

POST WWI AMERICA: A SOCIETY IN TURMOIL

Even during the Paris Peace Conference, many Americans were concerned less about international matters than about turbulent events at home. Some of this unease was a legacy of the almost hysterical social atmosphere of the war years; some of it was a response to issues that surfaced after the armistice.

Post-War **Recession**

The war ended sooner than almost anyone had anticipated. Without warning, without planning, the nation lurched into the difficult task of economic reconversion. At first, the boom continued, but accompanied by raging inflation. Through most of 1919 and 1920, prices rose at an average of more than 15 percent a year. Finally, late in 1920, the economic bubble burst as inflation began killing the market for consumer goods. Between 1920 and 1921, the gross national product declined nearly 10 percent; 100,000 businesses went bankrupt; and nearly 5 million Americans lost their jobs.

Labor Unrest

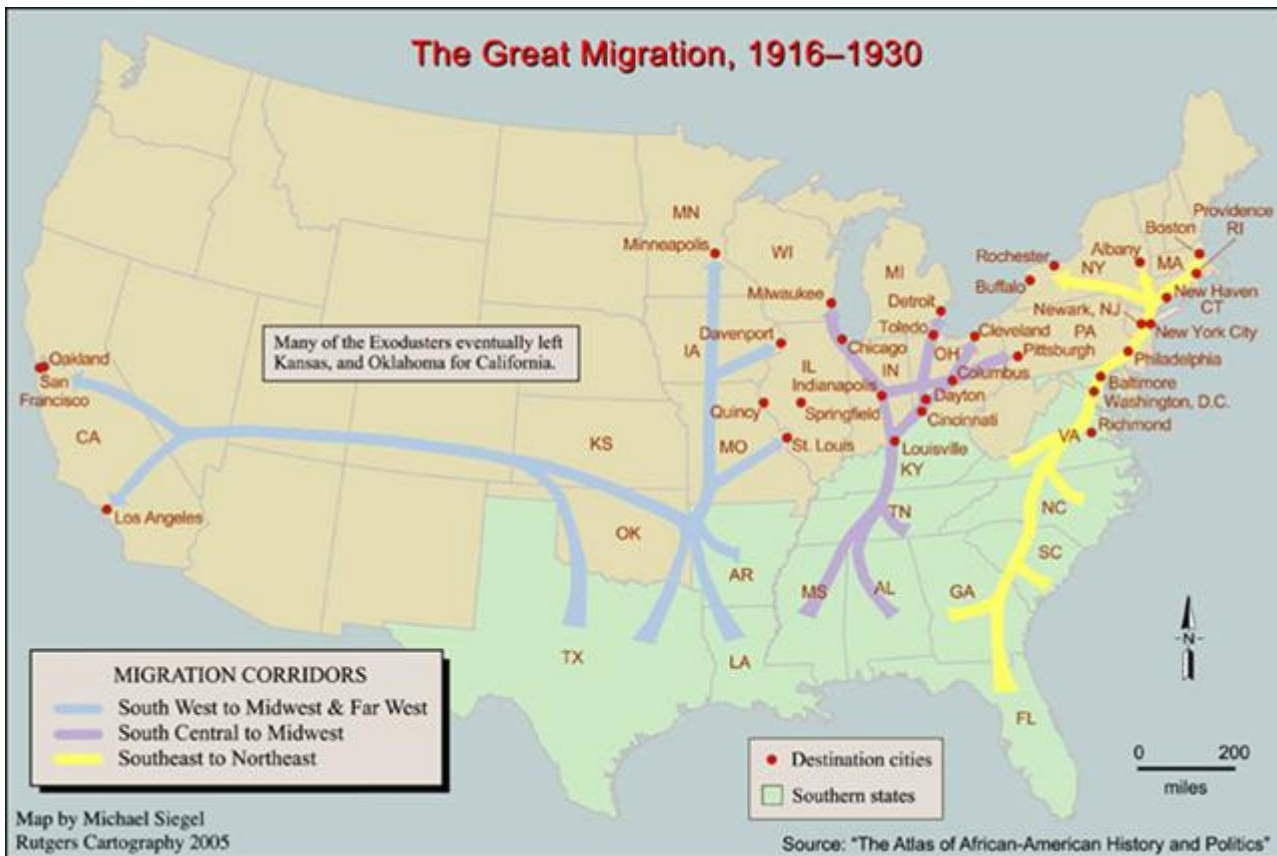
Well before this severe recession began, labor unrest increased dramatically. The raging inflation of 1919 wiped out the modest wage gains workers had achieved during the war; many laborers were worried about job security as veterans returned to the workforce; arduous working conditions continued to be a source of discontent. Employers aggravated the resentment by using the end of the war to rescind benefits they had been forced to concede to workers in 1917 and 1918—most notably, recognition of unions. The year 1919, therefore, saw an unprecedented strike wave. In January, a walkout by **shipyard workers in Seattle**, Washington, evolved into a general strike that brought the entire city to a virtual standstill. In September, the **Boston police force struck** to demand recognition of its union. With its police off the job, Boston erupted in violence and looting. Governor **Calvin Coolidge** called in the National Guard to restore order and attracted national acclaim by declaring, “There is no right to strike against the public safety.”

Coolidge’s statement tapped into a broad **middle-class hostility to unions and strikes**, a hostility that played a part in defeating the greatest strike of **1919: a steel strike** that began in September, when 350,000 steelworkers in several midwestern cities demanded an eight-hour day and union recognition. The long and bitter steel strike climaxed in a riot in Gary, Indiana, in which eighteen strikers were killed. Steel executives managed to keep most plants running with nonunion labor, and public opinion was so hostile to the strikers that the American Federation of Labor timidly repudiated the strike. By January, the strike—like most of the others in 1919—had collapsed.

Post-War America and African Americans

Black World War I veterans (367,000 of them) came home in 1919 and marched down the main streets of cities with other returning troops. And then (in New York and elsewhere) they marched again through the streets of black neighborhoods such as **Harlem**, led by jazz bands and cheered by thousands of African Americans, who **believed that the glory of black heroism in the war would make it impossible for white society ever again to treat African Americans as less than equal citizens.**

As it turned out, the fact that black soldiers had fought in the war had almost **no impact at all on white attitudes**. But it profoundly affected black attitudes, accentuated African American bitterness, and increased blacks’ determination to fight for their rights. During the war, **nearly half a million blacks had migrated from the rural South to industrial cities (often enticed by northern “labor agents,” who offered free transportation) in search of the factory jobs the war was rapidly generating. This was the beginning of what became known as the “Great Migration.”** Within a few years, the nation’s racial demographics were transformed; suddenly, large black communities arose in northern cities, in some of which very few African Americans had lived in the past.



By 1919, the racial climate had become savage and murderous. In the South, lynchings suddenly increased; more than seventy blacks, some of them war veterans, died at the hands of white mobs in 1919 alone. In the North, black factory workers faced widespread layoffs as returning white veterans displaced them from their jobs. And as whites became convinced that black workers with lower wage demands were hurting them economically, animosity grew rapidly.

Racial Violence

Wartime riots in East St. Louis and Tulsa (at right) elsewhere were a prelude to a summer of much worse racial violence in 1919. In Chicago, a black teenager swimming in Lake Michigan on a hot July day happened to drift toward a white beach. Whites onshore allegedly stoned him unconscious; he sank and drowned. Angry blacks gathered in crowds and marched into white neighborhoods to retaliate; whites formed even larger crowds and roamed into African American neighborhoods. For more than a week, Chicago was virtually at war. In the end, 38 people died—15 whites and 23 blacks—and 537



were injured; over 1,000 people were left homeless. The **Chicago riot** was the worst but not the only racial violence during the so-called **red summer of 1919**; in all, 120 people died in such racial outbreaks in the space of little more than three months.

Racially motivated urban riots were not new. But the 1919 riots were different in one respect: they did not just involve white people attacking blacks, but also blacks fighting back. The NAACP signaled this change by urging blacks not just to demand government protection but also to defend themselves. The poet **Claude McKay**, one of the major figures of what would shortly be known as the **Harlem Renaissance**, wrote a poem after the Chicago riot called “If We Must Die”:

Like men we’ll face the murderous cowardly pack.
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back.

Marcus Garvey and the UNIA

At the same time, a black Jamaican, **Marcus Garvey**, began to attract a wide following in the United States with his ideology of black nationalism. Garvey encouraged African Americans to reject assimilation into white society and to develop pride in their own race and culture. His **Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA)** launched a chain of black-owned grocery stores and pressed for the creation of other black businesses. Eventually, Garvey began urging his supporters to leave America and return to Africa, where they could create a new society of their own. In the early 1920s, the Garvey movement experienced explosive growth for a time, but it began to decline after Garvey was indicted in 1923 on charges of business fraud. He was deported to Jamaica two years later. But the allure of **black nationalism** survived in black culture long after Garvey was gone.



Marcus Garvey (center in uniform)

Rise of Radicalism

Much of the public regarded the industrial warfare and racial violence of 1919 as frightening omens of instability and radicalism. This attitude resulted in part from other evidence that suggested the existence of a radical menace. After the Russian Revolution of November 1917, communism was no longer simply a theory but the basis of an important regime. Concerns about the communist threat grew in 1919 when the Soviet government announced the formation of the Communist International (or **Comintern**), whose purpose was to **export revolution around the world**.

In America, meanwhile, there was, in addition to the great number of imagined radicals, a modest number of real ones. These small groups of radicals were presumably responsible for a series of bombings in the spring of 1919. In April, the post office intercepted several dozen parcels addressed to leading businessmen and politicians that were triggered to explode when opened. Two months later, eight bombs exploded in eight cities within minutes of one another, suggesting a nationwide conspiracy.

In response to these and other provocations, what became known as the **Red Scare** began. Nearly thirty states enacted new peacetime sedition laws imposing harsh penalties on promoters of revolution. Spontaneous acts of violence against supposed radicals occurred in some communities, and universities and other institutions tried to expel radicals from their midst. But the greatest contribution to the Red Scare came from the federal government. On New Year's Day, 1920, Attorney General **A. Mitchell Palmer** and his ambitious young assistant, **J. Edgar Hoover**, orchestrated a series of raids on alleged radical centers throughout the country and arrested more than 6,000 people. Most of those arrested were ultimately released, but about 500 who were not American citizens were summarily deported. Later in 1920, a bomb exploded on Wall Street, killing thirty-eight people. No one was ever convicted of this bombing.



1920 Wall Street Bombing

The ferocity of the Red Scare gradually abated, but its effects lingered well into the 1920s. In May 1920, two Italian immigrants, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, were charged with the murder of a paymaster in South Braintree, Massachusetts. The case against them was weak and suffused with nativist prejudices and

fears; but because both men were confessed anarchists, they faced a widespread public presumption of guilt. They were convicted and eventually sentenced to death. Over the next several years, public support for **Sacco and Vanzetti** grew to formidable proportions. But on August 23, 1927, amid widespread protests in the United States and around the world, Sacco and Vanzetti, still proclaiming their innocence, died in the electric chair.



"Save Sacco and Vanzetti" Protest in London

On August 26, 1920, the **Nineteenth Amendment**, guaranteeing women the right to vote, became part of the Constitution. To the suffrage movement, this was the culmination of nearly a century of struggle. To many progressives, it seemed to promise new support for reform. Yet the Nineteenth Amendment marked not the beginning of a new era of progressive reform but the end of an earlier one.

The End of Progressivism?

Economic problems, labor unrest, racial tensions, and the intensity of the antiradicalism they helped create—all combined in the years immediately following the war to produce a general **sense of disillusionment**. That became particularly apparent in the election of 1920. Woodrow Wilson wanted the campaign to be a referendum on the League of Nations, and the Democratic candidates, Governor James M. Cox of Ohio and Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin D. Roosevelt, dutifully tried to keep Wilson's ideals alive. The Republican presidential nominee, **Warren Gamaliel Harding**, an obscure Ohio senator, offered a different vision. He embraced no soaring ideals, only a vague promise of a return, as he later phrased it, to "**normalcy**." He won in a landslide, with 61 percent of the popular vote and victory in every state outside the South. The party made major gains in Congress as well. To many Americans it seemed that, for better or worse, a new age had begun.

CONCLUSION

Presidents Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson contributed to a continuation, and indeed an expansion, of America's active role in international affairs, in part as an effort to abet the growth of American capitalism and in part as an attempt to impose American ideas of morality and democracy on other parts of the world. Similar mixtures of ideals and self-interest soon guided the United States into a great world war.

For a time after the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914, most Americans—President Wilson among them—wanted nothing so much as to stay out of the conflict. But as the war dragged on and the tactics of Britain and Germany began to impinge on American trade and access to the seas, the United States found itself drawn into the conflict. In April 1917, Congress agreed to the president’s request that the United States enter the war as an ally of Britain.

Within a few months of the arrival of American troops in Europe, Germany agreed to an armistice and the war shuddered to a close. American casualties, although not inconsiderable, were negligible compared to the millions suffered by the European combatants.

Wilson’s bold and idealistic dream of a peace based on international cooperation suffered a painful death. The Treaty of Versailles, which he helped draft, contained a provision for a League of Nations, which Wilson believed could transform the international order. But the League quickly became controversial in the United States; and despite strenuous efforts by the president—efforts that hastened his own physical collapse—the treaty was defeated in the Senate. In the aftermath of that traumatic battle, the American people turned away from Wilson and his ideals and prepared for a very different era.

The social experience of the war in the United States was, on the whole, dismaying to reformers. Although the war enhanced some reform efforts—most notably prohibition and woman suffrage—it also introduced an atmosphere of intolerance and repression into American life. The aftermath of the war was even more disheartening to progressives, because of both a brief but highly destabilizing recession and a wave of repression directed against labor, radicals, African Americans, and immigrants.

1920-1929: THE NEW ERA

The 1920s are often remembered as an era of affluence, conservatism, and cultural frivolity. In reality, however, the decade was a time of significant, even dramatic social, economic, and political change. The American economy not only enjoyed spectacular growth but developed new forms of organization. American popular culture reshaped itself to reflect the increasingly urban, industrial, consumer-oriented society of the United States. And American government experimented with new approaches to public policy. That was why contemporaries liked to refer to the 1920s as the “New Era”—an age in which America was becoming a modern nation.

At the same time, however, the decade saw the rise of a series of spirited, and at times effective, rebellions against the transformations in American life. The intense cultural conflicts that characterized the 1920s were evidence of how much of American society remained un-reconciled to the modernizing currents of the New Era.

THE NEW ECONOMY

After the recession of 1921–1922, the United States began a period of almost uninterrupted prosperity and economic expansion. Less visible at the time, but equally significant, was the survival (and even the growth) of inequalities and imbalances

Technology, Organization, and Economic Growth

No one could deny the remarkable feats of the American economy in the 1920s. The nation’s manufacturing output rose by more than 60 percent. Per capita income grew by a third. Inflation was negligible. A mild recession in 1923 interrupted the pattern of growth; but when it subsided early in 1924, the economy expanded with even greater vigor.

Rise of the Automobile Industry

The economic boom was a result of many things, but one of the most important was technology. As a result of the development of the assembly line and other innovations, **automobiles** now became one of the most important industries in the nation, stimulating growth in such related industries as steel, rubber, and glass, tool companies, oil corporations, and road construction. The increased mobility that the automobile made possible increased the demand for suburban housing, fueling a boom in the construction industry.

The Advent of Radio

Benefiting from technological innovations, **radio** contributed as well to the economic growth. Early radio had been able to broadcast little beside pulses, which meant that radio communication could occur only through the Morse code. But with the discovery of the theory of modulation, pioneered by the Canadian scientist Reginald Fessenden, it became possible to transmit speech and music. Many people built their own radio sets at home for very little money, benefiting from the discovery that inexpensive crystals could receive signals over long distances (but not very well over short ones). These “shortwave” radios, which allowed individual owners to establish contact with each other, marked the beginning of what later became known as “ham radio.” Once commercial broadcasting began, families flocked to buy more conventional radio sets powered by reliable vacuum tubes and capable of receiving high-quality signals over short and medium distances. **By 1925, there were two million sets in American homes, and by the end of the 1920s, almost every family had one.**

Commercial Aviation

Commercial aviation developed slowly in the 1920s, **beginning with the use of planes to deliver mail.** On the whole, airplanes remained curiosities and sources of entertainment. But technological advances—the development of the radial engine and the creation of pressurized cabins—laid the groundwork for the great increase in commercial travel in the 1930s and beyond.



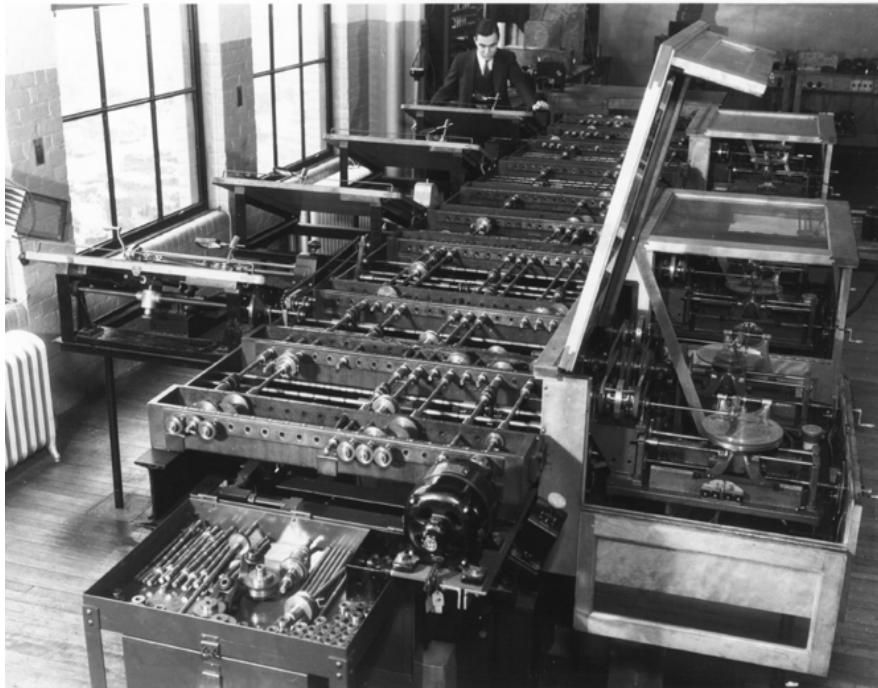
Airmail in 1926

Trains became faster and more efficient as well with the development of the diesel-electric engine. Electronics, home appliances, plastics and synthetic fibers (such as nylon), aluminum, magnesium, oil, electric power, and other industries fueled by technological advances—all grew dramatically. Telephones continued to proliferate.

By the late 1930s, there were approximately 25 million telephones in the United States, roughly one for every six people.

Technology

The seeds of future technological breakthroughs were also visible. In both England and America, scientists and engineers were working to transform primitive calculating machines into devices capable of performing more complicated tasks. By the early 1930s, researchers at MIT, led by Vannevar Bush, had created an instrument capable of performing a variety of complicated tasks—the **first analog computer**. A few years later, Howard Aiken, with financial assistance from Harvard and MIT, built a much more complex computer with memory, capable of multiplying eleven-digit numbers in three seconds.



The First Analog Computer at MIT, 1932

Workers in an Age of Capital

Despite the remarkable economic growth, more than two-thirds of the American people in 1929 lived at no better than what one major study described as the “minimum comfort level.” Half of those were at or below the level of “subsistence and poverty.”

Welfare Capitalism

American labor experienced both the successes and the failures of the 1920s. On the one hand, most workers saw their standard of living rise during the decade. Some employers adopted paternalistic techniques that came to be known as “**welfare capitalism.**” **Henry Ford**, for example, shortened the workweek, raised wages, and instituted paid vacations. By 1926, nearly 3 million industrial workers were eligible for at least modest pensions on retirement. When labor grievances surfaced despite these efforts, workers could voice them through the so-called company unions that emerged in many industries—workers’ councils and shop committees, organized by the corporations themselves. But welfare capitalism, in the end, gave workers no real control over their own fates. Company unions were feeble vehicles. And **welfare capitalism survived only as long as industry prospered.** After 1929, with the economy in crisis, the entire system collapsed.

Welfare capitalism affected only a relatively small number of firms in any case. Most laborers worked for employers interested primarily in keeping their labor costs low. Workers as a whole, therefore, received wage increases that were proportionately far below the growth of the economy. At the end of the decade, the average

annual income of a worker remained below \$1,500 a year, when \$1,800 was considered necessary to maintain a minimally decent standard of living. Only by relying on the combined earnings of several family members could many working-class families make ends meet.

Bleak Time for Labor

The New Era was a bleak time for labor organization, in part because many unions themselves were relatively conservative and failed to adapt to the realities of the modern economy. The **American Federation of Labor (AFL)**, led after Samuel Gompers's death by the cautious William Green, sought peaceful cooperation with employers and remained wedded to the concept of the craft union. In the meantime, the rapidly rising number of unskilled industrial workers received little attention from the craft unions.

But whatever the unions' weaknesses, the strength of the corporations was the principal reason for the absence of effective labor organization in the 1920s. After the turmoil of 1919, corporate leaders worked hard to spread the doctrine that a crucial element of democratic capitalism was the protection of the "**open shop**" (a shop in which no worker could be required to join a union). The crusade for the open shop, euphemistically titled the "**American Plan**," became a pretext for a harsh campaign of union-busting. As a result, union membership fell from more than 5 million in 1920 to under 3 million in 1929.

Women and Minorities in the Workforce

A growing proportion of the workforce consisted of women, who were concentrated in what have since become known as "**pink-collar**" jobs—low-paying service occupations. Large numbers of women worked as secretaries, salesclerks, and telephone operators and in other non-manual service capacities. Because, technically, such positions were not industrial jobs, the AFL and other labor organizations were uninterested in organizing these workers.

Similarly, the half million African Americans who had migrated from the rural South into the cities during the Great Migration after 1914 had **few opportunities for union representation**. The skilled crafts represented in the AFL usually excluded blacks. Partly as a result of that exclusion, most blacks worked in jobs in which the AFL took no interest at all—as janitors, dishwashers, garbage collectors, and domestics and in other service capacities. **A. Philip Randolph's Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters** was one of the few important unions dominated and led by African Americans.

In the West and the Southwest, the ranks of the unskilled included considerable numbers of Asians and Hispanics. In the **wake of the Chinese Exclusion Acts, Japanese immigrants increasingly replaced the Chinese in menial jobs in California**. They worked on railroads, construction sites, farms, and in many other low-paying workplaces. Some Japanese managed to escape the ranks of the unskilled by forming their own small businesses or setting themselves up as truck farmers; and many of the **Issei** (Japanese immigrants) and **Nisei** (their American-born children) enjoyed significant economic success—so much so that California passed laws in 1913 and 1920 to make it more difficult for them to buy land.

Mexican immigrants formed a major part of the unskilled workforce throughout the Southwest and California. **Nearly half a million Mexicans entered the United States in the 1920s**. Most lived in California, Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico; and by 1930, most lived in cities. Large Mexican barrios grew up in Los Angeles, El Paso, San Antonio, Denver, and many other urban centers. Some of the residents found work locally in factories and shops; others traveled to mines or did migratory labor on farms but returned to the cities between jobs. **Mexican workers, too, faced hostility and discrimination from the Anglo population of the**



region, but there were few efforts actually to exclude them. Employers in the relatively under-populated West needed this ready pool of low-paid and unorganized workers.

The Continuing Plight of the Farmer

The new technologies, such as hybrid corn, fertilizers, combines, and harvesters, greatly increased agricultural productivity, but **the demand for agricultural goods was not rising as fast as production**. As a result, there were **substantial surpluses, a disastrous decline in food prices, and a severe drop in farmers' incomes beginning early in the 1920s**. More than 3 million people left agriculture altogether in the course of the decade. Of those who remained, many lost ownership of their lands and had to rent instead from banks or other landlords.

In response, some **farmers began to demand relief in the form of government price supports**. One price-raising scheme in particular came to dominate agrarian demands: the idea of "**parity**." Parity was a complicated formula for setting an adequate price for farm goods and ensuring that farmers would earn back at least their production costs no matter how the national or world agricultural market might fluctuate. Champions of parity urged high tariffs against foreign agricultural goods and a government commitment to buy surplus domestic crops at parity and sell them abroad.

The legislative expression of the demand for parity was the **McNary- Haugen Bill**, which **required the government to support prices at parity for grain, cotton, tobacco, and rice**. It was introduced repeatedly between 1924 and 1928. In 1926 and again in 1928, Congress approved the bill. President **Coolidge vetoed it both times**.

THE NEW CULTURE

The United States of the 1920s was a **consumer society**. Many more people than ever before could buy items not just because of need but for **convenience and pleasure**. Middle-class families purchased electric refrigerators, washing machines, and vacuum cleaners. People wore wristwatches and smoked cigarettes. Women purchased cosmetics and mass-produced fashions. **Above all, Americans bought automobiles**. By the end of the decade, there were more than 30 million cars on American roads.



Bruce Barton

No group was more aware of the emergence of consumerism (or more responsible for creating it) than the advertising industry. In the 1920s, partly as a result of techniques pioneered by wartime propaganda, advertising came of age. Publicists no longer simply conveyed information; **they sought to identify products with a particular lifestyle**. They also encouraged the public to absorb the values of promotion and salesmanship and to admire those who were effective "boosters" and publicists. One of the most successful books of the 1920s was *The Man Nobody Knows*, by **advertising executive Bruce Barton**. It portrayed Jesus as not only a religious prophet but also a "super salesman." Barton's message, one in tune with the new spirit of the consumer culture, was that Jesus had been concerned with living a full and rewarding life in this world and that twentieth-century men and women should be concerned with doing the same.

The advertising industry could never have had the impact it did without the emergence of **new vehicles of**

communication. Newspapers were absorbed into national chains. Mass-circulation magazines attracted broad national audiences.

Movies in the 1920s became an ever more popular and powerful form of mass communication. Over 100 million people saw films in 1930, as compared to 40 million in 1922. The addition of sound to motion pictures—beginning in 1927 with the **first feature-length “talkie,”** *The Jazz Singer* starring Al Jolson—greatly enhanced film’s appeal. *The Jazz Singer*, about a white singer who performs in blackface, reflected the racial tenor of the times in that no one seemed offended by the sheer racism associated with minstrel shows.



Birth of Commercial Radio

An at least equally important communications vehicle, however, was radio. The first commercial radio station in America, **KDKA in Pittsburgh**, began broadcasting in 1920, and the first national radio network, the **National Broadcasting Company**, was formed in 1927. That same year, Congress passed the Radio Act, which created a **Federal Radio Commission** to regulate the public airwaves used by private companies. (In 1935, it became the **Federal Communications Commission**, which survives today.)

Women in the New Era

College-educated women were no longer pioneers in the 1920s. There were now two and even three generations of graduates of women’s or coeducational colleges and universities, and some were making their presence felt in professional areas that in the past women had rarely penetrated. The “**new professional woman**” was a vivid and widely publicized image in the 1920s. In reality, however, most employed women were still nonprofessional, lower-class workers. **Middle-class women, in the meantime, remained largely in the home.**

Motherhood Redefined

Yet the 1920s constituted a new era for middle-class women nonetheless. In particular, the decade saw a **redefinition of motherhood.** Shortly after World War I, John B. Watson and other behaviorists began to challenge the long-held assumption that women had an instinctive capacity for motherhood. Maternal affection was not, they claimed, sufficient preparation for child rearing. Instead, mothers should rely on the advice and assistance of experts and professionals: doctors, nurses, and trained educators. For many middle-class women, these changes devalued what had been an important and consuming activity. Many attempted to compensate through what are often called “**companionate marriages**,” the idea of devoting new attention to their roles as wives and companions. And **many women now openly considered their sexual relationships with their husbands not simply as a means of procreation, as earlier generations had been taught, but as an important and pleasurable experience in its own right, the culmination of romantic love.**

Margaret Sanger

One result was growing interest in birth control. The pioneer of the American birth-control movement, **Margaret Sanger**, began her career as a promoter of the diaphragm and other birth-control devices out of a concern for working-class women; **she believed that large families were among the major causes of poverty and distress in poor communities.** By the 1920s, she was becoming more effective in persuading middle-class women to see the benefits of birth control. Nevertheless, some birth control devices remained illegal in many states (and abortion remained illegal nearly everywhere).



“Flappers”

To the consternation of many longtime women reformers and progressive suffragists, some women concluded that in the New Era it was no longer necessary to maintain a rigid, Victorian female “respectability.” They could smoke, drink, dance, wear seductive clothes and makeup, and attend lively parties. Those assumptions were reflected in the emergence of the “**flapper**”—the modern woman whose liberated lifestyle found expression in dress, hairstyle, speech, and behavior. The flapper lifestyle had a particular impact on lower-middle-class and working-class single women, who were filling new jobs in industry and the service sector. At night, such women flocked to clubs and dance halls in search of excitement and companionship. Many more affluent women soon began to copy the “flapper” style.

Despite all the changes, **most women remained highly dependent on men and relatively powerless when men exploited that dependence.** The **National Woman’s Party**, under the leadership of **Alice Paul**,

attempted to fight that powerlessness through its campaign for the **Equal Rights Amendment**, although it found little support in Congress.



Flappers, uh, flapping.

Responding to the suffrage victory, women organized the **League of Women Voters** and the women’s auxiliaries of both the Democratic and Republican parties. Female-dominated consumer groups grew rapidly and increased the range and energy of their efforts.

Writers and Artists

Many artists and intellectuals coming of age in the 1920s experienced a fundamental disenchantment with modern America, reflected in a series of **savage critiques of modern society** by a wide range of writers, some

of whom were known as the “**debunkers.**” Among them was the Baltimore journalist **H. L. Mencken**, who delighted in ridiculing religion, politics, the arts, even democracy itself. **Sinclair Lewis** published a series of savage novels— *Main Street* (1920), *Babbitt* (1922), *Arrowsmith* (1925), and others—in which he lashed out at one aspect of modern bourgeois society after another. Intellectuals of the 1920s claimed to reject the “success ethic” that they believed dominated American life. The novelist **F. Scott Fitzgerald**, for example, attacked the American obsession with material success in *The Great Gatsby* (1925). The roster of important American writers active in the 1920s may have no equal in any other period. It included Fitzgerald, Lewis, **Ernest Hemingway**, **Thomas Wolfe**, **John Dos Passos**, **Ezra Pound**, **T. S. Eliot**, **Gertrude Stein**, **Edna Ferber**, **William Faulkner**, and **Eugene O’Neill** and a remarkable group of African American artists.

“Harlem Renaissance”

In New York City, a new generation of African American intellectuals created a flourishing artistic life widely described as the “**Harlem Renaissance.**” The Harlem poets, novelists, and artists drew heavily from their African roots in an effort to prove the richness of their own racial heritage, captured in a single sentence by the poet **Langston Hughes**: “I am a Negro—and beautiful.” Other black writers in Harlem and elsewhere—James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen, **Zora Neale Hurston**, Claude McKay, Alain Locke—as well as black artists and musicians **helped establish a thriving, and at times highly politicized, culture rooted in the historical legacy of race.**

A CONFLICT OF CULTURES



Uh, Nothing Personal, But Lips that Touched These Would Have HAD To Touch Liquor First

When the prohibition of the sale and manufacture of alcohol went into effect in January 1920, **it had the support of most members of the middle class and most of those who considered themselves Progressives.** Within a year, however, it had become clear that the “**noble experiment,**” as its defenders called it, was not working well. Prohibition did substantially reduce drinking in most parts of the country. But it also produced conspicuous and growing violations. Before long, it was almost as easy to acquire illegal alcohol in many parts of the country as it had once been to acquire legal alcohol. And since an enormous, lucrative industry was now barred to legitimate businessmen, **organized crime took it over.**

Failure of Prohibition

Many middle-class progressives who had originally supported prohibition soon soured on the experiment. But a large constituency of provincial, largely rural Protestant Americans continued vehemently to defend it. To them, prohibition represented the effort of an older America to protect traditional notions of morality. **Drinking, which they associated with the modern city and Catholic immigrants,** became a symbol of the new culture they believed was displacing them.



The Scalia Faction Arrives

“Wets” versus “Drys”

As the decade proceeded, opponents of prohibition (or “**wets,**” as they came to be known) gained steadily in influence. Not until 1933, however, when the Great Depression added weight to their appeals, were they finally able to challenge the “**drys**” effectively and win repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment.

Nativism



The fear of immigrants that characterized many supporters of prohibition found other expressions as well. **Agitation for a curb on foreign immigration had begun in the nineteenth century and, as with prohibition, had gathered strength in the years before the war largely because of the support of middle-class progressives.** In the years immediately following the war, when **immigration began to be associated with radicalism, popular sentiment on behalf of restriction grew rapidly.**

National Origins Act of 1924

In 1921, Congress passed an emergency immigration act, establishing a **quota system** by which **annual immigration from any country could not exceed 3 percent of the number of persons of that nationality who had been in the United States in 1910.** The new law cut immigration from 800,000 to

300,000 in any single year, but the nativists remained unsatisfied. **The National Origins Act of 1924 banned immigration from East Asia entirely and reduced the quota for Europeans from 3 to 2 percent.** The quota would be based, moreover, not on the 1910 census but on the census of 1890, a year in which there had been far fewer southern and eastern Europeans in the country. **What immigration there was, in other words, would heavily favor northwestern Europeans.** Five years later, a further restriction set a rigid limit of 150,000 immigrants a year. In the years that followed, immigration officials seldom permitted even half that number actually to enter the country.

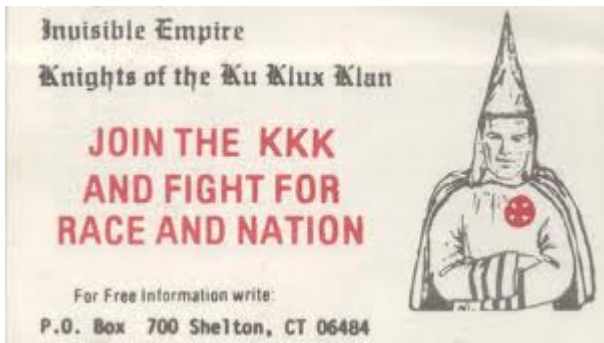


One of The Most Disturbing Photographs Ever Taken: The Klan March in Washington 1926

Rise of the New Klan

To defenders of an older, more provincial America, the growth of large communities of foreign peoples, alien in speech, habits, and values, came to seem a direct threat to their own embattled way of life. Among other things, this provincial nativism helped instigate the rebirth of the **Ku Klux Klan as a major force in American society.** The first Klan, founded during Reconstruction, had died in the 1870s. But in 1915, a new group of white southerners met on Stone Mountain near Atlanta and established a modern version of the society. Nativist passions had swelled in Georgia and elsewhere in response to the case of **Leo Frank**, a Jewish factory manager in Atlanta convicted in 1914 (on very flimsy evidence) of murdering a female employee; a mob stormed Frank's jail and lynched him. The premiere (also in Atlanta) of **D. W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation***, which glorified the early Klan, also helped inspire white southerners to form a new one.





At first the new Klan, like the old, was largely concerned with intimidating blacks. **After World War I, however, concern about blacks gradually became secondary to concern about Catholics, Jews, and foreigners.** At that point, membership in the Klan expanded rapidly and dramatically, not just in the small towns and rural areas of the South but in **industrial cities in the North and Midwest.** By 1924, there were reportedly **4 million members, including many women,** organized in separate, parallel units. **The largest state Klan**

Not Just A Southern Thing Anymore

was not in the South but in Indiana. Beginning in 1925, a series of scandals involving the organization's leaders precipitated a slow but steady decline in the Klan's influence.

Most Klan units (or "**klaverns**") **tried to present their members as patriots and defenders of morality,** and some did nothing more menacing than stage occasional parades and rallies. Often, however, the Klan also operated as a brutal, even violent, opponent of "alien" groups. Klansmen systematically terrorized blacks, Jews, Catholics, and foreigners. At times, they did so violently, through public whipping, tarring and feathering, arson, and lynching. **What the Klan feared, however, was not simply "foreign" or "racially impure" groups, but anyone who posed a challenge to traditional values.**

Religious Fundamentalism

Another cultural controversy of the 1920s was a **conflict over the place of religion in contemporary society.** By 1921, American Protestantism was already divided into two warring camps. On one side stood the **modernists:** mostly urban, middle-class people who were attempting to adapt religion to the teachings of modern science and to the realities of their modern, secular society. On the other side stood the **fundamentalists:** provincial, largely (although far from exclusively) rural men and women fighting to **preserve traditional faith and to maintain the centrality of religion in American life.** The fundamentalists insisted the Bible was to be interpreted literally. Above all, they **opposed the teachings of Charles Darwin,** whose theory of evolution had openly challenged the biblical story of the Creation.

Fundamentalists and Modernists



By the mid-1920s, to the great alarm of modernists, fundamentalist demands to forbid **the teaching of evolution** in public schools were gaining political strength in some states. In Tennessee in March 1925, the legislature adopted a measure making it illegal for any public school teacher “to teach any theory that denies the story of the divine creation of man as taught in the Bible.”

Scopes Trial



Clarence Darrow (l) and The Man That Wouldn't Die, William Jennings Bryan (r)

The Tennessee law caught the attention of the fledgling **American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)**, founded in 1917 to defend pacifists, radicals, and conscientious objectors during World War I. The ACLU offered free counsel to any Tennessee educator willing to defy the law and become the defendant in a test case. A twenty-four-year-old biology teacher in the town of Dayton, **John T. Scopes**, agreed to have himself arrested. And when the ACLU decided to send the famous attorney **Clarence Darrow** to defend Scopes, the aging **William Jennings Bryan** (now an important fundamentalist spokesman) announced that he would travel to Dayton to assist the prosecution. Journalists from across the country flocked to Tennessee to cover the trial. Scopes had, of course, clearly and deliberately violated the law; and a verdict of guilty was a foregone conclusion, especially when the judge refused to permit “expert” testimony by evolution scholars. Scopes was fined \$100, and the case was ultimately dismissed in a higher court because of a technicality. Nevertheless, Darrow scored an important victory for the modernists by calling Bryan himself to the stand to testify as an “expert on the Bible.” In the course of the cross-examination, which was broadcast by radio to much of the nation, Darrow made Bryan’s stubborn defense of biblical truths appear foolish and finally maneuvered Bryan into admitting the possibility that not all religious dogma was subject to only one interpretation.

The Scopes trial put fundamentalists on the defensive and discouraged many of them from participating openly in politics. But it did not resolve the conflict between fundamentalists and modernists, which continued to smolder.

The Democrats' Ordeal

The anguish of provincial Americans attempting to defend an embattled way of life proved particularly troubling to the Democratic Party during the 1920s. More than the Republicans, the Democrats consisted of a diverse coalition of interest groups, including prohibitionists, Klansmen, and fundamentalists on one side and Catholics, urban workers, and immigrants on the other.

Divided Democrats

At the 1924 Democratic National Convention in New York, a bitter conflict broke out over the platform when the party's urban wing attempted to win approval of planks calling for the repeal of prohibition and a denunciation of the Klan. Both planks narrowly failed. (The effort to condemn the Klan by name failed by one vote out of 1,085.) Even more damaging to the party was a deadlock in the balloting for a presidential candidate. Urban Democrats supported **Alfred E. Smith, the Irish Catholic governor of New York**; rural Democrats backed William McAdoo, Woodrow Wilson's Treasury secretary, who had skillfully positioned himself to win the support of southern and western delegates suspicious of modern urban life but whose reputation had been tarnished by a series of scandals resulting from his work as an attorney for an unsavory oil tycoon. For 103 ballots, the convention dragged on, with Smith supporters chanting "No oil on Al," until finally both Smith and McAdoo withdrew. The party settled on a compromise: the corporate lawyer John W. Davis, who lost decisively to Calvin Coolidge.

Al Smith

A similar schism plagued the Democrats again in 1928, when Al Smith finally secured his party's nomination for president. **He was not, however, able to unite his divided party**—in part because of widespread anti-Catholic sentiment, especially in the South. **He was the first Democrat since the Civil War not to carry the entire South.** Elsewhere, he carried no states at all except Massachusetts and Rhode Island. Smith's opponent, and the victor in the presidential election, was a man who perhaps more than any other personified the modern, prosperous, middle-class society of the New Era: **Herbert Hoover.**

REPUBLICAN GOVERNMENT

For twelve years, beginning in 1921, both the presidency and the Congress rested in the hands of the Republican Party. For most of those years, **the federal government enjoyed a warm and supportive relationship with the American business community.** Yet the government of the New Era was more than the passive, pliant instrument that critics often described. It attempted to serve in many respects as an agent of economic change.

Harding and Coolidge

Nothing seemed more clearly to illustrate the unadventurous nature of 1920s politics than the characters of the two men who served as president during most of the decade: **Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge.** Harding, who was elected to the presidency in 1920, was an undistinguished senator from Ohio. He had received the Republican presidential nomination as a result of an agreement among leaders of his party, who considered him, as one noted, a "good second-rater." Harding appointed distinguished men to some important cabinet offices, and he attempted to stabilize the nation's troubled foreign policy. But he seemed baffled by his responsibilities, as if he recognized his own unfitness. "I am a man of limited talents from a small town," he reportedly told friends on one occasion. "I don't seem to grasp that I am President." **Harding's intellectual limits were compounded by personal weaknesses: his penchant for gambling, illegal alcohol, and attractive women.**

Warren Harding

Harding lacked the strength to abandon the party hacks who had helped create his political success. One of them, Ohio party boss Harry Daugherty, he appointed attorney general. Another, New Mexico Senator **Albert**

B. Fall, he made secretary of the interior. Members of the so-called **Ohio Gang** filled important offices throughout the administration. Unknown to the public, Daugherty, Fall, and others were engaged in fraud and corruption.

Teapot Dome Scandal

The most spectacular scandal involved the rich **naval oil reserves at Teapot Dome**, Wyoming, and Elk Hills, California. **At the urging of Fall, Harding transferred control of those reserves from the Navy Department to the Interior Department. Fall then secretly leased them to two wealthy businessmen and received in return nearly half a million dollars in “loans” to ease his private financial troubles.** Fall was ultimately convicted of bribery and sentenced to a year in prison; Harry Daugherty barely avoided a similar fate for his part in another scandal.

In the summer of 1923, only months before Senate investigations and press revelations brought the scandals to light, a tired and depressed Harding left

Washington for a speaking tour in the West. In Seattle late in July, he complained of severe pain, which his doctors wrongly diagnosed as food poisoning. A few days later, in San Francisco, he died. He had suffered two major heart attacks.

Calvin Coolidge

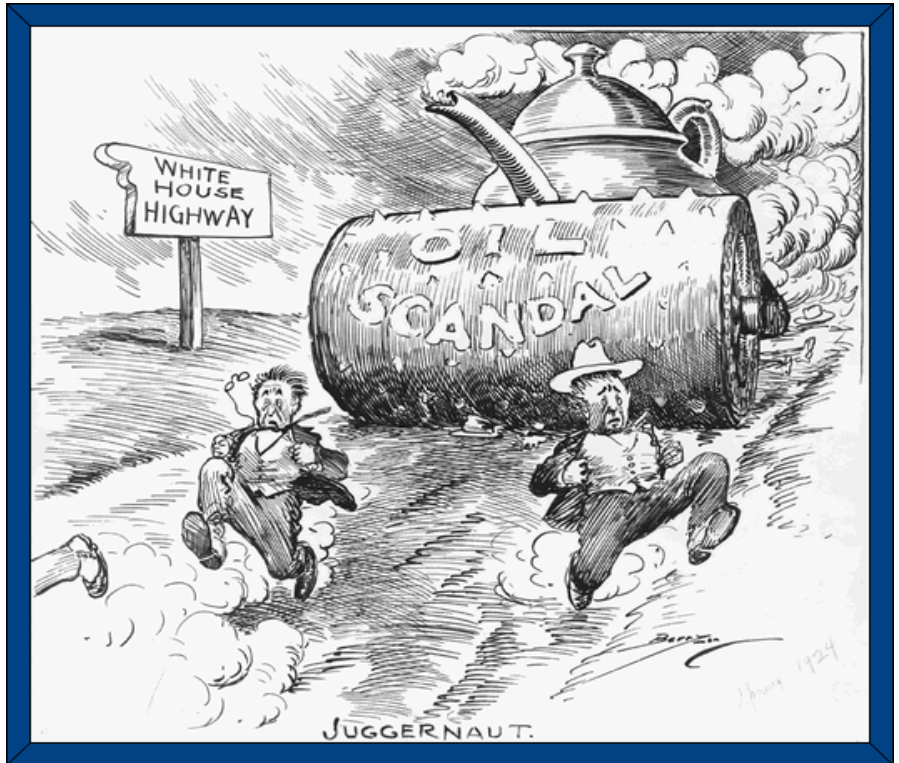
In many ways, **Calvin Coolidge**, who succeeded Harding in the presidency, was utterly different from his predecessor. Where Harding was genial, garrulous, and debauched, Coolidge was dour, silent, even puritanical. In other ways, however, Harding and Coolidge were similar figures. Both took essentially passive approaches to their office.

Elected governor of Massachusetts in 1919, Coolidge had won national attention with his tough, if laconic, response to the Boston police strike that year. That was enough to make him his party's vice presidential nominee in 1920. Three years later, after Harding's death, he took the oath of office from his father, a justice of the peace, by the light of a kerosene lamp.

If anything, Coolidge was even less active as president than Harding, partly as a result of **his conviction that government should interfere as little as possible in the life of the nation.** In 1924, he received his party's presidential nomination virtually unopposed. Running against John W. Davis, he won a comfortable victory: 54 percent of the popular vote and 382 of the 531 electoral votes. Coolidge probably could have won re-nomination and reelection in 1928. Instead, in characteristically laconic fashion, he walked into a press room one day and handed each reporter a slip of paper containing a single sentence: “I do not choose to run for president in 1928.”

Government and Business

However passive the New Era presidents may have been, much of the federal government worked effectively and efficiently during the 1920s to adapt public policy to the widely accepted goal of the time: **helping business and industry to operate with maximum efficiency and productivity.** The close relationship between the private sector and the federal government forged during World War I continued. Secretary of the Treasury



Andrew Mellon, a wealthy steel and aluminum tycoon, worked to achieve substantial reductions in taxes on corporate profits, personal incomes, and inheritances. Largely because of his efforts, Congress cut them all by more than half. Mellon also worked closely with President Coolidge after 1924 on a series of measures to trim dramatically the already modest federal budget, even managing to retire half the nation's World War I debt.

“Associationalism”

The most prominent member of the cabinet was Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover. During his eight years in the Commerce Department, **Hoover constantly encouraged voluntary cooperation in the private sector as the best avenue to stability**. But the idea of voluntarism did not require that the government remain passive; on the contrary, public institutions, Hoover believed, had a duty to play an active role in creating the new, cooperative order. Above all, Hoover became the champion of the concept of business “**associationalism**”—a concept that envisioned the creation of national organizations of businessmen in particular industries. Through these trade associations, private entrepreneurs could, Hoover believed, stabilize their industries and promote efficiency in production and marketing.

Some progressives derived encouragement from the **election of Herbert Hoover to the presidency in 1928**. Hoover easily defeated Al Smith, the Democratic candidate. And he entered office promising bold new efforts to solve the nation's remaining economic problems. But Hoover had few opportunities to prove himself. Less than a year after his inauguration, the nation plunged into the severest and most prolonged economic crisis in its history—a crisis that brought many of the optimistic assumptions of the New Era crashing down and launched the nation into a period of unprecedented social innovation and reform.

CONCLUSION

The remarkable prosperity of the 1920s shaped much of what exuberant contemporaries liked to call the “New Era.” In the years after World War I, America built a vibrant and extensive national culture. Its middle class moved increasingly into the embrace of the growing consumer culture. Its politics reorganized itself around the needs of a booming, interdependent industrial economy—rejecting many of the reform crusades of the previous generation but also creating new institutions to help promote economic growth and stability.

Beneath the glittering surface of the New Era, however, were great controversies and injustices. Although the prosperity of the 1920s was more widely spread than at any time in the nation's industrial history, more than half the population failed to achieve any real benefits from the growth. A new, optimistic, secular culture attracted millions of urban middle-class people. But many other Americans looked at it with alarm and fought against it with great fervor. The unprepossessing conservative presidents of the era suggested a time of stability, but in fact few eras in modern American history have seen so much political and cultural conflict.

The 1920s ended in a catastrophic economic crash that has colored the image of those years ever since.

The crises of the 1930s should not obscure the real achievements of the New Era economy. Neither, however, should the prosperity of the 1920s obscure the inequity and instability in those years that helped produce the difficult years to come.