

The Booming Twenties ^[1]

The booming postwar economy began to collapse in mid-1920. The Republican candidates for president and vice president, Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge, easily defeated their Democratic opponents, James M. Cox and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Following [ratification](#) ^[2] of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, women voted in a presidential election for the first time.

The first two years of Harding's administration saw a continuance of the economic recession that had begun under Wilson. By 1923, however, prosperity was back. For the next six years the country enjoyed the strongest economy in its history, at least in urban areas. Governmental economic policy during the 1920s was eminently conservative. It was based upon the belief that if government fostered private business, benefits would radiate out to most of the rest of the population.

Accordingly, the Republicans tried to create the most favorable conditions for U.S. industry. The Fordney-McCumber Tariff of 1922 and the Hawley-Smoot [Tariff](#) ^[3] of 1930 brought American trade barriers to new heights, guaranteeing U.S. manufacturers in one field after another a monopoly of the domestic market, but blocking a healthy trade with Europe that would have reinvigorated the international economy. Occurring at the beginning of the Great Depression, Hawley-Smoot triggered retaliation from other manufacturing nations and contributed greatly to a collapsing cycle of world trade that intensified world economic misery.

The federal government also started a program of tax cuts, reflecting Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon's belief that high taxes on individual incomes and corporations discouraged investment in new industrial enterprises. Congress, in laws passed between 1921 and 1929, responded favorably to his proposals.

"The chief business of the American people is business," declared Calvin Coolidge, the Vermont-born vice president who succeeded to the presidency in 1923 after Harding's death, and was elected in his own right in 1924. Coolidge hewed to the conservative economic policies of the Republican Party, but he was a much abler administrator than the hapless Harding, whose administration was mired in charges of corruption in the months before his death.

Throughout the 1920s, private business received substantial encouragement, including construction loans, profitable mail-carrying contracts, and other indirect subsidies. The Transportation Act of 1920, for example, had already restored to private management the nation's railways, which had been under government control during the war. The Merchant Marine, which had been owned and largely operated by the government, was sold to private operators.

Republican policies in agriculture, however, faced mounting criticism, for farmers shared least in the prosperity of the 1920s. The period since 1900 had been one of rising farm prices. The unprecedented wartime demand for U.S. farm products had provided a strong stimulus to expansion. But by the close of 1920, with the abrupt end of wartime demand, the commercial agriculture of staple crops such as wheat and corn fell into sharp decline. Many factors accounted for the depression in American agriculture, but foremost was the loss of foreign markets. This was partly in reaction to American tariff policy, but also because excess farm production was a worldwide phenomenon. When the Great Depression struck in the 1930s, it devastated an already fragile farm economy.

The distress of agriculture aside, the Twenties brought the best life ever to most Americans. It was the decade in which the ordinary family purchased its first automobile, obtained refrigerators and vacuum cleaners, listened to the radio for entertainment, and went regularly to motion pictures. Prosperity was real and broadly distributed. The Republicans profited politically, as a result, by claiming credit for it.

Tensions over immigration

During the 1920s, the United States sharply restricted foreign immigration for the first time in its history. Large inflows of foreigners long had created a certain amount of social tension, but most had been of Northern European stock and, if not quickly assimilated, at least possessed a certain commonality with most Americans. By the end of the 19th century, however, the flow was predominantly from southern and Eastern Europe. According to the census of 1900, the population of the United States was just over 76 million. Over the next 15 years, more than 15 million immigrants entered the country.

Around two-thirds of the inflow consisted of "newer" nationalities and ethnic groups—Russian Jews, Poles, Slavic peoples, Greeks, southern Italians. They were non-Protestant, non-"Nordic," and, many Americans feared, nonassimilable. They did hard, often dangerous, low-pay work – but were accused of driving down the wages of native-born Americans. Settling in squalid urban ethnic enclaves, the new immigrants were seen as maintaining Old World customs, getting along with very little English, and supporting unsavory political machines that catered to their needs. Nativists wanted to send them back to Europe; social workers wanted to Americanize them. Both agreed that they were a threat to American identity.

Halted by World War I, mass immigration resumed in 1919, but quickly ran into determined opposition from groups as

varied as the American Federation of Labor and the reorganized Ku Klux Klan. Millions of old-stock Americans who belonged to neither organization accepted commonly held assumptions about the inferiority of non-Nordics and backed restrictions. Of course, there were also practical arguments in favor of a maturing nation putting some limits on new arrivals.

In 1921, Congress passed a sharply restrictive emergency immigration act. It was supplanted in 1924 by the Johnson-Reed National Origins Act, which established an immigration quota for each nationality. Those quotas were pointedly based on the census of 1890, a year in which the newer immigration had not yet left its mark. Bitterly resented by southern and Eastern European ethnic groups, the new law reduced immigration to a trickle. After 1929, the economic impact of the Great Depression would reduce the trickle to a reverse flow – until refugees from European fascism began to press for admission to the country.

Clash of cultures

Some Americans expressed their discontent with the character of modern life in the 1920s by focusing on family and religion, as an increasingly urban, secular [4] society came into conflict with older rural traditions. Fundamentalist preachers such as Billy Sunday provided an outlet for many who yearned for a return to a simpler past.

Perhaps the most dramatic demonstration of this yearning was the religious fundamentalist crusade that pitted Biblical texts against the Darwinian theory of biological evolution. In the 1920s, bills to prohibit the teaching of evolution began appearing in Midwestern and Southern state legislatures. Leading this crusade was the aging William Jennings Bryan, long a spokesman for the values of the countryside as well as a progressive politician. Bryan skillfully reconciled his anti-evolutionary activism with his earlier economic radicalism, declaring that evolution "by denying the need or possibility of spiritual regeneration, discourages all reforms."

The issue came to a head in 1925, when a young high school teacher, John Scopes, was prosecuted for violating a Tennessee law that forbade the teaching of evolution in the public schools. The case became a national spectacle, drawing intense news coverage. The American Civil Liberties Union retained the renowned attorney Clarence Darrow to defend Scopes. Bryan wrangled an appointment as special prosecutor, then foolishly allowed Darrow to call him as a hostile witness. Bryan's confused defense of Biblical passages as literal rather than metaphorical truth drew widespread criticism. Scopes, nearly forgotten in the fuss, was convicted, but his fine was reversed on a technicality. Bryan died shortly after the trial ended. The state wisely declined to retry Scopes. Urban sophisticates ridiculed fundamentalism, but it continued to be a powerful force in rural, small-town America.

Another example of a powerful clash of cultures – one with far greater national consequences – was Prohibition [5]. In 1919, after almost a century of agitation, the 18th Amendment to the Constitution was enacted, prohibiting the manufacture, sale, or transportation of alcoholic beverages. Intended to eliminate the saloon and the drunkard from American society, Prohibition created thousands of illegal drinking places called "speakeasies," made intoxication fashionable, and created a new form of criminal activity – the transportation of illegal liquor, or "bootlegging." Widely observed in rural America, openly evaded [6] in urban America, Prohibition was an emotional issue in the prosperous Twenties. When the Depression hit, it seemed increasingly irrelevant. The 18th Amendment would be repealed in 1933.

Fundamentalism and Prohibition were aspects of a larger reaction to a modernist social and intellectual revolution most visible in changing manners and morals that caused the decade to be called the Jazz Age, the Roaring Twenties, or the era of "flaming youth." World War I had overturned the Victorian social and moral order. Mass prosperity enabled an open and hedonistic [7] life style for the young middle classes.

The leading intellectuals were supportive. H.L. Mencken, the decade's most important social critic, was unsparing in denouncing sham and venality [8] in American life. He usually found these qualities in rural areas and among businessmen. His counterparts of the progressive movement had believed in "the people" and sought to extend democracy. Mencken, an elitist and admirer of Nietzsche [9], bluntly called democratic man a boob and characterized the American middle class as the "booboisie."

Novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald captured the energy, turmoil, and disillusion of the decade in such works as *The Beautiful and the Damned* (1922) and *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Sinclair Lewis, the first American to win a Nobel Prize for literature, satirized mainstream America in *Main Street* (1920) and *Babbitt* (1922). Ernest Hemingway vividly portrayed the malaise wrought by the war in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and many other writers dramatized their alienation from America by spending much of the decade in Paris.

African-American culture flowered. Between 1910 and 1930, huge numbers of African Americans moved from the South to the North in search of jobs and personal freedom. Most settled in urban areas, especially New York City's Harlem, Detroit, and Chicago. In 1910 W.E.B. Du Bois and other intellectuals had founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which helped African Americans gain a national voice that would grow in importance with the passing years.

An African-American literary and artistic movement, called the "Harlem Renaissance," emerged. Like the "Lost Generation," its writers, such as the poets Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, rejected middle-class values and conventional literary forms, even as they addressed the realities of African-American experience. African-American musicians – Duke Ellington, King Oliver, Louis Armstrong – first made jazz a staple of American culture in the 1920's.

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[Harlem Renaissance](#) ^[10]

[history](#) ^[11]

[immigration](#) ^[12]

[North Carolina History](#) ^[13]

[Page](#) ^[14]

[religion](#) ^[15]

[Roaring Twenties](#) ^[16]

[Students](#) ^[17]

[Teachers](#) ^[18]

[United States](#) ^[19]

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