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## FMC Program Segments 1930-1960

### How the Suburbs Changed America

**BEN WATTENBERG:** In the years immediately following the war, the baby boom posed a problem: Where would all those growing families live? For 15 years, thanks to the Depression and World War II, there had been virtually no new housing built in the United States.

**KENNETH T. JACKSON (Columbia University):** By 1947, you have millions of husbands and wives and children living together, bunched up, crunched in with their in-laws. That was my situation; four kids. I remember sleeping in a dining room. People would take any kind of a place that had a roof over it and a wall around it as a place to live.

**FILM CLIP ANNOUNCER:** Today, the ingenious veteran who has managed to find even a barge or a houseboat for his family may count himself lucky, despite the special problems involved in commuting.

**KENNETH T. JACKSON:** I think that we have never experienced in American history the kind of pent-up demand for housing that existed about 1947, 1948.

**BEN WATTENBERG:** Again, the GI bill was a key part of the solution. It allowed veterans to buy a home with no money down. What's more, it guaranteed the loans, removing the risk for lenders. In a housing boom to end all housing booms, builders responded. Lakewood, California, 15 miles south of Los Angeles, in 1950 this was called the fastest-growing housing development in the world. On one day, 100 homes were sold in one hour. Builders here started 50 houses a day. Cement trucks waited in a mile-long line to pour foundations for low-cost housing. Within just three years, the empty farm land around Lakewood had grown to a city of 90,000 people. Nationwide, housing starts soared from a low of only one per 1,000 people in the war year of 1944 to a high of 12 per 1,000 in 1950, a number not equaled since.

By 1950, the same assembly-line methods that had turned out an airplane every five minutes during the war were used to build almost four new houses per minute.

**KENNETH T. JACKSON:** We are making on the order of 2 million houses, new starts per year, and about 95 percent of them are fully detached, single-family houses. The second

thing to remember about it is they're affordable. Quite literally, you could buy a house in the 1950s cheaper than you could rent it. In some ways, if we look at the whole history of the world, what's been unusual about America, the United States, has been that the single-family house has been available and affordable for the average person more so than any other land, save possibly Australia and Canada.

**BEN WATTENBERG:** In 1940, only two Americans in five owned their own homes. By 1950, it was more than half. And by the end of the 1950s boom, home ownership had climbed to 61 percent. Today, two out of every three Americans own their own homes. Increasingly, those homes are in the suburbs; 12 percent in 1910, about a third in 1960, and today a majority of Americans live in the suburbs.

**KENNETH T. JACKSON:** You have sort of a national ethos that celebrates the single-family house. We believe in it. We're not like, let's say, the Spanish or the Italians or the Germans or the Japanese, who love urban life. It's not surprising that we've become essentially the world's greatest suburban nation.

**BEN WATTENBERG:** This, too, was liberty and individualism at work, a free-standing private home of your own on land that you own. Now, these days suburbia has its critics. It's sprawl, they say. But, hey, have you ever heard anyone say, "A man's apartment is his castle"? In the years following the war, there were also criticisms of the suburbs and of the people who lived in them. The book "The Crack in the Picture Window" by John Keats was somewhat typical, complaining that the suburbs were boring places with no culture, where a homogeneous group of conformists lived in ticky-tacky homes, one looking exactly like the other. The American people were not buying the criticisms. They were voting with their feet, moving to the suburbs.

**WILLIAM O'NEILL:** This is probably the stupidest vein of social criticism ever developed in the history of social criticism, so far as I can tell, because who are they talking about? They're talking about the greatest generation. The guys who won World War II were the ones who were buying these houses and living in the subdivisions. They're the same people. So how can they be cowering conformists and people lacking any convictions of their own in one decade, and in the earlier decade they're the greatest generation? They're the same people, and they have the same aspirations that Americans have always had.

**BEN WATTENBERG:** And what, pray tell, were the American people doing in those homes?