Even for men and women who did not actively participate in the anti-communist crusade, the Cold War changed their lives. The development of hostilities between the United States and the Soviet Union seemed to make the world a more dangerous place by creating the potential for armed conflict. In a nuclear age, that potential threatened even to include civilians in small towns and large cities in the American heartland. The outbreak of fighting in areas of Eastern Europe and especially in Asia confirmed the validity of those fears. At home, the discovery of a communist spy network frightened Americans who worried that the government might be overrun with infiltrators. The paranoia proved contagious; in their fear, citizens questioned anyone or anything that was “different,” assuming the differences were a sign of communist sympathies.
On a more positive note, Cold War–driven defense spending fueled an economic prosperity that allowed many families to move into the middle class. Accompanied by increased consumer spending, the ever-growing defense budgets provided jobs and rising incomes for many Americans. This prosperity, combined with the effects of government initiatives such as the GI Bill and the Federal Housing Authority, pushed many families into middle-class status and allowed others to appear so through increased consumerism. The growth of suburbia developed alongside a new emphasis on family and conformity that resulted in part from Cold War anxieties.

The Cold War, the rise of the middle class, and the renewed emphasis on domesticity had a particularly powerful impact on women. They were supposed to find their ultimate fulfillment as wives and mothers, staying at home and tending to home and family. Everyone, from preachers to teachers to government officials, believed that was what women wanted. Many women mouthed similar sentiments, even as the reality of their lives proved the “feminine mystique” was a myth. Although men and women continued to insist that domesticity should be every woman’s ideal, women took jobs, joined clubs, and volunteered with organizations that took them away from home.

The Cold War was actually much more complex than the black-and-white explanations American leaders gave their fellow citizens. Tension between Russia and the United States predated the creation of the Soviet Union in 1924. Nationalism on both sides, combined with American distrust of the autocratic and anti-Semitic Russian czars and Russian resentment of American arrogance and expansionist tendencies, created an underlying hostility between the two nations. The Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 added an ideological element to an already existing antagonism. While the onset of World War II forged a temporary alliance between the two countries in an effort to defeat fascism, the smoldering mistrust never completely disappeared. Even as the Soviets stood alone in their struggle in 1942, Franklin Delano Roosevelt had difficulty convincing both Congress and the American people to extend Lend-Lease aid to their new allies. Recognizing American ambivalence toward them and determined to protect their borders from future invasions, the Soviets reacted defensively as they liberated Eastern Europe from Nazi control by maintaining armies in the countries of that region. By the end of World War II, the allies were deeply suspicious of each other.
In the five years following V-J Day, misunderstandings between the Soviet and U.S. governments hardened into belligerent defensive-ness. Beginning from a position of suspicion, government leaders on each side saw the other’s actions as threatening and dangerous. Officials in the Kremlin and the U.S. State Department refused to recognize their own part in the growing conflict. Soviet leaders ignored the call for free elections and crushed any opposition to their authority. When the Americans, British, and French began cooperating with one another in Germany, the Soviets suspected a Western plot to isolate them. Their response, closing off ground access to Berlin, only height-ened the Western nations’ concern that the Soviets planned to take over Europe. Each side assumed the other was out to destroy it and saw every action as a threat.

Meanwhile, Americans developed the containment policy. At heart, this policy divided the world into two, and only two, spheres: the free world (those on America’s side) and the communist world (those on the Soviets’ side). Nations had to be on one side or the other. Containment thus left little room for negotiation or compromise; you agreed with the good guys, or you were assumed to be one of the bad guys. One result of U.S. officials’ acceptance of that bipolar vision of the world was their blindness to the existence of those who fell into gray areas; in other words, those who did not fit neatly into one cate-gory or another. For example, Yugoslavian president Josip Tito, techni-cally a member of the communist bloc, stood up to Soviet premier Joseph Stalin and wanted to form a relationship with the United States; Chinese leader Mao Zedong practiced a variation of commu-nism that troubled Stalin almost as much as it did the Americans; and various nations of the developing world, such as India, did not want to be drawn into the great power struggle. From the opposite perspec-tive, Americans reacted incredulously to French president Charles de Gaulle’s refusal blindly to accept U.S. dictates. In ignoring nations that did not fit the containment mold exactly, Americans missed oppor-tunities to develop a realistic vision of the international situation. The Cold War world was much more complicated than the containment view allowed.4

Despite its complex reality, American political leaders described the Cold War to the U.S. public in very simplistic terms. FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover, who first expressed concern over the Bolsheviks in 1919, epitomized the standard anticommunist refrain. Bolshevik doctrines, he explained, “threaten the happiness of the community,
the safety of every individual, and the continuance of every home and fireside.” Ultimately, this system would “destroy the peace of the country and thrust it into a condition of anarchy and lawlessness and immorality that passes imagination.” The passage of time did nothing to change Hoover’s views of the Bolsheviks-turned-Soviets. In fact, his continued study of the ideology and its practitioners deepened his hatred and distrust of the enemy. Fearing the Truman administration underestimated the seriousness of the threat from the Reds, Hoover testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947. Once again, he emphasized the sinister nature of communism. “It stands,” he proclaimed, “for the destruction of our American form of government . . . American democracy . . . [and] free enterprise.” Communism’s goal, according to Hoover, was the “creation of a ‘Soviet of the United States’ and ultimate world revolution.”

Like many Americans, Hoover viewed the threat of communism in ideological terms. Rather than speak of tanks and totalitarian countries, Hoover tended toward religious language. “The real danger in communism,” he explained, “lies in the fact that it is atheistic and seeks to replace the Supreme Being.” Without God as the center, he stated, there would be no moral guidelines, and society would fall into chaos. Not only would Americans lose their everyday freedoms, but their families would be destroyed as well. “Children,” Hoover explained, “would be placed in nurseries and special indoctrination schools.” Women, relieved of child-care responsibilities, would go to work in factories and mines with the men. This scenario contrasted sharply with the American ideal of a stay-at-home mom who served as the bulwark of the family. Obviously, Hoover believed the American system was superior.

For others, such as President Harry Truman, ideology took a back seat to questions of an international balance of power. Already bothered by the Soviets’ refusal to allow free elections in Eastern Europe, Truman decided to take a firmer stand when asked to help anti-communist forces in Greece in their battle against the Red menace. Truman realized he needed to convince Congress and the American public to spend sufficient funds to halt communism in Greece and the surrounding area. He feared Congress and voters would be reluctant both to commit such a large sum and to re-engage in a worldwide struggle. After consulting with his advisers and congressional leaders, Truman decided he needed to frighten the public into agreement. The Truman Doctrine, as it became known, warned that if the
United States did not aid Greece and Turkey “in this fateful hour;” the consequences would “be far reaching to the West as well as the East.” With this speech, Truman implemented the containment policy and established a pattern anticommunists, particularly those in government, would continue to follow for decades. Combining frightening rhetoric about the potential threat to U.S. shores with a sense of American duty, government anticommunists legitimized the reality of the communist danger.\(^8\)

Nongovernmental anticommunists echoed the concern. In 1948, James F. O’Neil, national commander of the American Legion, used vivid imagery to explain to his fellow Legionnaires that the “rape of Czechoslovakia” posed a threat even to Americans safe within their meeting halls. What happened in far-off places, he wrote, foreshadowed what could occur in the good old United States if Legionnaires did not open their eyes to the foreign agents in their midst.\(^9\) Containment, it seemed, was not just a policy for diplomats.

President Truman, struggling to stay ahead of the public’s concern, turned the problem over to his National Security Council (NSC). The NSC issued its report in April 1950, but NSC-68 did little to calm the growing fears. In fact, the report set a very somber tone. The situation Americans faced was “momentous, involving the fulfillment or destruction not only of this Republic but of civilization itself.” According to the NSC, the Soviet Union desired “to bring the free world under its dominion by methods of the cold war.” The report exposed the “risks” if the free world—that is, America—did not begin to build an adequate defense system. Using words and phrases meant to instill a sense of urgency, the report cautioned that a delay in decision making could prove fatal. Americans must accept “that the cold war is in fact a real war in which the survival of the free world is at stake.”\(^10\)

By the early 1950s, the Cold War battlefront had shifted from Europe to Asia. The success of Mao Zedong and his communist forces in pushing American-supported Jiang Jieshi into exile, combined with the creation of the People’s Republic of China, shocked Americans. Suddenly, it appeared to many Americans as though communism was winning the struggle to control the globe. The situation worsened in June 1950 when communist North Korea invaded U.S. ally South Korea. The Cold War had turned hot. Despite nominal United Nations support, Americans paid for the war in Korea in both blood and dollars, as American GIs provided the bodies and U.S. taxpayers
fooled the bill for the conflict. Expecting an easy victory, Americans watched incredulously as the conflict settled into a stalemate. Only a limited victory seemed possible, and no one was sure exactly what it would entail. They did know, however, that it was not the same as winning the war. America, which had defeated both Japan and Germany in 1945, suddenly seemed incapable of defeating a small developing nation. Frustration over the situation exposed what for most Americans proved the bitter reality of the containment policy—it worked to maintain the status quo instead of vanquishing the enemy—and caused some Americans to push for increased defense spending; they could only rationalize that the Korean stalemate had resulted from a failure to prosecute the war to the fullest.11

Wisconsin senator Joseph McCarthy and numerous other political leaders continued to pursue this theme in the coming years. In his career-making speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, in 1950, McCarthy chillingly reported that the number of people living under communist rule had increased by 400 percent since 1945. He stated that this increase indicated “the swiftness of the tempo of Communist victories and American defeats in the cold war.” Richard Nixon, senator and future vice president, cautioned Americans who wanted to stay out of the struggle that this was no longer an option: “If Europe [were] allowed to go Communist, it [would] mean that within five or ten years we will be faced with a war which we are likely to lose.” FBI director Hoover also urged Americans not to relax their guard. Facing “formidable weapons,” Americans could not afford the “luxury of waiting for communism to run its course like other oppressive dictatorships.”12 Instead, according to New Hampshire senator Styles Bridges, Americans had to assume a leadership role. The U.S. government should concentrate less on the people already lost to communism and more on the “millions of Asiatics waiting to be arrayed against Communism. They are waiting only on American leadership.”13 Without a willingness to press on with the struggle as well as continual vigilance, these leaders warned, Americans risked losing their way of life.

Other Americans disagreed with this way of thinking. Although they also found the Soviet system repugnant and feared its intentions, these Americans worried that the obsession with defeating communism everywhere might prove equally dangerous for Americans. Some, like President Dwight Eisenhower, warned that the ever-growing defense expenditures were weakening the budget and could permanently damage the economy. In his Farewell Address,
The Cold War World

Ike encouraged Americans to refrain from thinking that “some spectacular and costly action could become the miraculous solution” to destroying their “ruthless” enemy. Others, such as author, critic, and philosopher Lewis Mumford, thought the increasingly belligerent language ruined any chance to seek peaceful solutions to crises. They were concerned that the government would only consider military options to resolve conflicts. Democratic presidential candidate in 1952 and 1956 Adlai Stevenson expressed concern that the actions of some of the more zealous anticommunists undermined “the bright image of America” held by peoples around the world.

Meanwhile, the development of more overt conflict between the United States and the USSR invigorated existing anticommunist and antiradical factions across the country. Building on the anti-immigrant and anti-labor sentiments of the late nineteenth century, this early anticommunist movement came into its own during the Red Scare following World War I. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, aided by his young and dedicated assistant, J. Edgar Hoover, succeeded in deporting a number of communists (most notably Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman) before overplaying their hands in a series of highly publicized, ethically questionable, and ultimately unproductive raids on supposed communist cells. Palmer’s loss of prestige did not lead to cancellation of the Investigative Bureau (later the Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI]) he had created to look into subversive groups. The new head of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, took his responsibilities seriously and began compiling lists of individuals and organizations he found “subversive.”

Hoover was not alone. In fact, during the 1920s and 1930s, concern about the threat from the Left arose in different areas. Corporate leaders and some members of the middle class increasingly associated communism and socialism with the efforts of various labor groups to organize and protect laborers. The Catholic Church proclaimed its opposition to the communist regime in Russia, citing both Lenin’s atheism and the treatment of priests and nuns under radical regimes. Disillusioned former leftists, such as J. B. Matthews, and virulent anti-Semites, such as Elizabeth Dilling, worked to build libraries of information and published books in their attempts to warn the American public of the continued threat communism posed. The creation of the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1938 provided a perfect springboard from which to launch a crusade against the Red menace. Although initially formed to investigate German Americans’
connections to the Nazi regime, the committee—under the influence of Matthews, who served as chief investigator, and Texan Martin Dies—soon turned its attention to communism.¹⁹

On the eve of World War II, an ill-defined, disorganized, and multifaceted anticommunist sentiment existed among Americans. Most Americans could not have defined the philosophy of communism, but they sensed that it was bad. They knew communists did not allow people to practice religion or own private property. Some feared the Soviet Union’s power to spread anti-capitalist sentiment throughout Europe and the rest of the world. Many others conflated concerns about foreign communism with a dislike of the political policies of the Roosevelt administration. These people were not certain where the line ended separating true communism from the make-work programs of the New Deal. In their view, encouraging the poor to expect help from the government, which would take money from the rich in the form of taxes, sounded radical enough to be communism. Still, the vagueness of their apprehensions meant most Americans willingly suppressed their anxieties about the Soviets during the period of the Grand Alliance.

Those underlying doubts came roaring back, however, after the exposure in 1945 and 1946 of Soviet spies in Canada, England, and even the United States. At that point, most Americans recognized the need to eliminate any legitimate threats to the government. The convictions of former State Department employee Alger Hiss (for perjury) and Julius and Ethel Rosenberg (for espionage) appeared to prove that a serious problem existed.²⁰ Building on these concerns about national security, politicians such as Senator Joseph McCarthy began to hunt for spies in every nook and cranny of the government. In their quest to ferret out any potential subversives, McCarthy and his ilk willingly accused people based on circumstantial evidence, hearsay, or other seemingly unrelated factors. Spy hunters, for example, declared open season on homosexuals. Similarly, anyone who appeared to support the growing Civil Rights Movement drew criticism from McCarthy and his associates. Even being friends with someone of a different race was suspicious behavior and raised concerns that one was a potential communist, or “fellow traveler.”

The extreme nature of many of McCarthy’s views caused concern among some anticommunist politicians and intellectuals, who feared that the obsession with spies blinded Americans to reality. They believed the danger from any remaining communists was slight
compared with the damage being done to the American justice system.\textsuperscript{21} For example, historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. accepted that communism posed a threat but ridiculed the idea that a party of 70,000 or fewer members would “contemplate a violent revolution” in the United States.\textsuperscript{22} Even President Truman, one of the original creators of containment, worried that some anticommunist measures went too far. In vetoing the Internal Security Act of 1950, he wrote that the proposed measure would discredit “as hypocrisy the efforts of the US on behalf of freedom.” He warned that implementation of the bill could constitute the “greatest danger to freedom of speech, press and assembly, since the Alien and Sedition Laws of 1798.”\textsuperscript{23} McCarthyites charged that such an attitude indicated a “softness” on the part of the individual and marked that person as a “pinko”—a commie sympathizer at worst and a dupe at best. Historian Richard Gid Powers separated what he labeled “countersubversives,” those who saw little difference between a Soviet communist and an American Democrat, and liberals, who worried about the Soviet Union’s power but saw little threat in the American Communist Party.\textsuperscript{24}

Increasingly, these differences in approach to anticommunism took on a partisan flavor. Both Republicans and Democrats—in fact, almost all Americans—professed to espouse some measure of anticommunism. Moreover, within the major political parties were those who disagreed on the amount of time and money that should be spent fighting communists abroad and searching out subversives at home. In general, however, Republicans pushed continually to increase defense spending and sought military solutions to problems abroad. At home, they were more vehement in their efforts to sniff out Reds. Democrats, who had originated the Cold War under Truman, also voted for large defense budgets but were more leery of an over-reliance on military solutions. In addition, they feared the quest for spies in government had run amok. Democrats argued that what they had begun as a legitimate security measure, Republicans had turned into a free-for-all.

More important than these slight variations in tone and degree, however, was the way anticommunism became a weapon to be used in partisan warfare. Mud slinging reached new lows as Republicans and Democrats smeared one another every shade of red and pink. Republicans proved particularly adept at this in their effort to regain control of the White House after their long exile under the Roosevelt-Truman presidencies. The GOP had grown impatient and frustrated after a twenty-year banishment; they wanted control of the Oval Office. Anti-
communism was a way to get there. Joe McCarthy, Richard Nixon, Barry Goldwater, and numerous others successfully defeated their Democratic opponents by accusing them of being “soft on communism.” Taking the charge a step further, some Republicans began equating “liberalism” with communism, thus making it even easier to undermine not just their opponents but also any programs they disliked. Reaching its peak in the early 1950s, Red baiting remained a useful partisan tool throughout the rest of the twentieth century.

Even as the hysteria of the Red Scare climaxed in the early 1950s with the Army-McCarthy hearings, circumstances abroad and political developments at home provided Americans with the opportunity to reevaluate their Cold War thinking. The death of Stalin in 1953, followed by the eventual rise to power of Nikita Khrushchev and the increasingly visible and important role in geopolitics of developing nations in Asia and Africa, changed the players and settings of the Cold War drama without interfering with the basic plot. The standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union settled into a tense stalemate, with an occasional exchange of hostile words or displays of military prowess. Despite his campaign promises to get tough with the commies, Republican Dwight Eisenhower’s victory in 1952 did not intensify the battle, liberate “captive nations,” or take the Soviets to the brink of nuclear war. In fact, much to the regret of some of his supporters, Ike spent much of his time—especially after winning reelection in 1956—trying to thaw the ice blocking communication between Washington and the Kremlin. His willingness to meet with Khrushchev and his desire to end the arms race met with little ultimate success, as the containment view of the world still predominated. That mind-set continued into the early 1960s even as Eisenhower’s Democratic successors, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, heated up the conflict in places like Cuba and Vietnam. The thick layer of ice keeping the United States in the Cold War proved very difficult to thaw.

The Cold War played a similarly influential role in Americans’ economic lives. The prosperity of the postwar years was intimately connected to the evolving Cold War in a number of ways. At its most basic level, America’s campaign against communism cost a tremendous amount of money. The containment policies required huge expenditures to arm and maintain a large standing army, fund the training of foreign troops, aid the development of evolving nations around the world, and continue research and development on every-
thing from weapons to medicines to space exploration. By funneling all this money into defense expenditures, the federal government helped create thousands of new industries and jobs, many of them in the southern and southwestern states. New jobs combined with the educational benefits available through the GI Bill helped keep the unemployment rate consistently low throughout the 1950s and into the mid-1960s.27

The combination of shifting populations, returning veterans benefiting from the GI Bill, and increased employment affected various segments of the American population in different ways. For many African Americans, their new middle-class status was bitter-sweet, since it did not guarantee an end to segregation in schools or housing. New income and educational levels, however, did help fuel existing civil rights organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which was challenging the old system through the courts, and the Montgomery Women’s Political Caucus, which attacked segregation on the streets and buses. Building on half a century of work, the African American Civil Rights Movement of the postwar years would utilize every weapon at its disposal, including Cold War fears, to demand equality.28

Even as they fought for equality, many middle-class African Americans joined their white counterparts in fueling another key ingredient of the booming postwar economic stew—consumer spending. Released from the enforced frugality of the Depression and war years, Americans eagerly gobbled up consumer goods as fast as they could be produced. They bought houses and filled them with furniture and appliances, including new technological wonders such as televisions and transistor radios. In their new cars, they zoomed off on the new interstate highway system (defended as a military necessity as an escape route in case of an atomic blast but sponsored by automobile manufacturers and trucking and oil companies), pausing to eat at a new McDonald’s and spending the night at a Holiday Inn on their way to Disneyland. The old adage “a penny saved” was replaced by the seductive tones of advertisers (and government officials) encouraging people to spend, spend, spend. Consumerism, the ads and politicos promised, would not only make you a happier and better person, it would also help keep the economy going and the Reds out.29

The most important purchase most people made was a new house in the suburbs springing up around most large and many smaller cities. Returning veterans and others with new families needed a place
to live and longed for their own bit of land. The need for housing was particularly acute in the South and Southwest, where the population was exploding exponentially. Answering the call, home builders utilized mass production to create entire communities almost overnight. The federal government contributed by making easy loans available through the Veterans’ Administration and the Federal Housing Authority. Children of immigrants and working-class men and women, whose parents’ dreams of home ownership had never been realized, eagerly leaped at the chance to fulfill their parents’ and their own fantasies and rushed to buy up these houses as soon as they became available.  

In part because of this rise in home ownership as well as the increase in the number of white-collar, managerial jobs, America seemed more and more like a middle-class nation. As people poured into the suburbs, buying new houses and cars and the accoutrements that went with them, Americans began to look middle class, even if their incomes did not always fit within that sociological range or their shirt collars were not white. Even many of those who remained solidly working class found themselves with incomes sufficient to join the ranks of suburbanites. Some unions, frightened by threats from McCarthyites, abandoned their leftist members and goals and traded worker loyalty for job security, higher wages, and benefits. As a result, plumbers and machinists shed their uniforms in the locker rooms at work and looked like every other father and husband returning to his castle at the end of a long workday.

An essential element of this middle-class suburban existence was the family. For a variety of reasons—making up for lost time after the Depression and war years, anxiety over the Cold War, taking advantage of prosperity—more and more people were getting married and having more and more children. Prosperity allowed people to marry younger, which gave them time to have more children; concern over the future created a need for family comfort and security; and the housing boom created a safe and roomy environment for a family. In turn, the baby boom fueled consumer spending and necessitated the development of more housing units. Regardless of whether people consciously thought of it, and few probably did, this emphasis on family life also served as a counterpoint to the accepted view of the lonely, rigid existence under communism. For many Americans, their ability to have a barbeque in the backyard surrounded by friends, neighbors, and kids proved they were living the American dream.
In this idyllic image of suburban family life, women played the key role. They were wives and mothers, cleaners and cooks in the man’s castle, nurturers and chauffeurs for the children, the linchpin that kept everything running smoothly. Although they could not control their own economic existence (a woman needed a man’s signature for a loan application, for example), women usually served as managers of the household budget and thus as the chief consumers. A woman was her husband’s partner, albeit a junior one, in the quest to enhance his career, obtain the right house, and function as the perfect family. In other words, she was to have no existence apart from her family. Most important, perhaps, she was not supposed to want anything else.

At least that was the message delivered by political, cultural, and economic leaders. Presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson told a group of female college graduates that they could have no higher career aspiration than that of wife and mother. The new media, television, reinforced the image of woman as domestic goddess. Sitcoms of the era such as Leave It to Beaver, Father Knows Best, and The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet emphasized women’s important supporting role as wife and mother. The few single characters on the shows almost always spent their time searching for a husband or lamenting their “spinsterhood.” During breaks in the shows, businessmen acknowledged women’s role as consumers by aiming ads at them. Rarely did the commercials portray women as anything other than a housewife obsessed with cleanliness, a mother protective of her children, or a young beauty looking for love. From all sides, women constantly heard that they should be happy and fulfilled by their role as wife and mother.33

Commentators and historians in succeeding years uncritically accepted this view of postwar women as reality, establishing it as the norm for American women at the time. The most famous example was Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique. Based on questionnaires completed by Smith College graduates, the book exposed the vague unhappiness of women who felt constrained by the role of housewife-mother. For women who had felt alone in their discontent, the book was a godsend. It meant they were not crazy. Interestingly, although this best-seller indicted the era as oppressive for women, it also assumed that the image had been an unpleasant reality for most women. Friedan and later scholars focused on the predominant image and ignored contrary evidence.34

Most women, however, did not neatly fit the image Friedan and others accepted as real. Despite advertising’s whitewash of happy,
smiling women mopping floors, a closer examination of 1950s media reveals that women reacted in various ways to this emphasis on domesticity. Women’s magazines discussed the difficulties women faced in trying to live up to an impossible ideal. Although the editors usually ended up encouraging women to look to the home for solutions to their frustration, many articles acknowledged that a problem existed. In their responses to these articles, many women asserted that they were neither “sheep following the rest of the herd” nor “poor little housewives.” They rejected the idea that they were passive victims and claimed to be happy with their choices. Similarly, television shows presented conflicting images of women. Alongside *Ozzie and Harriet* was *Our Miss Brooks*, in which a single female teacher proved to be the smartest character.35 Armed with this evidence, historians have begun to challenge the traditionally held view of the “feminine mystique.” Studying the lives of women of color, as well as those of politically active and career women, scholars have begun to agree that many women of the era chose alternative lifestyles or consciously molded the image of housewife to suit their particular needs.36

For example, middle-class African American and Mexican American women were very much a part of the emerging Civil Rights Movement of the postwar years. In joining and helping to create various activist groups, women fulfilled traditional female functions of writing letters, stuffing envelopes, making coffee, and generally working in the background of such groups as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Community Service Organization. They used their positions as wives and mothers to convince other women to register to vote or to sign petitions to protect their children. Women of color moved beyond these roles and took on leadership responsibilities in various organizations. For example, the highly organized Montgomery Women’s Political Caucus (MWPC) was able to capitalize on Rosa Parks’s arrest in 1955 and mobilize the black community in an effective boycott of the city’s transportation and commercial services. In fact, the MWPC chose Parks’s arrest as the catalyst because she was a respected woman in the community. Similarly, Dolores Huerta played such a key role in founding the Farm Workers’ Association that she became the group’s first vice president. Huerta might have been the most visible woman in the organization, but she was far from the only one. Thousands of women combined their duties as wives and mothers with their organizing activities. Protecting the future of their families was more important to them than obeying societal
and cultural norms that would have kept them at home. Although these women frequently dealt with sexism among the men in their communities, the overwhelming racism they faced necessitated that all volunteers be utilized.

Women in labor organizations fought both the biases of their male colleagues and the backlash against left-wing organizations. The unions’ male leadership hesitated to include women because they feared the wrath of men who held traditional views of women’s place in society. Moreover, male workers often believed the presence of females in the workplace lowered wages and prevented men from getting jobs. Women persisted, however. As they had in earlier years, female members demanded that union leaders protect women workers from unfair practices such as job segregation and wage discrimination. In addition, during the 1950s, as women still reeled from postwar layoffs, some women aggressively fought both union and corporate leadership to maintain employment and wage levels. As women moved increasingly into new areas of work, they took their positive view of labor organizing with them and insisted on having a voice in existing unions and in the creation of new locals where that proved necessary. Of course, women were more successful at arguing their cause in some labor organizations than in others. As the anticommunist crusade chilled support for labor organizing, unions sometimes had no choice but to turn to their female members for continued support, providing those women with new leadership opportunities.

Despite prevailing domesticity and anticommunist rhetoric, women on the Left continued to voice strong support for political causes. Members of the National Woman’s Party (NWP), the Communist Party USA (CPUSA), and groups such as Women Strike for Peace (WSP) faced ridicule, ostracism, and even the threat of federal investigation and prosecution. Interestingly, organizations lumped together as “left wing” by mainstream American culture frequently disagreed with one another and shared commonalities with the dominant society. For example, NWP members, although continuing to fight for the Equal Rights Amendment and actively pursuing a “feminist” agenda, distanced themselves from the CPUSA by forcing out communist members. The WSP followed a similarly anticommunist agenda. Both CPUSA and WSP female members frequently emphasized marriage and children, relating to more typical womanly occupations even as they challenged the dominant political powers. In other words, these
women frequently looked like “normal” housewives, even as they participated in “abnormal” activities.  

But what about the “normal” housewife? Did the white, middle-class suburban woman—the model for the normal housewife—fit the image of the feminine mystique? Was she sitting at home, cooking, cleaning, parenting, and slowly going out of her mind? Certainly, some women appeared to live out this scenario. There were wives and mothers who claimed to be perfectly happy as homemakers, but there were obviously others who claimed to be happy when all the while they were drinking bourbon or popping pills.  

Even for women who embraced the domestic ideal of the time, wife and mother were only two of their job titles. To help maintain the newly attained middle-class lifestyle, an increasing number of women worked outside the home. By 1960 there were 23.3 million women in the workforce, more than the number during the war years. Included in this figure were a large number of white married women who joined their African American, Mexican American, and immigrant sisters as wage laborers. Like other traditional working-class people, these women had jobs but not careers. Many saw their employment as a temporary measure to help pay for braces for the kids’ teeth, a new car, or their children’s education. Answering the “Help Wanted—Girl” ads in the newspapers, women usually found work in traditionally female occupations—teacher, nurse, sales clerk, secretary. Moreover, this outside employment was undertaken in addition to, not instead of, her main responsibilities at home.  

For those fortunate enough not to have to work, life frequently did not fit the “happy homemaker” pattern. In addition to caring for their families and homes, middle-class suburban women also participated in many community service and volunteer organizations. Groups ranging from the League of Women Voters to the PTA noted an increase in membership during these years. Especially for women whose children were in school or who were childless, such organized activity helped fill the time between household tasks. A particular beneficiary of this impetus was the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, whose membership increased significantly during these years. This national organization allowed local chapters to choose their own agendas. Thus, women could shop around for a group that fit their personal likes and needs.  

The mainstream political parties also utilized women volunteers. During the 1950s, political organizers increasingly turned to suburban
women for help with the day-to-day operations of party machinery. The booming economy meant men were employed full-time, leaving them with less time for party work and creating a need for new volunteers. Middle-class housewives had both the time and the desire to participate. In addition, male workers found that women excelled at the tasks necessary to maintain a party during and between elections. Women had excellent “people skills,” making them perfect for what historian and activist Jo Freeman called the “grunt work of canvassing, telephoning and mailing.” As a result, by the 1960s women had completely infiltrated both the Democratic and Republican parties at the lowest levels. Men claimed the spotlight, but women were running the operations.42

Obviously, despite the lingering image of the 1950s woman as a homebody with little concern about the “outside” world, many women involved themselves in some kind of political activity. Whether they worked for a mainstream political party, a civil rights organization, or a local women’s group, these women frequently saw their actions as an extension of their responsibilities as mothers, wives, and citizens. They explained their involvement not just as a way to fill leisure time but also as a means to protect their children’s future. Frequently, local issues served as the impetus for their movement outside the home. Once that initial issue was resolved, however, many were eager to remain active. As with earlier generations of American women, these “June Cleavers” discovered that family responsibilities and political activism were not mutually exclusive.

The Cold War world existed on two levels. The first seemed simple to understand. Soviets-communists-Reds were bad; Americans were good. Americans who understood this and who fought against everything that looked or sounded remotely communist were good; Americans who were willing to tolerate communists or leftists of any variety were bad. The American family during the Cold War era consisted of father, mother, and children, all living happily in their new suburban home and enjoying the fruits of father’s hard labor. Mother flitted around the house cleaning and cooking or dabbling in gardening.

The second level was more complicated. The conflict between the United States and the Soviets proved difficult to fight and very expensive to maintain. Military engagements such as the Korean War lacked clear, decisive outcomes. There were a few Soviet spies, but most seemed to have disappeared by the time the FBI got around to looking for them. Many Americans enjoyed unprecedented prosperity, which
led not only to an increased emphasis on material goods but also to the development of new forms of debt. While the economic boom sent some Americans scurrying to the suburbs, others used their newfound security to launch an aggressive Civil Rights Movement, attacking the Jim Crow system in the South and the racist attitudes of white Americans across the country. Women of all races and classes absorbed the message of the feminine mystique even as their lives seemed to deny its existence.

Accepting the simplistic version of the Cold War and manipulating the complexities of the evolving Cold War world to their advantage, a significant number of women who appeared to epitomize the feminine mystique joined the crusade against communism at home and abroad. These women took advantage of the free time afforded them by the economic prosperity of the time, as well as of pervasive anticommunist attitudes, to justify leaving the suburbs (at least metaphorically) to become politically active. Although their individual circumstances and motivations varied, they were united in their dedication to root out communism and protect the American way of life.