not able to change in the 1960s.

Thanks for watching. I'll see you then.

=====Credits (11:25)=====

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Thanks again for watching Crash Course and as we say in my hometown, don't forget to be awesome.