**Chapter 26: Triumph of the Middle Class, 1945-1963**

**[[BIG IDEA:** Why did consumer culture become such a fixture of American life in the postwar decades, and how did it affect politics and society?]]

When you get a chance, Google the 1959 Cadillac El Dorado. You’ll see that it came with the largest set of tail fins ever designed for an American automobile. The massive steel cars built in Detroit in the 1950s, many with those trade-mark tail fins, were sculpted to look like the rockets that had captured Americans’ imaginations in the new space age.

But those heavy, rocket-age cars were symbolic of more than American’s fascination with space travel. They represented the new middle-class economy of abundance. More Americans than ever in the nation’s history joined the middle class in the postwar decades and took on the role of consumers. What did they buy? Well, plenty of automobiles for sure. Their consumption centered around the nuclear family home: in addition to cars, they purchased new television sets, radios, and refrigerators; lawn mowers and other gadgets for around the house; toasters, vacuum cleaners, blenders, and any number of home appliances; and they purchased plenty of food, toys, and clothing for the children.

One could say that the new middle class of the first two postwar decades orbited around houses, cars, and children. These three things organized family consumption, dominated social life, and even structured whole communities: the new suburbs that were being build at a furious pace in the 1950s and 1960s from New York to Los Angeles.

This wasn’t inevitable, and it wasn’t just happenstance. Americans enjoyed this new era of middle class dominance because of a set of developments that Chapter 26 explores in detail. We’ll take you through the conditions that made American economic dominance possible, that kept inflation low, wages high, factories humming, and family income steadily rising during the first two postwar decades. But we don't ignore those left out of the new prosperity; we’ll consider the poverty amid plenty that also characterized these years.

The middle class that American created in the 1950s and 1960s would not last forever. But it exerted a powerful pull over American tastes and patterns of life for many, many decades.