

History 3326G

Atomic America: The United States during the 1950s

Winter 2026

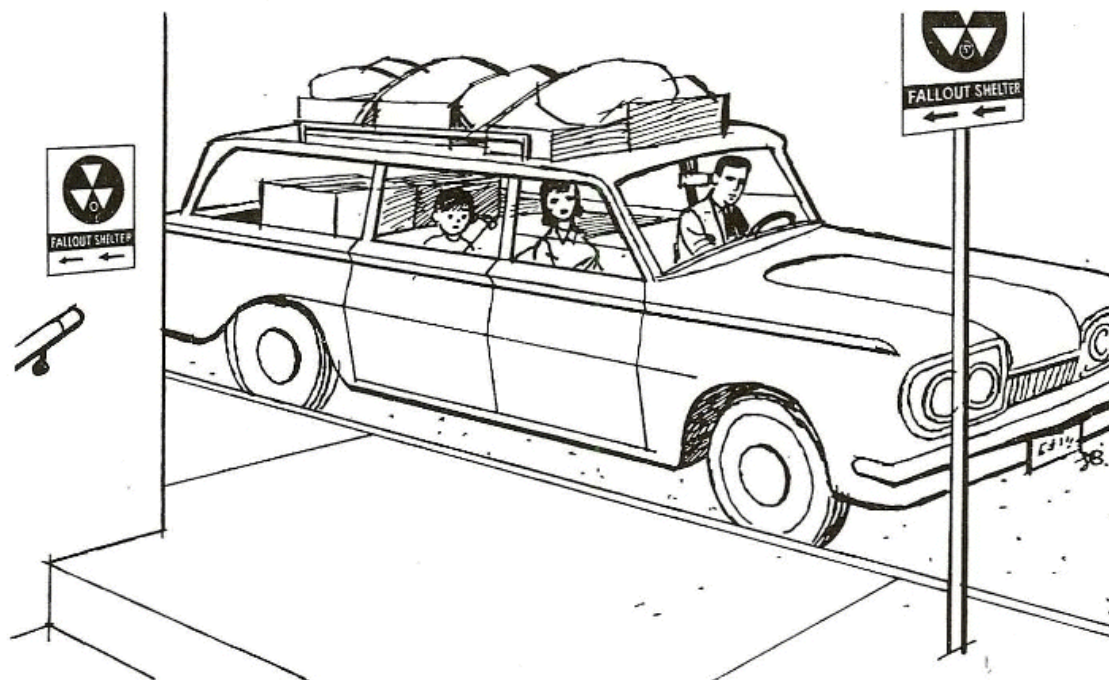
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This is a **draft** outline. Please see the course site on OWL Brightspace for a final version.



U.S. Dept. of Defense/Office of Civil Defense,
Personal and Family Survival (SM 3-11, Revised, 1963)

Course Description

Films and television tend to depict the 1950s as a happy, golden age: a decade of widespread affluence and stability, close-knit families, and a new teen culture which embraced drive-in restaurants, poodle skirts, and sock hops. Other portrayals, however, present the 1950s as a period shaped by anxiety, and marked by conformity and hypocrisy. While many Americans enjoyed the benefits of a strong and affluent post-war society, they also struggled to learn to live in the shadow of the threat posed by the newly-developed atomic bomb. It was a period of new suburban homes and time-saving appliances, but also of backyard bomb shelters, blacklists, and worries about the spread of Communism. Meanwhile, Americans such as Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr.,

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challenged the racial status quo and inspired a movement for civil rights. American women began to question their prescribed role in the nuclear family and in society as a whole. Anti-heroes such as James Dean, Jack Kerouac, and Lenny Bruce, who resisted the conventional norms of 1950s society, became role models for a generation of young people.

In this course, we will examine some key aspects of political, social and cultural life in the United States, beginning with the advent of the “atomic age” in 1945. How did the introduction of the atomic bomb and the start of the Cold War affect the everyday lives of ordinary Americans?

We will explore examples of the best and worst trends and developments of the decade. Urban growth, sprawling suburbia, the rise of the freeway system and the car culture, the expansion of education systems, booming aerospace and defence industries, widespread consumerism: all of these suggested the idea of America as the land of the future, the land of possibility. At the same time, however, in 1950s America we see evidence of more negative developments, including the destruction of the environment, the phasing out of public transportation systems, the growth of the military-industrial complex, and the excesses of anti-Communist fervour.

In examining some of the key events, trends, and developments of this period, we will also consider what sort of “fallout” they caused—both positive and negative—that continues to affect society to this day.

Prerequisite(s):

Registration in third year or above, any module.

Course Syllabus

Learning Outcomes:

By the end of the course, students will have:

- developed a detailed knowledge of key events and issues of 1950s American society
- assessed the legacy and long-term impacts of the events of the 1950s
- familiarized themselves with several significant primary documents of the period and evaluated their historical value and significance, alone and in relation to other primary and secondary sources
- critically analyzed various historical interpretations of the decade
- examined some of the cultural artifacts of the period and learned to understand their significance (*egs.*: music, poetry and literature, media coverage)
- developed a research question and answered it in a written assignment, integrating both primary and secondary sources in formulating the argument
- improved oral communication skills through presentations and classroom discussion

Course Materials

- Weekly readings will be assigned. These will be available online, either on the OWL course website or through the Western Libraries website

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- One book or novel, published in the 1950s, to be chosen from a list that will be provided in class. (Most of these titles can be borrowed from Western Libraries.)

Methods of Evaluation

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| ○ Leading class discussion on one of the primary documents assigned in the weekly readings | 15% |
| ○ Written analysis of a book or novel published and/or widely read during the 1950s (4-5 pages + footnotes and bibliography) (due Feb. 26 th) | 20% |
| ○ Written proposal for research essay, outlining topic, proposed research question to be answered, and possible sources (1/2-1 page) (due Feb. 12 th) | 5% |
| ○ Research essay (8-10 pages + footnotes and bibliography) on a topic of the student's choosing, in consultation with the instructor (due April 2 nd) | 35% |
| ○ Class participation (grade based on thoughtful and informed contributions to discussion, as well as occasional in-class written exercises) | 25% |

There are no exams in this course.

Written Assignments:

Written assignments must be submitted at the specified time on the due date. Assignments are to be submitted in Word format to the submission link on the OWL course website. (By using the submission link on the course website, your paper will automatically be submitted to Turnitin.com.)

Further instructions regarding the above-listed assignments will be provided in class.

Note that HIST 3326G is an essay course. According to Western's Academic Handbook, an essay course "...must be so structured that the student is required to demonstrate competence in essay writing to pass the course." In this course, that means that, in addition to receiving an overall passing grade in the course, students must complete and submit both the book analysis and the research essay in order to pass the course, regardless of grades earned on other assignments.

Absences and Late Assignments:

In the event you must miss a class, due to illness or other reason, please notify the instructor as soon as possible. Absence from class (without documentation from Academic Advising) will result in a grade of 0 for participation for that day. Partial participation marks can sometimes be made up by completing an additional assignment; please consult the instructor for this option.

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Late assignments: a late penalty of 2% per day (including Saturdays and Sundays) will be incurred for all written work submitted after the due date and time. Papers submitted on the due date but after the due time (i.e., 1:30 p.m.) will be considered late and will be penalized 2%.

A late penalty will not be waived unless the student has provided documentation from Academic Advising to the instructor. In that case, the student must contact the professor as soon as possible (i.e., within 48 hours of the missed deadline) to discuss an alternate assignment and/or due date.

Late assignments will **not** be accepted more than 10 days after the due date of the assignment.

(Note that students may request, through the Student Absence Portal, academic consideration for one assignment/evaluation without supporting documentation, during the course. Undocumented absence consideration requests will not be accepted for the “leading class discussion” assignment.)

Expectations:

- Regular attendance.
- Completion of all assigned readings and active, informed participation in class discussion, based on those readings.
- Courtesy and respect towards all other members of the class.
- Be present: engage with the class, rather than with your cell phones and other electronic devices, during class time. Laptops may be used to take notes or to refer to online course readings. Use of laptops for other purposes in class may negatively affect your participation mark.
- Academic integrity.

Make-up tests, midterms, and exams can only be approved by Academic Advising. Please see https://history.uwo.ca/undergraduate/program_module_information/policies.html for department procedures and requirements involving make-up tests and exams.

Additional Statements

Communication policies:

The best way to contact me is by e-mail. (Please write “HIST 3326” or “Atomic America” as the subject of your e-mail.) I may not be able to answer your e-mail immediately, but I will do my utmost to respond within 48 hours. You are welcome to speak with me in person before or after class, or to drop by my office during my Office Hours. You can also e-mail me to request a meeting over Zoom.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have about the course and the assignments, review your assignments with you, help you find research sources, review footnoting format with you, or assist you in any way I can.

Use of electronic devices:

Students may use laptops during class to access course readings and to take notes, but not for any other purposes, as they tend to distract from one's engagement in the class discussion. The use of other electronic devices (cell phones, audio or video recording devices, *etc.*) is not permitted during class.

Use of generative artificial intelligence (AI):

The goals of this course include learning to think critically, to find and evaluate sources, to use your analysis of these sources to create, organize, and support an argument, and to communicate your argument clearly, in your own words. The use of AI bypasses these important learning activities.

Therefore, you may not make use of generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, in this course, except for initial brainstorming to come up with a subject for your research essay. You may not use ChatGPT to create an outline for your assignments, to help you write your assignments, or as a research source. Any use of such tools for assignments in this course may be considered a form of academic misconduct and handled accordingly.

If AI use is suspected, the instructor will ask for research notes and/or drafts of assignments, outlines, and other material used in preparing your assignment. Students must keep all notes, outlines, and first drafts until after the release of final grades for the course.

And finally...

Please review the Department of History's shared policies and statements for all undergraduate courses at: https://history.uwo.ca/undergraduate/program_module_information/policies.html for important information regarding accessibility options, make-up exams, medical accommodations, health and wellness, academic integrity, plagiarism, and more.