

The Eisenhower Era

Learn about Eisenhower's Domestic and Foreign Policies

Overview

- President Dwight D. Eisenhower was a popular war hero whose eight-year presidency was characterized by peace and prosperity, despite **Cold War** tensions and nuclear anxieties.
- During his presidency the nation's consumer culture flourished. Workers' wages rose, the baby boom reached its peak, and the suburbs grew rapidly.
- A moderate Republican, Eisenhower continued federal government activism in the economy and supported the largest public works project in history: the **interstate highway system**.
- In 1957 Eisenhower deployed troops to Little Rock, Arkansas to enforce the Supreme Court's ruling that public schools be desegregated.

Dwight D. Eisenhower and Modern Republicanism

Dwight Eisenhower was a celebrated hero of the Second World War, well known to the public as the five-star general who had commanded Allied forces in Europe on **D-Day**. Eisenhower won landslide victories in both the 1952 and 1956 presidential elections over his Democratic rival Adlai Stevenson, the former governor of Illinois.



Figure 1: President Dwight Eisenhower in 1954, talking with Lewis L. Strauss, chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission. Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

Eisenhower was a moderate Republican. Eisenhower did not try to dismantle the social welfare programs of the New Deal; on the contrary, the federal government continued to grow during his presidency. He signed an expansion to Social Security—to cover the self-employed, and disabled—and established the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. He also signed legislation increasing the minimum wage by a third.

Eisenhower also emphasized the importance of a balanced federal budget, and his administration worked for modestly lower taxes on corporations and the highest income earners. He called his brand of politics **Modern Republicanism**, and said he wanted to lead the country “down the middle of the road.”

With the **Federal-Aid Highway Act**, he funded the largest public works project in American history—authorizing the expenditure of \$25 billion to build more than 40,000 miles of four-lane interstate highways.

1950s prosperity

The Eisenhower era of the 1950s was a time of unprecedented economic growth and prosperity. GDP (gross domestic product) grew by an astonishing 150% in the period from 1945 to 1960. In the 1950s, with only five percent of the world's population the U.S. economy produced almost half of the world's manufactured products.

Americans drove three-quarters of the world's cars and consumed half of the world's energy. Union membership reached its historic peak in American history in 1954 when almost 35% of the nation's workforce was unionized. The [GI Bill](#) and [Marshall Plan](#) expenditures, along with Cold War defense spending, contributed to economic growth. So, too, did the nation's growing population—some 50 million babies were born during the continuing [baby boom](#) in the Eisenhower era.

Eisenhower and Civil Rights

Eisenhower was a limited supporter of civil rights legislation. He signed the **Civil Rights Act of 1957**, the first civil rights bill passed by Congress since the nineteenth century, and appointed a Commission on Civil Rights to ensure that citizens were not being "deprived of their right to vote." In 1960, he signed the **Civil Rights Act**, which introduced penalties for anyone who destroyed voter registration records or attempted to block a person from registering to vote. The integration of the United States armed services, which began under President Truman, was completed during Eisenhower's administration. Finally, in 1957 Eisenhower deployed federal troops to aid with the integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Eisenhower's Foreign Policy

Eisenhower's eight years in office were relatively peaceful ones for the nation. He ended the Korean War with a July 1953 armistice, and did not take the country into war in Vietnam when communists took over part of that country in 1954 (though he did supply South Vietnam with military advisers and equipment). In concert with Nikita Khrushchev, his Soviet counterpart, Eisenhower voluntarily suspended nuclear atmospheric testing in 1958, although an official test-ban treaty would not be signed until after he left office.

The Cold War framed Eisenhower's foreign policy. Cold War thinking frequently took on an "us-versus-them" mindset, and this view of the world as one polarized between Soviet totalitarian communism (them) and American democracy and freedoms (us) saw Eisenhower's administration both provide aid to dictators friendly to US interests (the Shah of Iran, Fulgencio Batista in Cuba, for example) and authorize covert CIA missions to overthrow governments sympathetic to the Soviets. For example, in 1954 Eisenhower authorized the CIA to depose the democratically elected president of Guatemala, Jacobo Arbenz.

The Eisenhower administration's national security strategy was called the **New Look**. It relied on strategic nuclear weapons and air power while scaling back conventional army and navy forces. A nuclear arsenal was cheaper to maintain than paying a standing army: "more bang for the buck," the popular slogan went.

New Look policy gave rise to talk of the need to employ a diplomacy of **brinkmanship**: a willingness on the part of American leaders to take the world to the brink of a nuclear war with the hope that the Soviets would back down in the face of a potential US nuclear strike. But the stakes were high. If brinkmanship failed, nuclear war might result. Consequently, fear of nuclear war weighed heavily on the minds of Americans during the Eisenhower era.

What do you think?

1. Why do you think President Eisenhower was so popular?
2. What accounted for the incredible rise in the nation's wealth during the 1950s?
3. How would you characterize President Eisenhower's domestic politics?