The 1950s were a good time for most people. Returning veterans were able to attend college on the G.I. Bill and to buy homes. Enrollment in colleges and universities soared, and suburbs (residential areas around cities) sprang up. So many children were born that this period was known for its baby boom. The economy was strong, with an average family income of $4,421.

America’s love affair with the automobile reached full bloom. Riding around and “hanging out” at drive-in restaurants was a favorite pastime of young people. The first McDonald’s opened with 15-cent hamburgers. New words added to the dictionary told a lot about the period: rock and roll, UFO, junk mail, and credit card.

Inventions of the period changed the way people lived. Dr. Jonas Salk developed a vaccine to erase the single greatest fear of the decade—polio. Johnson & Johnson provided the nation with no-tears baby shampoo. We also got super glue, radial tires, contact paper, Saran wrap, appliances in color, and Velcro.

Rock and roll dominated the period, led by performers such as Bill Haley and Georgia’s Chuck Berry. Many adults believed that such music was dangerous and damaging for American teens! Perhaps the most important influence on this and later periods was television.
Television Changes America

Teenagers in the 1950s grew up with television. At first, television programs ran only six or seven hours a day. Families gathered around the small black-and-white sets to watch such popular performers as Jackie Gleason in “The Honeymooners,” Lucille Ball in “I Love Lucy,” comics Sid Caesar and Milton Berle, and major productions such as the “Ed Sullivan Show,” “Gunsmoke,” and “Bonanza.” Television shows like “The Adventures of Rin Tin Tin,” “Lassie,” and “Captain Kangaroo” made an appearance for young children. The “Mickey Mouse Club” made its debut, and “Dragnet” was a television favorite. “Your Hit Parade” kept teenagers informed about the latest musical hits.

Television viewing began to replace family games and conversation as the evening entertainment of choice. Even food changed. Frozen TV dinners were developed to shorten the time spent preparing evening meals. They were designed to be eaten in front of the television set, not at a dining table.

Television also brought about a change in organized religion, which flourished in the 1950s. Evangelists such as Billy Graham and Oral Roberts developed national followings through their use of the television screen. Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, a nationally known Roman Catholic priest, joined his Protestant counterparts in using the new medium to promote family values and the fight against communism.

In 1956, the appearance of Elvis Presley on the “Ed Sullivan Show” drew a record 54 million viewers. Cameramen on the show were ordered to show Presley only from the waist up since many considered the singer’s “hip swinging gyrations” to be unsuitable for family audiences. Less than ten years later, the Beatles appeared on the “Ed Sullivan Show” and drew a record 70 million viewers.

In 1950, only 9 percent of the nation’s households had a television. By 1955, that percentage had spiraled to 65 percent, and by 1979, 99 percent of American households had televisions. The number of hours spent watching those television sets also grew. In 1950, the average viewer watched 5 hours of television a day; by the 1970s, the average viewer watched over 6½ hours of television a day.

In the 1970s, the major commercial broadcasting stations (ABC, CBS, NBC) were joined by commercial cable television stations. By the end of the decade, about 20 percent of

Did You Know?

In 1951, Diner’s Club introduced the first credit card to two hundred customers who could use it at twenty-seven restaurants in New York.
American households had access to both network and cable television. Time, Inc., established the first cable television network—HBO—in 1972. In 1976, Ted Turner turned Atlanta’s WTBS into the first “superstation.” Turner was also responsible for the nation’s first 24-hour news network, CNN, which began broadcasting from its Atlanta headquarters in 1980 and which today reaches over a billion viewers daily worldwide.

In addition to changing the nation’s entertainment habits, television contributed greatly to our nation’s cultural and educational growth. Television allowed Americans to travel throughout the nation and the world from the safety of their living rooms. It presented live news so that viewers could see events as they actually happened and not as groups of editors or broadcasters interpreted them. Americans in the 1970s, for example, watched as John F. Kennedy and Bobby Kennedy were assassinated; they watched gun battles in Vietnam; and, they watched as Neil Armstrong walked on the moon.

**The Cold War**

While some people focused on the social and cultural changes, others turned their attention to world tensions. The relations between the United States and the Soviet Union grew strained after World War II. This hostility was called the Cold War because it was fought mainly with words and diplomacy.

The hostility arose for several reasons. At the end of the war, the United States and the Soviet Union were the two most powerful countries in the world. The United States expected the Soviet Union to permit free elections in the East European countries it occupied. Instead, the Soviets held them in an iron grip. Winston Churchill called it an “Iron Curtain.”

The Soviets believed that communism would triumph over democracy and capitalism, and they supported communist revolutions in other nations. The United States thus feared for its security. The United States adopted a foreign policy called containment, which was intended to prevent the Soviet Union from expanding its control to other nations. As part of this policy, the United States formed military alliances with nations on both sides of the Soviet Union. Containment led the United States into wars in Korea and Vietnam, a confrontation over nuclear weapons in Cuba, and the “arms race.”

**Did You Know?**

Sir Winston Churchill first referred to the “Iron Curtain” in a speech at Westminster College in Missouri.
The Cold War ended with the breakup of the Soviet Union in the 1980s and Russia’s movement toward democratic government. The fear of nuclear war has lessened, but regional conflicts are emerging all over the world.

**The Korean War**

At the end of World War II, Korea had been divided along the 38th parallel of latitude. The United States supervised the government of South Korea, and the Soviet Union that of North Korea. On June 25, 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea, hoping to make one unified communist country. Instead, the Korean War broke out.

Seventeen United Nations countries immediately sent troops to South Korea to stop the North Korean invasion forces. The UN troops, led by divisions of American soldiers that included 75,000 Georgians, pushed the North Korean troops back almost to the border of China. However, the United Nations forces were not prepared when China’s huge army came to North Korea’s aid. There seemed to be no way to avoid another world war.

After many attacks and counterattacks, a battle line was drawn between the two countries in July 1951. Peace was finally declared in July 1953 with no clear victor.

The Korean War was a costly one, with 2,500,000 killed or wounded. Of those killed, 25,000 were Americans and over 500 were Georgians. Today, Korea remains divided along the 38th parallel. Some U.S. troops are still in South Korea to help with its protection, although efforts toward the reunification of Korea continue on both sides.

**Georgia During the Cold War**

The economy of Georgia—like that of many other states—benefitted from the arms race and by the need for military preparedness. Businesses like Martin-Marietta employed thousands of workers. Military installations such as Dobbins, Warner Robins, and Fort Benning created employment for many other Georgians. Even textile firms were kept busy supplying clothing, sheets, and other items for the armed forces.

**Top:** This photograph of the Korean War illustrates the stark contrast between fleeing refugees and a liberating army.