

## AP U.S. History

### The Contentious Fifties: Dinner Table Discussions

Each group will construct, practice, and perform a dinner table conversation that might have occurred in the 1950s. Each conversation will reveal some of the conflicts that might have taken place in real households across the country. Outlined below are the “parts” to be played in each group, followed by more general guidelines that your group might explore in the course of your conversation.

**Important:** You do NOT need to create a formal script for your dinner table discussion! Instead, you should have an outline of questions to be answered and topics to cover. You will practice it at least once, to get a sense of where to insert different issues. For all groups, the year is **1956**.

#### Group 1

**The Setting:** Family Dinner Table

**The Parents:** They are conservative and traditional, and are nervous that their children do not subscribe to mainstream capitalist values. They love the suburbs. They are also worried that their daughters are too independent, and that their son is focused too much on popular culture and not on his school work.

**Sallie:** She is dismayed that women seem to be abandoning their post-war work positions to return to the domestic sphere. When she finishes college, she wants to go into a career that has traditionally been male-oriented.

**Patty:** She is interested in the Beatnik movement and is critical of consumer culture and advertising. She is very disappointed about her family’s recent move to the suburbs.

**Mikey:** He is obsessed with Rock ‘n’ Roll music, comic books, and automobiles. He is also obsessed with the family’s brand new television.

*Topics that MUST be mentioned: baby boom, women’s roles, Rock n’ Roll (specific artists/controversies related to it), “auto culture,” other aspects of teenage life in the 1950s Topics, Levittown, restrictive covenants, conglomerates and franchises, highways, role of television/sitcoms.*

#### Group 2

**The Setting:** An upscale restaurant

**Friend Group #1:** They are politically traditional. Although they are not opposed to extending rights to all people, they are nervous about recent political activity by African Americans; in their minds, things are moving awfully fast.

**Friend Group #2:** They are offended by racism in the US and support the movement towards extending civil rights to all.

*Topics that MUST be mentioned: Emergence of Civil Rights, Brown v. Board of Education, Montgomery Bus Boycott, African Americans in Popular Culture, Truman’s and Eisenhower’s views of Civil Rights, immigration during the 1950’s.*

### Group 3

**The Setting:** A 24-hour diner in the suburbs

**Friend Group # 1:** They are dedicated Democrats. They supported all of Truman's domestic and foreign policy decisions, including his extension of the New Deal, his position on Civil Rights, his nuclear policy, and his position on Communism. They dislike Eisenhower and what they view as the Republican-fueled Red Scare. To them, brinkmanship is not a great idea.

**Friend Group #2:** They are dedicated Republicans, and believe that Eisenhower has a stronger Cold-War foreign policy than Truman did. They also like his practical domestic policy. They even support Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy and anti-communist legislation.

*Topics that MUST be mentioned: Comparison and contrast between Truman and Eisenhower's domestic AND foreign policies, U-2, Mutually Assured Destruction, the World Bank, AFL-CIO, "military industrial complex."*

#### **Questions for all Groups to Consider:**

- At the beginning of the dinner, what are the moods of the various members at the table? Are they glad to be together, or do some seem to resent the others?
- Who will bring up the issue (political, social, or economic) that will be discussed at dinner? What will that initiator's position be?
- Who will challenge or refute the first speaker? If more than one person wants to respond at the same time, how will that conflict be settled? What will the challenger(s) say?
- Who in the family will agree with the position of the first speaker? What will he or she say?
- How will the first speaker react to the challenges and the support of the other speakers?
- Will the discussion be civil, or will speakers start squelching one another? If the members start fighting, how can the actors calm tempers so that the dinner doesn't totally fall apart?
- How will the dinner discussion end?