# Death of a Salesman | Historical Context

When World War II ended in 1945, the United States embarked upon an unprecedented period of economic prosperity, driven by the increase in industrial production markets brought about by the war. Unlike the Great Depression and the war years, Americans had a surplus of goods and services from which to choose, and the money with which to purchase them. Nonfarming businesses grew by one-third, and housing construction became a booming industry. However, the economic situation was not improved for the poorest Americans during this time. The economic boom brought high inflation, which kept poorer citizens from saving any money, and small farmers faced hard times because of government policies that benefitted larger, corporate farmers. The lowest-paid workers in the country were the migrant farm workers, with sales clerks and unskilled laborers (such as gas station attendants) not far above them. Happy, a sales clerk, and Biff, a farm worker, represent this segment of the American workforce in *Death of a Salesman*, and each of them struggles to retain his dignity in the face of his lowly position in a largely affluent society.

Because Americans felt so secure in their newfound prosperity, they began using credit to purchase the products and services they desired. Although the prices of these goods and services were driven higher and higher by increased demand, Americans continued to purchase them, using credit to buy what they could not otherwise afford. For the first time in history, automobiles were more often purchased on credit than with cash, and the use of long-term credit, such as home mortgages, also rose dramatically. Willy Loman suffers from the effects of relying too much on credit, struggling to keep up his payments while trying to provide the necessities for his family.

The United States emerged from World War II as a "superpower" among the world's nations, but this role led to insecurities on the part of the American government and the American people, who suddenly bore the responsibility of retaining their position in the world, "keeping the world safe for democracy'' by protecting it from the influences of the other world "superpower," the communist Soviet Union. Because of the national pride and feeling of superiority instilled in them by their victories during the war, Americans felt a deep-seated need to prove that capitalism was better than communism during the period that followed World War II, which is known as the Cold War era. Americans felt obligated to achieve financial success, both as a way of defeating the Soviets and as a way to show their gratitude for the freedom they were privileged to possess by virtue of living in a democratic society. Willy's preoccupation with his financial status and his position in society reflect this Cold War attitude.

The Great Depression and World War II led to major changes in the nature of the American government. Beginning with President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal (an economic program that began in response to the Great Depression), government became larger and more influential in the daily lives of American citizens. Furthermore, the growth of large corporations and the spread of such mass communication media as radio and television made Americans feel more like a large, connected society. With this new-found sense of belonging came a new-found desire to conform to the accepted norms and values of the majority. Instead of being a nation of rugged individualists, the United States became a nation of people who wished desperately for acceptance by their peers, which meant that they needed to appear successful in the eyes of society. Willy displays this wish for acceptance in his preoccupation with being "well liked," which he views as the ultimate measure of success. In *The Lonely Crowd*, a book published in 1950, author David Reisman argues that prior to the Cold War era, Americans were motivated by strict morals and rules of conduct, but following World War II they became more motivated by others' perceptions of them, and altered their behavior according to acceptable societal standards. Reisman classified the pre-Cold War behavior pattern as "inner-directed," and the postwar pattern as "other-directed," maintaining that "other-directed" people, like Willy Loman, have no established sense of identity because they look to other people to determine their self-image. This idea is reflected in Biffs comment at the end of the play when he says that Willy "didn't know who he was."

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Based on what you just read, and considering the fact that this play was written over sixty years ago, how might modern day audiences be able to relate to and connect with this play?