

CHAPTER 22

THE “NEW ERA”



THE FLAPPER, 1927 The popular Condé Nast fashion magazine, *Vogue*, portrayed a fashionably dressed “flapper” on its cover in 1927. The short hair and the cap pulled down low over the forehead were both part of the flapper style. What had begun as a fashion among working-class women had by 1927 moved into stylish high society. (Georges Lepape/©Vogue, The Condé Nast Publications Inc.)

THE IMAGE OF THE 1920S in the American popular imagination is of an era of affluence, conservatism, and cultural frivolity: the “Roaring Twenties,” what Warren G. Harding once called the age of “normalcy.” In reality, the decade was a time of significant, even dramatic, social, economic, and

Myth and Reality

political change. It was an era in which the American economy not only enjoyed spectacular growth but developed new forms of organization as well. It was a time in which American popular culture reshaped itself in response to the urban, industrial, consumer-oriented society America was becoming. And it was a decade in which American government, for all its apparent conservatism, experimented with new approaches to public policy that helped pave the way for the important period of reform that was to follow. Contemporaries liked to refer to the 1920s as the “New Era”—an age in which America was becoming a modern nation.

To a large degree, these changes were the result of the increasing reach of industrialization, the rapid growth of cities, and the increasing size and power of the middle class. The idea of a “New Era” was primarily an urban, middle-class idea, an idea rooted in the exciting new professional, cultural, and consumerist opportunities that economic growth was creating for large groups of affluent Americans. It was also an idea that embraced the belief that the New Era was a time of liberation—in which people could reject traditional social restraints and live a freer life less constrained by tradition and propriety.

But these same challenges to traditional values and ways of life also made the 1920s a turbulent era in which the nation experienced substantial cultural conflict. Many Americans rebelled against the new customs and morals of the urban middle class and sought to defend older values. Some did so by defending traditional religion and embracing the fundamentalist movement within Protestant Christianity. Others lashed out against immigrants and minorities and called for a “purer” America in which old-stock whites were securely in charge. The vehicle for many such people was the Ku Klux Klan. Others mobilized to fight once again the power of great financial and industrial combinations, calling for a return to a more decentralized and smaller-scale society.

The intense cultural conflicts of the 1920s were evidence of how many Americans remained outside the reach of the new affluent, consumer culture—some because their economic and social circumstances barred them from it, others because they found the character of this culture alien and unfulfilling. The New Era’s exuberant modernization, in short, contributed to deep divisions in both politics and culture.

SIGNIFICANT EVENTS

- 1914–1920
 - ▶ Great Migration of black southerners to northern cities
- 1920
 - ▶ First commercial radio station, KDKA in Pittsburgh, begins broadcasting
 - ▶ Prohibition begins
 - ▶ Warren G. Harding elected president
- 1921
 - ▶ Sheppard-Towner Act funds maternity assistance
 - ▶ Nation experiences economic recession
 - ▶ *Reader's Digest* founded
- 1922
 - ▶ Sinclair Lewis publishes *Babbitt*
 - ▶ Motion Picture Association, under Will Hays, founded to regulate film industry
- 1923
 - ▶ Nation experiences mild recession
 - ▶ Harding dies; Calvin Coolidge becomes president
 - ▶ Teapot Dome and other scandals revealed
 - ▶ *Time* magazine founded
- 1924
 - ▶ National Origins Act passed
 - ▶ Ku Klux Klan reaches peak membership
 - ▶ Coolidge elected president
- 1925
 - ▶ F. Scott Fitzgerald publishes *The Great Gatsby*
 - ▶ Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee
 - ▶ A. Philip Randolph founds Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters
- 1926
 - ▶ Congress passes McNary-Haugen bill; Coolidge vetoes it
- 1927
 - ▶ First feature-length sound motion picture, *The Jazz Singer*, released
 - ▶ Charles Lindbergh makes solo transatlantic flight
- 1928
 - ▶ Congress passes, and Coolidge vetoes, McNary-Haugen bill again
 - ▶ Herbert Hoover elected president
- 1929
 - ▶ Sheppard-Towner program terminated
 - ▶ Ernest Hemingway publishes *A Farewell to Arms*

THE NEW ECONOMY

After the recession of 1921–1922, the United States began a long 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 and Economic Growth

No one could deny the remarkable, some believed miraculous, feats of the American economy in the 1920s. The nation's manufacturing output rose by more than 60 percent during the decade. 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 greater vigor than before.

The economic boom was a result of many factors. An immediate cause was the debilitation of European industry in the aftermath of World War I, which left the

United States for a short time the only truly healthy industrial power in the world. More important in the long run was technology, and the great industrial expansion it made possible. The automobile industry, as a result of the development of the assembly line and other innovations, now became one of the most important industries in the nation. It stimulated growth in many related industries as well. Auto manufacturers purchased the products of steel, rubber, glass, and tool companies. Auto owners bought gasoline from the oil corporations. Road construction in response to the proliferation of motor vehicles became an important industry. The increased mobility that the automobile made possible increased the demand for suburban housing, fueling a boom in the construction industry.

Other new industries benefiting from technological innovations contributed as well to the economic growth. Radio began to become a popular technology even before commercial broadcasting began in 1920. Early radio had been able to broadcast little besides 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. (Modulation also eventually made possible the transmission of video signals and later helped create radar and television.) Once commercial broadcasting began, families flocked to buy conventional radio sets, which, unlike the cheaper “shortwave” or “ham” radios, could receive high-quality signals over short and medium distances. They were powered by vacuum tubes that were much more reliable than earlier models. By 1925, there were 2 million sets in American homes, and by the end of the 1920s almost every family had one.

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—were laying the groundwork for the great increase in commercial travel in the 1930s and beyond. 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 (both pioneered by researchers at Du Pont), aluminum, magnesium, oil, electric power, and other industries fueled by technological advances—all grew dramatically and spurred the economic boom. Telephones continued to proliferate. By the late 1930s, there were approximately 25 million telephones in the United States, approximately one for every six people.

The seeds of future widespread technologies were also visible in the 1920s and 1930s. In both England and America, scientists and engineers were working to transform primitive calculating machines into devices capable of

Sources of the Boom

Radio



THE STEAMFITTER Lewis Hine was among the first American photographers to recognize his craft as an art. In this photograph from the mid-1920s, Hine made a point that many other artists were making in other media: The rise of the machine could serve human beings, but might also bend them to its own needs. The steamfitter (carefully posed by the photographer) is forced to shape his body to the contours of his machine in order to complete his task. (*International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House*)

Early Computers

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, which became the starting point for dramatic progress over the next several decades. 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.

Genetic research had begun in Austria in the mid-nineteenth century through the work of Gregor Mendel, a Catholic monk who performed experiments on the hybridization of vegetables in the garden of his monastery. His findings attracted little attention during his lifetime, but in the early twentieth century they were discovered by several investigators and helped shape modern genetic research. Among the American pioneers was Thomas Hunt Morgan of Columbia University and later CalTech, whose experiments with fruit flies revealed how several genes could be transmitted together (as opposed to Mendel's belief that they could only be transferred separately). Morgan also revealed the way in which genes were arranged along the chromosome. His work helped open the path to understanding how genes could recombine—a critical discovery that led to advanced experiments in hybridization and genetics.

Economic Organization

Large sectors of American business were accelerating their drive toward national organization and consolidation. Certain industries—notably those, such as steel, dependent on large-scale mass production—seemed naturally to move toward concentrating production in a few large firms; U.S. Steel, the nation's largest corporation, was so dominant that almost everyone used the term "Little Steel" to refer to all of its competitors. Other industries, such as textiles, that were less dependent on technology and less susceptible to great economies of scale, proved more resistant to consolidation, despite the efforts of many businessmen to promote it.

In those areas where industry did consolidate, new forms of corporate organization emerged to advance the

Modern Administrative Systems

trend. General Motors, which by 1920 was not only the largest automobile manufacturer but also the fifth-largest American corporation, was a classic example. GM's founder, William Durant, had expanded the company dramatically but had never replaced the informal, personal management style with which he began. When GM foundered in the recession of the early 1920s, leadership of the company fell to Alfred P. Sloan, who created a modern administrative system with an efficient divisional organization. The new system not only made it easier for GM to control its many subsidiaries; it also made it simpler

for it—and for the many other corporations that adopted similar administrative systems—to expand further.

Some industries less susceptible to domination by a few great corporations attempted to stabilize themselves not through consolidation but through cooperation. An important vehicle was the trade association—a national organization created by various members of an industry to encourage coordination in production and marketing techniques. Trade associations worked reasonably well in the mass-production industries that had already succeeded in limiting competition through consolidation. But in more decentralized industries, such as cotton textiles, their effectiveness was limited.

Trade Associations

The strenuous efforts by industrialists throughout the economy to find ways to curb competition through consolidation or cooperation reflected a strong fear of overproduction. Even in the booming mid-1920s, industrialists remembered how too-rapid expansion had helped produce recessions in 1893, 1907, and 1920. The great, unrealized dream of the New Era was to find a way to stabilize the economy so that such collapses would never occur again.

Labor in the New Era

The remarkable economic growth was accompanied by a continuing, and in some areas even increasing, maldistribution of wealth and purchasing power. 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 languished at or below the level of "subsistence and poverty."

American industrial workers experienced both the successes and the failures of the 1920s as much as any other group. On the one hand, most workers saw their standard of living rise during the decade; many enjoyed greatly improved working conditions and other benefits. Some employers in the 1920s, eager to avoid disruptive labor unrest and the growth of independent trade unions, adopted paternalistic techniques that came to be known as "welfare

"Welfare Capitalism"

capitalism." Henry Ford, for example, shortened the workweek, raised wages, and instituted paid vacations. U.S. Steel made conspicuous efforts to improve safety and sanitation in its factories. For the first time, some workers became eligible for pensions on retirement—nearly 3 million by 1926. (Women workers in such companies tended to receive other kinds of benefits—less often pensions, more often longer rest periods and vacations.) When labor grievances surfaced despite these efforts, workers could voice them through the so-called company unions that were emerging in many industries. These were workers' councils and shop committees, organized by the corporations themselves and thus without the independence most unions demand.

Welfare capitalism brought many workers important economic benefits, but it did not help them gain any real control over their own fates. Company unions were feeble vehicles, forbidden in most industries to raise the issues most important to workers. And welfare capitalism survived only as long as industry prospered. After 1929, with the economy in crisis, the system quickly collapsed.

Welfare capitalism affected only a relatively small number of workers, in any case. Most laborers worked for employers interested primarily in keeping their labor costs to a minimum. Workers as a whole, therefore, received wage increases at a rate far below increases in production and profits. Unskilled workers, in particular, saw their wages increase almost imperceptibly—by only a little over 2 percent between 1920 and 1926. In the end, American workers in the 1920s remained a relatively impoverished and powerless group. Their wages rose; but 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 earnings of several family members at once could many working-class families make ends meet. And almost all such families had to live with the very real possibility of one or more members losing their jobs. Unemployment was lower in the 1920s than it had been in the previous two decades, and much lower than it would be in the 1930s. But a large proportion of the work force (estimated at 5–7 percent at any given time) was out of work for at least some period during the decade—in part because the rapid growth of industrial technology made many jobs obsolete.

Many laborers continued to regard an effective, independent union movement as their best hope. But the New Era was a bleak time for labor organization, in part because the unions themselves were generally conservative and failed to adapt to the realities of the modern economy. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) remained wedded to the concept of the craft union, in which workers were organized on the basis of particular skills. It continued to make no provision for the fastest-growing area of the work force: unskilled, industrial workers, who had few organizations of their own. William Green, who became president of the AFL in 1924, was committed to peaceful cooperation with employers and to strident opposition to communism and socialism. He frowned on strikes.

Women and Minorities in the Work Force

A growing proportion of the work force consisted of women, who were concentrated in what have since become known as “pink-collar” jobs—low-paying service occupations with many of the same problems as manufacturing employment. Large numbers of women worked as secretaries, salesclerks, telephone operators, and in other, similarly

underpaid jobs. Because technically such positions were not industrial jobs, the AFL and other labor organizations were generally uninterested in organizing these workers.

Similarly, the half-million African Americans who had migrated from the rural South to the cities during the Great Migration after 1914 had few opportunities for union representation. The skilled crafts represented in the AFL often worked actively to exclude blacks from their trades and organizations. Most blacks worked in jobs in which the AFL took no interest at all—as janitors, dishwashers, garbage collectors, commercial laundry attendants, and domestics, and in other types of service jobs. This general reluctance to organize service sector workers was in part because AFL leaders did not want women and minorities to become union members. The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, founded in 1925 and led for years by A. Philip Randolph, was a notable exception: a vigorous union, led by an African American and representing a virtually all-black work force. Over time, Randolph won some significant gains for his members—increased wages, shorter working hours, and other benefits. He also enlisted the union in battles for civil rights for African Americans.

A. Philip Randolph

Hard Times for
Organized Labor

failed to adapt to the realities of the modern economy. The American Federation of Labor (AFL)



PREPARING WOMEN FOR WORK This school was established during World War I by the Northern Pacific Telegraph Company to train new women employees to be telephone operators. Both during and after the war, telephone companies were among the largest employers of women. (Bettmann/Corbis)



AFRICAN-AMERICAN WORKER The frail union movement among African Americans in the 1920s, led by A. Philip Randolph and others against imposing obstacles, slowly built up a constituency within the black working class. Here an aspiring black dairy worker draws attention to the contrast between African-American patriotism in war and the discriminatory treatment African Americans faced at home. (John Vachon/Getty Images)

In the West and the Southwest, the ranks of the unskilled included considerable numbers of Asians and Hispanics, few of them organized, most of them actively excluded from white-dominated unions. In the wake of the Chinese Exclusion Acts of the late nineteenth century, Japanese immigrants increasingly took the place of the Chinese in menial jobs in California, despite the continuing hostility of the white population. They worked on railroads, construction sites, and 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 (farmers who grow small food crops for local sale). 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. Other Asians—most notably Filipinos—also swelled the unskilled work force and generated considerable hostility. Anti-Filipino riots in California beginning in 1929 helped

produce legislation in 1934 virtually eliminating immigration from the Philippines.

Mexican immigrants formed a major part of the unskilled work force throughout the Southwest and California. Nearly half a million Mexicans entered the United States in the 1920s, more than any other national group, increasing the total Mexican population to over a million. Most lived in California, Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico; and by 1930, most lived in cities. Large Mexican barrios—usually raw urban communities, often without even such basic services as plumbing and sewage—grew up in Los Angeles, El Paso, San Antonio, Denver, and many other cities and towns. 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 underpopulated West needed this ready pool of low-paid, unskilled, and unorganized workers.

The “American Plan”

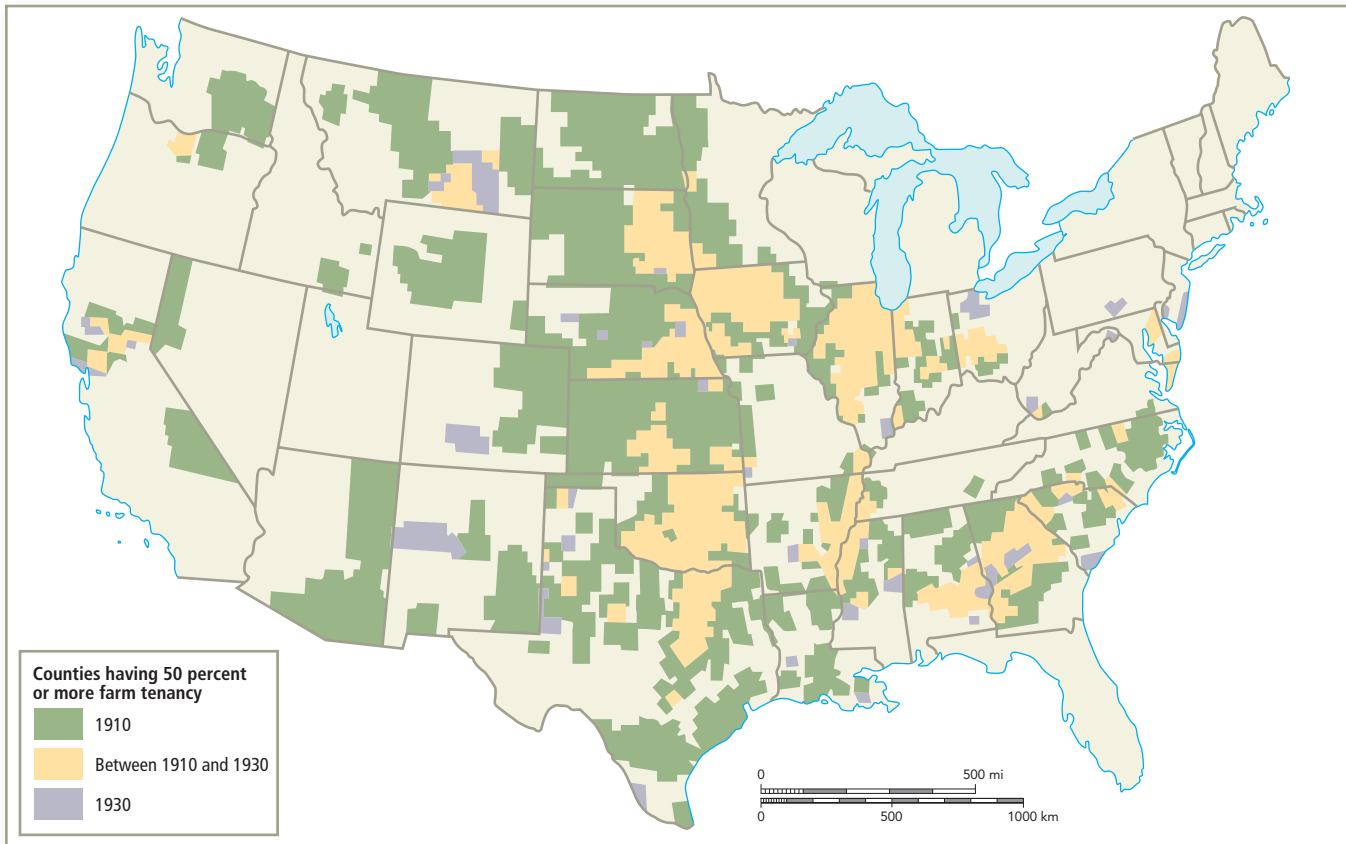
Whatever the weaknesses of the unions and of unorganized, unskilled workers, the strength of the corporations was the principal reason for the absence of effective labor organization. After the turmoil of 1919, corporate leaders worked hard to spread the doctrine that unionism was somehow subversive, 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,” received the endorsement of the National Association of Manufacturers in 1920 and became a pretext for a harsh campaign of union busting across the country.

Protecting the
Open Shop

When such tactics proved insufficient to counter union power, government assistance often made the difference. In 1921, the Supreme Court upheld a lower-court ruling that declared picketing illegal and supported the right of courts to issue injunctions against strikers. In 1922, the Justice Department intervened to quell a strike by 400,000 railroad workers. In 1924, the courts refused protection to members of the United Mine Workers Union when mine owners launched a violent campaign in western Pennsylvania to drive the union from the coal fields. As a result of these developments, union membership fell from more than 5 million in 1920 to under 3 million in 1929.

Agricultural Technology and the Plight of the Farmer

Like industry, American agriculture in the 1920s was embracing new technologies for increasing production. The number of tractors on American farms, for example,



FARM TENANCY, 1910–1930 This map illustrates the significant increase in farm tenancy—that is, the number of farmers who did not own their land but worked as tenants for others—between 1910 and 1930. The dark green areas of the map show how extensive tenancy was even in 1910; over 50 percent of the land in those areas was farmed by tenants. The gold and purple parts of the map show the significant expansion of tenancy between 1910 and 1930—creating many new areas in which more than half the farmers were tenants. ♦ *How did the increasing efficiency and technological progress of agriculture in these years contribute to the growth of tenancy?*

quadrupled during the 1920s, especially after they began to be powered by internal combustion engines (like automobiles) rather than by the cumbersome steam engines of the past. They helped to open 35 million new acres to cultivation. Increasingly sophisticated combines and harvesters were proliferating, helping make it possible to produce more crops with fewer workers.

Agricultural researchers were already at work on other advances that would later transform food production in America and around the world: the invention of hybrid corn (made possible by advances in genetic research), which became available to farmers in 1921 but was not grown in great quantities until the 1930s; and the creation of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, which also began to have limited use in the 1920s but proliferated quickly in the 1930s and 1940s.

The new technologies greatly increased agricultural productivity, both in the United States and in other parts of the world. But the demand for agricultural goods was not rising as fast as production. The results were substantial surpluses, a disastrous decline in food prices, and a

severe drop in farmers' income 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 at whatever the market would bring.

The legislative expression of the demand for parity was the McNary-Haugen Bill, named after its two principal sponsors in Congress and introduced repeatedly between 1924 and 1928. In 1926 and again in 1928, Congress (where

Mechanized Farming

“Parity”

McNary-Haugen Bill

farm interests enjoyed disproportionate influence) approved a bill requiring parity for grain, cotton, tobacco, and rice, but President Coolidge vetoed it both times.

THE NEW CULTURE

The increasingly urban and consumer-oriented culture of the 1920s helped many Americans in all regions live their lives and perceive their world in increasingly similar ways. That same culture exposed them to a new set of values that reflected the prosperity and complexity of the modern economy. But the new culture could not, of course, erase the continuing, and indeed increasing, diversity of the United States. The relatively uniform mass culture reached Americans divided by region, race, religion, gender, and class, and those characteristics shaped the way individuals responded to national cultural messages.

Consumerism

Among the many changes industrialization produced in the United States was the creation of a mass consumer culture. By the 1920s, America was a society in which many men and women could afford not merely the means of subsistence, but a considerable measure of additional, discretionary goods and services; a society in which people could buy items not just because of need but for pleasure as well. Middle-class families purchased such new appliances as electric refrigerators, washing machines, electric irons, and vacuum cleaners, which revolutionized housework and had a particularly dramatic impact on the lives of women. Men and women 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.

The automobile affected American life in countless ways. It greatly expanded the geographical horizons of millions of people who had previously seldom ventured very far from their homes. Rural men and women, in particular, found in the automobile a means of escaping the isolation of farm life; now they could visit friends or drive into town quickly and more or less at will, rather than spending hours traveling by horse or foot. City dwellers found in the automobile an escape from the congestion of urban life.

Social Impact of the Automobile

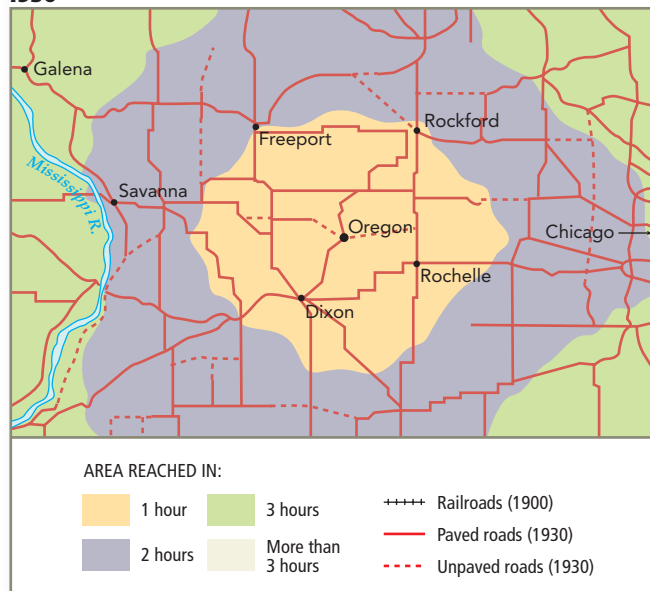
Weekend drives through the countryside became a staple of urban leisure. Many families escaped the city in a permanent sense: by moving to the new suburbs that were rapidly growing up around large cities in response to the ease of access the automobile had created.

The automobile also transformed the idea of vacations. In the past, the idea of traveling for pleasure had been a luxury reserved for the wealthy. Now many middle-class and even working-class people could aspire to travel

1900



1930



BREAKING DOWN RURAL ISOLATION: THE EXPANSION OF TRAVEL HORIZONS IN OREGON, ILLINOIS This map uses the small town of Oregon, Illinois—west of Chicago—to illustrate the way in which first railroads and then automobiles reduced the isolation of rural areas in the first decades of the twentieth century. The gold and purple areas of the two maps show the territory that residents of Oregon could reach within two hours. Note how small that area was in 1900 and how much larger it was in 1930, by which time an area of over a hundred square miles had become easily accessible to the town. Note, too, the significant network of paved roads in the region by 1930, few of which had existed in 1900. ♦ *Why did automobile travel do so much more than railroads to expand the travel horizons of small towns?*

For an interactive version of this map, go to www.mhhe.com/brinkley13ech22maps

considerable distances for vacations, which were a new concept for most men and women in this era. Many businesses and industries began to include paid vacations among their employee benefits; and many employers encouraged their vacationing workers to travel, on the assumption that a change of scene would help restore their energy and vigor at work.

For young people in families affluent enough to afford a car, the automobile was often a means of a different kind of escape. It allowed them to move easily away from parents and family and to develop social lives of their own. It contributed to one of the distinctive developments of the early twentieth century: the emergence of a well-developed and relatively independent youth culture in many communities.

Advertising

No group was more aware of the emergence of consumerism (or more responsible for creating it) than the advertising industry. The first advertising and public relations firms (N. W. Ayer and J. Walter Thompson) had appeared well before World War I; but 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, to invest them with glamour and prestige, and to persuade potential consumers that purchasing a commodity could be a personally fulfilling and enriching experience.

Advertisers 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 Christ as not only a religious prophet but also a “super salesman,” who “picked up twelve men from the bottom ranks of business and forged them into an organization that conquered the world.” The parables, Barton claimed, were “the most powerful advertisements of all time.” Barton’s message was fully in tune with the new spirit of the consumer culture. Jesus had been a man concerned with living a full and rewarding life in this world; twentieth-century men and women should do the same. (“Life is meant to live and enjoy as you go along,” Barton once wrote.) Jesus had succeeded because he knew how to make friends, to become popular, to please others; that talent was a prescription for success in the modern era as well.

The advertising industry could never have had the impact it did without the emergence of new vehicles of communication that made it possible to reach large audiences quickly and easily. Newspapers were being absorbed into national chains, and wire services were making it possible even for independent newspapers to carry nationally syndicated material.

New or expanded mass-circulation magazines also attracted broad, national audiences. *The Saturday Evening Post*, which began publication as a magazine in 1871, appealed to rural and small-town families

The Man Nobody Knows

Mass-Circulation Magazines

with its homey stories and its conspicuous traditionalism; its popularity was, in some respects, evidence of a yearning for an earlier time. But other magazines responded directly to the realities of modern, urban life. *The Reader’s Digest*, founded in 1921 by DeWitt and Lila Wallace, condensed stories and even books originally published in other places in an effort to make the expanding world of knowledge and information available in a brief, efficient form for people who would otherwise have no access to it. *Time* magazine, founded in 1923 by Henry Luce and Briton Hadden, set out to condense the news of the week into a brief, accessible, lively format for busy people who did not have the time or desire to read newspapers.

The Movies and Broadcasting

At the same time, movies were becoming an ever more popular and powerful form of mass communication. More than 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* with Al Jolson—created nationwide excitement. An embarrassing scandal in 1921 involving the popular comedian Fatty Arbuckle produced public outrage and political pressure to “clean up” Hollywood. In response, the film industry introduced “standards” to its films. Studio owners created the Motion Picture Association, a new trade association, and hired former postmaster general Will Hays to head it. More important, they gave Hays broad powers to review films and to ban anything likely to offend viewers (or politicians). Hays exercised his powers broadly and imposed on the film industry a safe, sanctimonious conformity for many years.

The most important communications vehicle was the only one truly new to the 1920s: 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. By 1923, there were more than 500 radio stations, covering every area of the country. The radio industry, too, feared government regulation and control, and thus monitored program content carefully and excluded controversial or provocative material. But radio was much less centralized than filmmaking. Individual stations had considerable autonomy, and even carefully monitored stations and networks could not control the countless hours of programming as effectively as the Hays office could control films. Radio programming, therefore, was more diverse—and at times more controversial and even subversive—than film.

Modernist Religion

The influence of the consumer culture, and its increasing emphasis on immediate, personal fulfillment, was visible even in religion. Theological modernists taught their

Hollywood

THE CINEMA

There is probably no cultural or commercial product more closely identified with the United States than motion pictures—or, as they are known in much of the world, the cinema. Although the technology of cinema emerged from the work of inventors in England and France as well as the United States, the production and distribution of films has been dominated by Americans almost from the start. The United States was the first nation to create a film “industry,” and it did so at a scale vaster than that of any other country. The 700 feature films a year that Hollywood produced in the 1920s was more than ten times the number created by any other nation, and its films were dominating not only the vast American market, but much of the world’s market as well. Seventy percent of the films seen in France, 80 percent of those seen in Latin America, and 95 percent of the movies viewed in Canada and Great Britain were produced in the United States in the 1920s.

As early as the 1930s, the penetration of other nations by American movies was already troubling many governments. The Soviet Union responded to the popularity of Walt Disney’s Micky Mouse cartoons by inventing a cartoon hero of its own—a porcupine, designed to entertain in a way consistent with socialist values and not the capitalist ones that they believed Hollywood conveyed. During World War II, American films were banned in occupied France (prompting some anti-fascist dissidents to screen such American films as Frank Capra’s *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* in protest).

American dominance was a result in part of World War I and its aftermath, which debilitated European filmmaking just as movies were vigorously growing in the United States. By 1915, the United States had gained complete control of its own vast market and had so saturated it with movie theaters that by the end of World War I, half the theaters of the world were in America. Two decades later, after an extraordinary expansion of theaters in other nations, the United States continued to have over 40 percent of the world’s cinemas. And while the spread of the-

aters through other areas of the world helped launch film industries in many other countries, it also increased the market (and the appetite) for American films and strengthened American supremacy in their production. “The sun, it now appears,” the *Saturday Evening Post* commented in the mid-1920s, “never sets on the British empire and the American motion picture.” Movies were then, and perhaps remain still, America’s most influential cultural export. Even American popular music, which has enormous global reach, faces more significant local competition than American movies do in most parts of the world.

Despite this American dominance, however, filmmaking has flourished—and continues to flourish—in many countries around the world. India’s fabled “Bollywood,” for example, produces an enormous number of movies for its domestic market—almost as many as the American industry creates, even though few of them are widely exported. This global cinema has had a significant impact on American filmmaking, just as American films have influenced filmmakers abroad. The small British film industry had a strong early influence on American movies partly because of the quality and originality of British films, and partly because of the emigration of talented actors, directors, and screenwriters to the United States. The great Alfred Hitchcock, for example, made his first films in London before moving to Hollywood, where he spent the rest of his long career. After World War II, French “new wave” cinema helped spawn a new generation of highly individualistic directors in the United States. Asian cinema—especially the thriving film industry in Hong Kong, with its gritty realism—helped lead to some of the powerfully violent American films of the 1980s and beyond, as well as the genre of martial-arts films that has become popular around the world. German, Italian, Swedish, Dutch, Japanese, Australian, and Indian filmmakers also had influence on Hollywood—and over time perhaps even greater influence on the large and growing “independent film” movement in the United States.



VALENTINO The popularity of the film star Rudolph Valentino among American women was one of the most striking cultural phenomena of the 1920s. Valentino was slight and delicate, not at all like the conventional image of “manliness.” But he developed an enormous following among women, in part—as this poster is obviously intended to suggest—by baring his body on screen. Valentino was Italian, which made him seem somehow strange and foreign to many older-stock Americans, and he was almost always cast in exotic roles, never as an American. His sudden death in 1926 (at the age of 31) created enormous outpourings of grief among many American women. (George Kleiman/Bettmann/Corbis)

In recent decades, as new technologies and new styles have transformed films around the world, the American movie industry has continued to dominate global cinema. But national boundaries no longer adequately describe moviemaking in the twenty-first century. It is becoming a truly globalized enterprise in the same way that so many other commercial ventures are becoming international. “American” films today are often produced abroad, often have non-American directors and actors, and are often paid for with international financing. Hollywood still dominates worldwide filmmaking, but Hollywood itself is now an increasingly global community.

“RADIO GAME” In the early 1920s, when radio was still new, many people considered it a “hobby,” appropriate to people interested in technology. By the end of the decade, radio was a normal part of the everyday lives of almost everyone. But the boxed “Radio Game,” whose cover is shown here and which remained popular well into the 1930s, reminded the public of radio’s early days. (From the *Collections of Henry Ford*)



followers to abandon some of the traditional tenets of evangelical Christianity (literal interpretation of the Bible, belief in the Trinity, attribution of human traits to the deity) and to accept a faith that would help individuals to live more fulfilling lives in the present world.

The most influential spokesman for liberal Protestantism in the 1920s was Harry Emerson Fosdick, the pastor of Riverside Church in New York. The basis of Christian religion, he claimed, was not unexamined faith, but a fully developed personality. In his 1926 book *Abundant Religion*, he argued that Christianity would “furnish an inward spiritual dynamic for radiant and triumphant living.”

Most Americans, even most middle-class Americans, stopped well short of this view of religion as a vehicle for advancing “man’s abundant life” and remained faithful to traditional religious messages. But many other middle-class Americans were gradually devaluing religion altogether, assigning it a secondary role (or at times no role at all) in their lives. When the sociologists Robert and Helen Merrell Lynd studied the society of Muncie, Indiana, in the mid-1920s, they were struck by how many people there claimed that they paid less attention to religion than their parents had. They no longer devoted much time to teaching their children the tenets of their faith; they seldom prayed at home or attended church on any day but Sunday. Even the Sabbath was becoming not a day of rest and reflection, but a holiday filled with activities and entertainments.

Professional Women

In the 1920s, college-educated women were no longer pioneers. There were now two and even three generations of graduates of women’s or coeducational colleges and universities; many such women were making their

presence felt in professional areas that in the past they had rarely penetrated.

Still, professional opportunities for women remained limited by prevailing assumptions (prevalent among many women as well as men) about what were suitable female occupations. Although there were notable success stories about female business executives, journalists, doctors, and lawyers, most professional women remained confined to such traditionally “feminine” fields as fashion, education, social work, and nursing, or to the lower levels of business management. Some middle-class women now combined marriage and careers, but most still had to choose between work and family. The majority of the 25 percent of married women who worked outside the home in the 1920s were working class. The “new professional woman” was a vivid and widely publicized image in the 1920s. In reality, however, most middle-class married women did not work outside the home.

Limited Opportunities
for Women

Changing Ideas of Motherhood

Yet the 1920s constituted a new era for middle-class women nonetheless. In particular, the decade saw a redefinition of the idea of motherhood. Shortly after World War I, an influential group of psychologists—the “behaviorists,” led by John B. Watson—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 in nursery schools and kindergartens.

For many middle-class women, these changes helped redefine what had been an all-consuming activity. Motherhood was no less important in behaviorist theory than it

had been before; if anything, it was more so. But for many women it was less emotionally fulfilling, less connected to their instinctive lives, more dependent on (and tied to) people and institutions outside the family. Many attempted to compensate by devoting new attention to their roles as wives and companions, to developing what became known as “companionate marriage.” The middle-class wife

“Companionate Marriages”

shared increasingly in her husband’s social life; she devoted more attention to cosmetics and clothing; she was less willing to allow children to interfere with their marriage. Most of all, many women now found support for thinking of their sexual relationships with their husbands not simply as a means of procreation, as earlier generations had been taught to do, but as an important and pleasurable experience in its own right, as the culmination of romantic love.

Progress in the development of birth control was both a cause and a result of this change. The pioneer of the American birth-control movement was Margaret Sanger, who had become committed to the cause in part because of the

Birth Control

influence of Emma Goldman—a Russian immigrant and political radical who had agitated for birth control before World War I. Sanger began her career promoting the diaphragm and other birth-control devices out of a concern for working-class women, believing that large families were among the major causes of poverty and distress in poor communities. By the 1920s, partly because she had limited success in persuading working-class women to accept her teachings, she was becoming more concerned with persuading middle-class women of the benefits of birth control. Women, she argued, should be free to enjoy the pleasures of sexual activity without any connection to procreation. Birth-control devices began to find a large market among middle-class women, even though some techniques remained illegal in many states (and abortion remained illegal nearly everywhere).

The “Flapper”: Image and Reality

The new, more secular view of womanhood had effects on women beyond the middle class as well. 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. They could strive for physical and emotional fulfillment, for release from repression and inhibition. (The wide popularity of Freudian ideas in the 1920s—often simplified and distorted for mass consumption—contributed to the growth of these attitudes.)

Such assumptions became the basis 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 flocking to



THE FLAPPER By the mid-1920s, the flapper—the young woman who challenged traditional expectations—had become not only a social type but a movement in fashion as well. This drawing was one of many efforts by fashion designers to create clothes that reflected the liberated spirit the flappers had introduced into popular culture. (Culver Pictures, Inc.)

new jobs in industry and the service sector. (The young, affluent, upper-class “Bohemian” women most often associated with the flapper image were, in fact, imitating a style that emerged first among this larger working-class group.) At night, such women flocked, often alone, to clubs and dance halls in search of excitement and companionship.

Despite the image of liberation the flapper evoked in popular culture, most women remained highly dependent on men—both in the workplace, where they were usually poorly paid, and in the home—and relatively powerless when men exploited that dependence.

Pressing for Women’s Rights

The realization that the “new woman” was as much myth as reality inspired some American feminists to continue their

DANCE HALLS

In the booming, boisterous, consumerist world struggling to be born in the 1920s, many Americans—especially those living in urban areas—challenged the rules and inhibitions of traditional public culture. They looked instead for freedom, excitement, and release. Nowhere did they do so more vigorously and visibly than in the great dance halls that were proliferating in cities across the nation in these years.

The dance craze that swept urban America in the 1920s and 1930s was a result of many things. The great African-American migration during World War I had helped bring new forms of jazz out of the South and into the urban North—where the phonograph and the radio popularized it. The growth of a distinctive youth culture—and the increasing tendency of men and women to socialize together in public—created an audience for uninhibited, sexually titillating entertainment. The relative prosperity of the 1920s enabled many young



THE SAVOY The Savoy ballroom in New York's Harlem was one of the largest and most popular dance halls in America, and a regular home to many of the most noted dance bands in the 1920s and 1930s.

(Bettmann/Corbis)

working-class people to afford to spend evenings out. And prohibition, by closing down most saloons and taverns, limited their other options.

And so, night after night, in big cities and small, young people flocked to dance halls to hear the powerful, pulsing new music; to revel in dazzling lights and ornate surroundings; to show off new clothes and hairstyles; and, of course, most of all, to dance. Some of the larger dance halls in the big cities—Roseland and the Savoy in New York, the Trianon and the Aragon in Chicago, the Raymor in Boston, the Greystone in Detroit, the Hollywood Paladium, and many others—were truly cavernous, capable of accommodating thousands of couples at once. Some were outdoors and, in warm weather, attracted even larger crowds. Many gave off some of the same sense of grandiosity and glamour that the new movie palaces, which were being built at the same time, provided. (Indeed, it was not unusual for couples to combine an evening at the movies with a visit to a dance hall.)

Many of the great ballrooms became the sites of regular radio programs—and thus enabled even isolated, rural people to experience something of the excitement of an evening of dance. In 1924, in New York City alone, 6 million people attended dance halls. Over 10 percent of the men and women between the ages of 17 and 40 in New York went dancing at least once a week, and the numbers were almost certainly comparable in other large cities.

What drew so many people to the dance halls? In large part, it was the music, which both its defenders and critics recognized as something very new in mainstream American culture. Dancing was “moral ruin,” the *Ladies' Home Journal* primly warned in 1921,



JITTERBUGGERS As dance halls became more popular, dancing became more exuberant—perhaps never more so than when the “jitterbug” became popular in the 1930s. This photograph shows an acrobatic pair of dancers during a huge dance event in Los Angeles designed to raise money for the Salvation Army. More than 10,000 people attended the event, and the police on hand to keep order had to call for reinforcements as the crowd became more and more frenzied and enthusiastic. (Bettmann/Corbis)

prompting “carelessness, recklessness, and laxity of moral responsibility” with its “direct appeal to the body’s sensory centers.” Many young dancers might have agreed with the description, if not with the moral judgment. Jazz encouraged a kind of uninhibited, even frenetic dancing—expressive, athletic, sensual—that young couples, in particular, found extraordinarily exciting, a welcome release from the often staid worlds of family, school, or work. The larger dance halls also attracted crowds by showcasing the most famous bands of the day.

crusade for reform. The National Woman's Party, under the leadership of Alice Paul, pressed on with its campaign to make the Equal Rights Amendment, first proposed in 1923, a part of the Constitution, although it found little support in Congress (and met continued resistance from other

feminist groups). Nevertheless, women's organizations and female political activities grew in many ways in the 1920s. Responding to the suffrage victory, women organized the League of Women Voters and the

League of Women
Voters



DANCING AT THE SAVOY This photograph of the interior of the famous Savoy ballroom shows the hundreds of men and women who typically flocked there to dance to the great black jazz bands of the 1920s and 1930s. (*Getty Images*)

Performances by Paul Whiteman, Ben Pollack, Fletcher Henderson, Bix Beiderbecke, Louis Armstrong, or Duke Ellington—musicians already familiar to everyone through radio performances and recordings—drew enormous crowds.

Some of the less savory halls also attracted dancers for illicit reasons—as sources of bootleg liquor or as places to buy drugs. The popular “taxi-dance” ballrooms—which allowed men without their own partners to buy tickets to dance with “hostesses” and “instructresses”—were sometimes closed by municipal authorities for “lewd” dancing and prostitution. At least sixty city governments passed regulations in the 1920s restricting the styles of public dancing; and the managers of the larger ballrooms tried to distance themselves from the

unsavory image of the taxi-dance halls by imposing dress codes and making at least some efforts, usually futile, to require “decorum” among their patrons.

Dance halls were particularly popular with young men and women from working-class, immigrant communities. For them, going dancing was part of becoming American, a way to escape—even if momentarily—the insular world of the immigrant neighborhood. (Their parents saw it that way too, and often tried to stop their children from going because they feared the dance halls would pull them out of the family and the community.) Going dancing was a chance to mingle with hundreds, sometimes thousands, of strangers of diverse backgrounds, and to participate in a cultural ritual that had no counterpart in ethnic cultures.

But dance halls were not melting pots. African Americans—who flocked to ballrooms at least as eagerly as whites—usually gathered at clubs in black neighborhoods, where there were only occasional white patrons. White working-class people might encounter a large number of different ethnic groups in a great hall at once, but the groups did not mix very much. In Chicago’s Dreamland, for example, Italians congregated near the door, Poles near the band, and Jews in the middle of the floor. Still, the experience of the dance hall—like the experience of the movie palace or the amusement park—drew people into the growing mass culture that was competing with and beginning to overwhelm the close-knit ethnic cultures into which many young Americans had been born.

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.

Women activists won a significant triumph in 1921, when they helped secure passage in Congress of a mea-

sure in keeping with the traditional feminist goal of securing “protective” legislation for women: the Sheppard-Towner Act. It provided federal funds to states to establish prenatal and child health-care programs. From the start,

Sheppard-Towner Act

however, the bill produced controversy. Alice Paul and her supporters opposed the measure, arguing that it classified all women as mothers. Margaret Sanger's objection was that the new programs would discourage birth-control efforts. More important, the American Medical Association fought Sheppard-Towner, warning that it would introduce untrained outsiders into the health-care field. In 1929, Congress terminated the program.

Education and Youth

The growing secularism of American culture and its expanding emphasis on training and expertise found reflection in the increasingly important role of education in the lives of American youth. First, more people were going to school in the 1920s than ever before. High-school attendance more than doubled during the decade, from 2.2 million to more than 5 million. Enrollment in colleges and universities increased threefold between 1900 and 1930, with much of that increase occurring after World War I. In 1918, there had been 600,000 college students; in 1930, there were 1.2 million, nearly 20 percent of the college-age population. Attendance was increasing as well at trade and vocational schools and in other institutions providing the specialized training that the modern economy demanded. Schools were beginning to offer instruction not only in the traditional disciplines but also in modern technical skills: engineering, management, economics.

The growing importance of education contributed to the emergence of a separate youth culture. The idea of adolescence as a distinct period in the life of an individual was

Youth Culture

for the most part new to the twentieth century. In some measure it was a result of the influence of Freudian psychology. But it was a result, too, of society's recognition that a more extended period of training and preparation was necessary before a young person was ready to move into the workplace. Schools and colleges provided adolescents with a setting in which they could develop their own social patterns, their own hobbies, their own interests and activities. An increasing number of students saw school as a place not just for academic training but for organized athletics, extracurricular activities, clubs, and fraternities and sororities—that is, as an institution that allowed them to define themselves less in terms of their families and more in terms of their peer group.

The Decline of the “Self-Made Man”

The sense of losing control, of becoming more dependent on rules and norms established by large, impersonal bureaucracies, created a crisis of self-identification among many American men. Robbed of the independence and control that had once defined “masculinity,” many men looked for other means to do so. Theodore Roosevelt, for example, had glorified warfare and the “strenuous life” as



VASSAR STUDENTS, 1920 Although a few prominent women's colleges, Vassar among them, had been educating women since the late nineteenth century, the number of colleges and universities willing to accept women, and hence the number of women enrolled in higher education, soared in the 1920s. (Bettmann/Corbis)

a route to "manhood." Other men turned to fraternal societies, to athletics, and to other settings where they found confirmation of their masculinity. The "Doom of the Self-Made Man," as *Century* magazine described it, produced marked ambivalence. These mixed feelings were reflected in the identity of three men who became the most widely admired heroes of the New Era: Thomas Edison, the inventor of the electric lightbulb and many other technological marvels; Henry Ford, the creator of the assembly line and one of the founders of the automobile industry; and Charles Lindbergh, the first aviator to make a solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean. All received the adulation of much of the American public. Lindbergh, in particular, became a national hero the like of which the country had never seen before.

Charles Lindbergh

On the one hand, all three men represented the triumphs of the modern technological and industrial society. On the other hand, all three had risen to success without the benefit of formal education and at least in part through their own efforts. They were, their admirers liked to believe, genuinely self-made men.

The Disenchanted

A generation of artists and intellectuals coming of age in the 1920s found the new society in which they lived especially disturbing. Many were experiencing a disenchantment with modern America so fundamental that they were often able to view it only with contempt. As a result, they adopted a role sharply different from that of most intellectuals of most earlier eras. Rather than trying to influence and reform their society, they isolated themselves from it and embarked on a restless search for personal fulfillment. Gertrude Stein once referred to the young Americans emerging from World War I as a "Lost Generation." For some writers and intellectuals, at least, it was an apt description.

At the heart of the Lost Generation's critique of modern society was a sense of personal alienation. This disillusionment had its roots in nothing so deeply as the experience of World War I. The repudiation of Wilsonian idealism, the restoration of "business as usual," the growing emphasis on materialism and consumerism suggested that the war had been a fraud; that the suffering and the dying had been in vain. Ernest Hemingway, one of the most celebrated (and most commercially successful) of the new breed of writers, expressed the generation's contempt for the war in his novel *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). Its protagonist, an American officer fighting in Europe, decides that there is no justification for his participation in the conflict and deserts the army with a nurse with whom he has fallen in love. Hemingway suggested that the officer was to be admired for doing so.

Lost Generation's Critique

One result of this alienation was 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

H. L. Mencken

the Baltimore journalist H. L. Mencken. His magazines—first the *Smart Set* and later the *American Mercury*—ridiculed everything most middle-class Americans held dear: religion, politics, the arts, even democracy itself. Mencken could not believe, he claimed, that "civilized life was possible under a democracy," because it was a form of government that placed power in the hands of the common people, whom he ridiculed as the "booboisie." Echoing Mencken's contempt was the novelist Sinclair Lewis, the first American to win a Nobel Prize in Literature. In a series of savage novels—*Main Street* (1920), *Babbitt* (1922), *Arrowsmith* (1925), and others—he lashed out at one aspect of modern society after another: the small town, the modern city, the medical profession, popular religion. The novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald ridiculed the American obsession with material success in *The Great Gatsby* (1925). The novel's title character, Jay Gatsby, spends his life accumulating wealth and social prestige in order to win the woman he loves. The world to which he has aspired, however, turns out to be one of pretension, fraud, and cruelty, and it ultimately destroys him.

Rejecting Success

The Harlem Renaissance

In postwar Harlem in New York City, a new generation of black artists and intellectuals created a flourishing African-American culture widely described as the "Harlem Renaissance." There were nightclubs (among them the famous Cotton Club) featuring many of the great jazz musicians who would later become staples of national popular culture: Duke Ellington, Jelly Roll Morton, Fletcher Henderson, and others. There were theaters featuring ribald musical comedies and vaudeville acts. Many white New Yorkers traveled up to Harlem for the music and theater, but the audiences were largely black.

Harlem in the 1920s was above all a center of literature, poetry, and art that drew heavily from African roots. Black artists were trying in part to demonstrate the richness of their own racial heritage (and not incidentally, to prove to whites that their race was worthy of respect). The poet Langston Hughes captured much of the spirit of the movement in a single sentence: "I am a Negro—and beautiful." One of the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance

African-American Pride

was Alain Locke, who assembled a notable collection of black writings published in 1925 as *The New Negro*. Gradually, white publishers began to notice and take an interest in the writers Locke helped launch. Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, James



THE ART OF THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE Aaron Douglas (1899–1979), one of the most significant African-American artists of the 1920s, created this cover image for *Opportunity* magazine in 1926. Douglas combined an interest in African and African-American themes with an attraction to the modernist trends in American art generally during this period. (Schomburg Center; The New York Public Library/Art Resource, NY. Permission courtesy of the Aaron & Alta Sawyer Douglas Foundation)

CAPTION TO COME



Weldon Johnson, and others gradually found readerships well beyond the black community. The painter Aaron Douglas, talented chronicler of the African-American experience, eventually found himself commissioned to create important murals in universities and public buildings.

A CONFLICT OF CULTURES

The modern, secular culture of the 1920s was not unchallenged. It grew up alongside older, more traditional cultures, with which it continually and often bitterly competed.

Prohibition

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, at least in some regions of the country. But it also produced conspicuous and growing violations that made the law an almost immediate source of disillusionment and controversy. The federal government hired only 1,500 agents to enforce the prohibition laws, and in many places they received little help from local police. Before long, it was almost as easy to acquire illegal alcohol in much 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 figures took it

Failure of Prohibition



CAPTION TO COME

over. In Chicago, Al Capone built a criminal empire based largely on illegal alcohol. He guarded it against interlopers with an army of as many as 1,000 gunmen, whose zealotry contributed to the violent deaths of more than 250 people in the city between 1920 and 1927. Other regions produced gangsters and gang wars of their own.

Alcohol and Organized Crime

Many middle-class progressives who had originally supported prohibition soon soured on the experiment. But an enormous constituency of provincial, largely rural, Protestant Americans continued vehemently to defend it. To them, prohibition had always carried implications far beyond the issue of drinking itself. It represented the effort of an older America to maintain dominance in a society in which they were becoming relatively less powerful. Drinking, which they associated with the modern city and with Catholic immigrants, became a symbol of the new culture they believed was displacing them.

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 effectively to challenge the “drys” and win repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment.

Nativism and the Klan

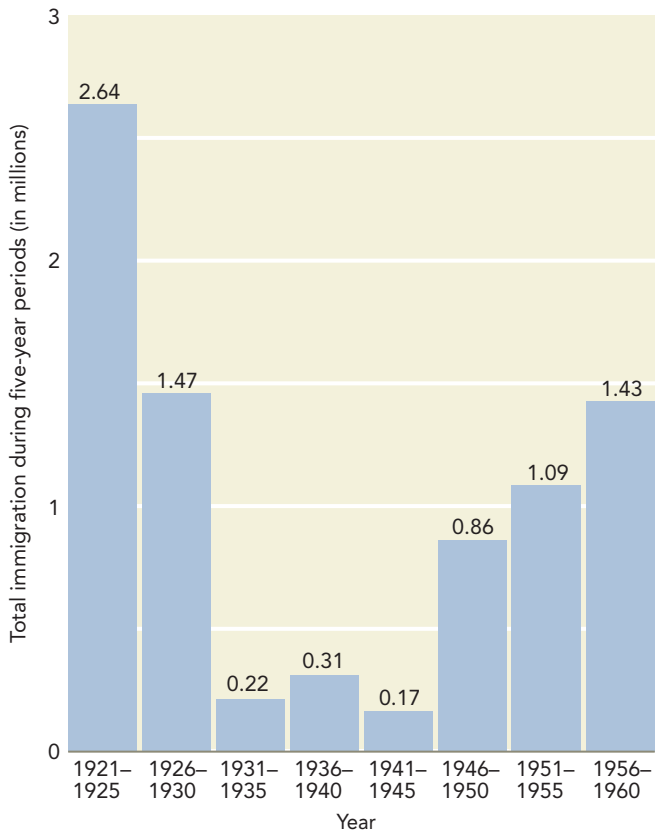
Like that for prohibition (which was itself in part a result of old-stock Americans trying to discipline the new immigrant population), agitation for a curb on foreign immigration

to the United States had begun in the nineteenth century; and like the prohibition movement, it had gathered strength in the years before the war largely because of the support of middle-class progressives. Such concerns had not been sufficient in the first years of the century to win passage of curbs on immigration; but in the troubled and repressive years immediately following the war, many old-stock Americans began to associate immigration with radicalism.

Sentiment on behalf of restriction grew rapidly as a result. 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 nativists remained unsatisfied and pushed for a harsher law. The National Origins Act of

National Origins Act of 1924

1924 strengthened the exclusionist provision of the 1921 law. It banned immigration from east Asia entirely. That provision deeply angered Japan, which understood that the Japanese were the principal target; Chinese immigration had been illegal since 1882. The law also reduced the quota for Europeans from 3 percent 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 many fewer southern and eastern Europeans in the country. What immigration there was, in other words, would heavily favor northwestern Europeans—people of “Nordic” or “Teutonic” stock. Five years later, a further restriction set a rigid limit of

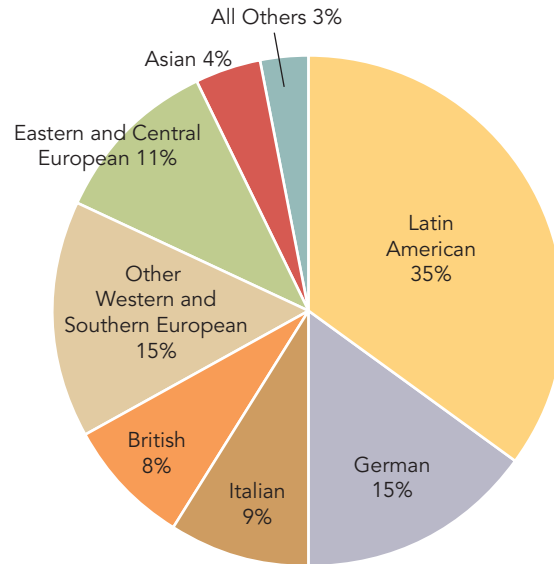


TOTAL IMMIGRATION, 1920–1960 After many years of enormous immigration from Europe and elsewhere, the United States experienced several decades of much lower immigration beginning in the 1920s. Immigration restriction legislation passed in 1921 and 1924 was one important reason for the decline. ♦ *What other factors depressed immigration in the 1930s and 1940s?*

150,000 immigrants a year. In the years that followed, immigration officials seldom permitted even half that number actually to enter the country.

But the nativism of the 1920s extended well beyond restricting immigration. Among other things, this 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, another group of white southerners met on Stone Mountain near Atlanta and established a new 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 join a new one. At first the new Klan, like the old, was largely concerned with intimidating African Americans, who according to Klan leader William J. Simmons were becoming insub-



SOURCES OF IMMIGRATION, 1920–1960 This chart shows a dramatic change in the sources of immigration between 1920 and 1960, a direct result of the National Origins Act of 1924, which established national quotas for immigrants to the United States based on the number of such immigrants who had been in the country in 1890. Note the shift back toward northern and western Europe and away from Italy and other southern and eastern European nations (which had not been heavily represented in the immigration of the 1890s). But the most dramatic change was the enormous increase in the proportion of immigrants from Latin America, a region explicitly exempted from the quota system established in 1924. ♦ *Why were Latin Americans treated differently than Europeans in immigration law in these years?*

ordinate. And at first it remained small, obscure, and almost entirely southern. After World War I, however, concern about blacks 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 also in industrial cities in the North and Midwest. Indiana had the largest membership of any state, and there were substantial Klans in Chicago, Detroit, and other northern industrial cities as well. The Klan was also strong in the West, with particularly large and active chapters in Oregon and Colorado. By 1924, there were reportedly 4 million members.

In some communities, where Klan leaders came from the most “respectable” segments of society, the organization operated much like a fraternal society, engaging in nothing more dangerous than occasional political pronouncements. Many Klan units (or “klaverns”) tried to present themselves as patriots and community leaders. Some established women's and even children's auxiliaries to demonstrate their commitment to the family. Often, however, the Klan also operated as a brutal, even



CAPTION TO COME

violent, opponent of “alien” groups and as a defender of traditional, fundamentalist morality. Some Klansmen systematically terrorized blacks, Jews, Catholics, and foreigners: boycotting their businesses, threatening their families, and attempting to drive them out of their communities. Occasionally, they resorted to violence: public whipping, tarring and feathering, arson, and lynching.

What the Klan feared, it soon became clear, was not simply “foreign” or “racially impure” groups; it was anyone who posed a challenge to “traditional values,” as the Klan defined them. Klansmen persecuted not only immigrants and African Americans, but also those white Protestants they considered guilty of irreligion, sexual promiscuity, or drunkenness. The Klan worked to enforce prohibition; it attempted to institute compulsory Bible reading in schools; it worked to punish divorce. It also provided its members, many of them people of modest means with little real power in society, with a sense of community and seeming authority. Its bizarre costumes, its elaborate rituals, its “secret” language, its burning crosses—all helped produce a sense of excitement and cohesion.

The Klan declined quickly after 1925, when a series of internal power struggles and several sordid scandals discredited some of its most important leaders. The most damaging episode involved David Stephenson, head of the Indiana

Klan, who raped a young secretary, kidnapped her, and watched her die rather than call a doctor after she swallowed poison. The Klan staggered on in some areas into the 1930s, but by World War II it was effectively dead. (The postwar Ku Klux Klan, which still survives, is modeled on but has no direct connection to the Klan of the 1920s and 1930s.)

Religious Fundamentalism

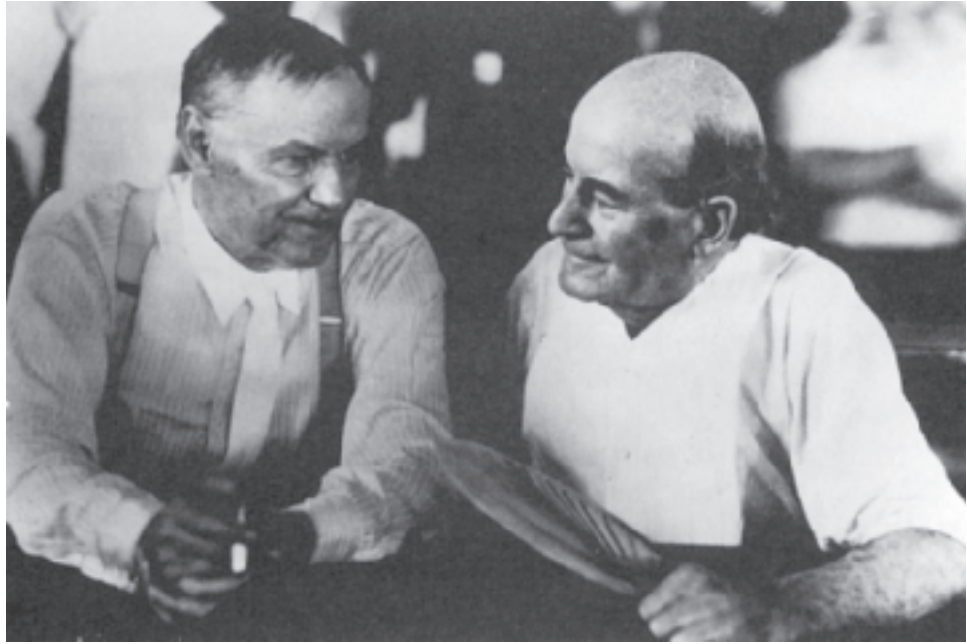
Another bitter cultural controversy of the 1920s was over the place of religion in contemporary society. By 1921, American Protestantism was divided into two warring camps. On one side stood the modernists: mostly urban, middle-class people who had attempted to adapt religion to the teachings of science and to the realities of their modern, secular society. On the other side stood the defenders of traditional faith: provincial, largely rural men and women, fighting to maintain the centrality of religion in American life. They became known as “fundamentalists,” a term derived from an influential set of pamphlets, *The Fundamentals*, published before World War I. The fundamentalists were outraged at the abandonment of traditional beliefs in the face of scientific discoveries. They insisted the Bible was to be interpreted literally. Above all, they opposed the teachings of Charles Darwin, who had openly challenged the biblical

Defending “Traditional Values”

David Stephenson

BRYAN AND DARROW IN DAYTON

Clarence Darrow (left) and William Jennings Bryan pose for photographers during the 1925 Scopes trial. Both men had removed their jackets because of the intense heat, and Bryan had shocked many of his admirers by revealing that he was not wearing suspenders (as most country people did), but a belt—which in rural Tennessee was a symbol of urban culture. (*Brown Brothers*)



story of the Creation. Human beings had not evolved from lower orders of animals, the fundamentalists insisted; they had been created by God, as described in Genesis.

Fundamentalism was a highly evangelical movement, interested in spreading the doctrine to new groups. Fundamentalist evangelists, among them the celebrated Billy Sunday, traveled from state to state (particularly in the South and parts of the West) attracting huge crowds to their revival meetings. (See “Patterns of Popular Culture,” pp. 618–619.) Protestant modernists looked on much of this activity with condescension and amusement. But by the mid-1920s, to their great alarm, evangelical fundamentalism was gaining political strength in some states with its demands for legislation to forbid the teaching of evolution in the public schools. 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.”

The Tennessee law attracted the attention of the fledgling American Civil Liberties Union, which had been founded in 1920 by men and women alarmed by the repressive legal and social climate of the war and its aftermath. 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 what became known as the “Monkey Trial,” which opened in an almost circuslike atmosphere. Scopes had, of course, clearly 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 tricked him into admitting the possibility that not all religious dogma was subject to only one interpretation.

The Scopes trial was a traumatic experience for many fundamentalists. It isolated and ultimately excluded them from many mainstream Protestant denominations. It helped put an end to much of their political activism. But it did not change their religious convictions. Even without connection to traditional denominations, fundamentalists continued to congregate in independent churches or new denominations of their own.

The Democrats’ Ordeal

The anguish of provincial Americans attempting to defend an embattled way of life proved particularly

Scopes Monkey Trial

troubling to the Democratic Party, which suffered during the 1920s as a result of tensions between its urban and rural factions. More than the Republicans, the Democrats were a diverse coalition of interest groups, linked to the party by local tradition. Among those interest groups were prohibitionists, Klansmen, and fundamentalists on one side and Catholics, urban workers, and immigrants on the other.

In 1924, the tensions between them proved devastating. At the Democratic National Convention in New York that summer, 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. More damaging to the party was a deadlock in the balloting for a presidential candidate. Urban Democrats supported Alfred E. Smith, the Irish Catholic Tammanyite who had risen to become a progressive governor of New York. Rural Democrats backed William McAdoo, Woodrow Wilson's Treasury secretary (and son-in-law), later to become a senator from California; he had skillfully positioned himself to win the support of southern and western delegates suspicious of Tammany Hall and modern urban life. The convention

dragged on for 103 ballots, until finally, after both Smith and McAdoo withdrew, the party settled on a compromise: the bland corporate lawyer John W. Davis, who had served as solicitor general and ambassador to Britain under Wilson. He was easily defeated by President Calvin Coolidge.

A similar schism plagued the Democrats again in 1928, when Al Smith finally secured his party's nomination for president after a much shorter battle. Smith was not, however, able to unite his divided party—largely 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, although he did well in the large cities, 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 contemporary politician seemed to personify the modern, prosperous, middle-class society of the New Era: Herbert Hoover.

Al Smith

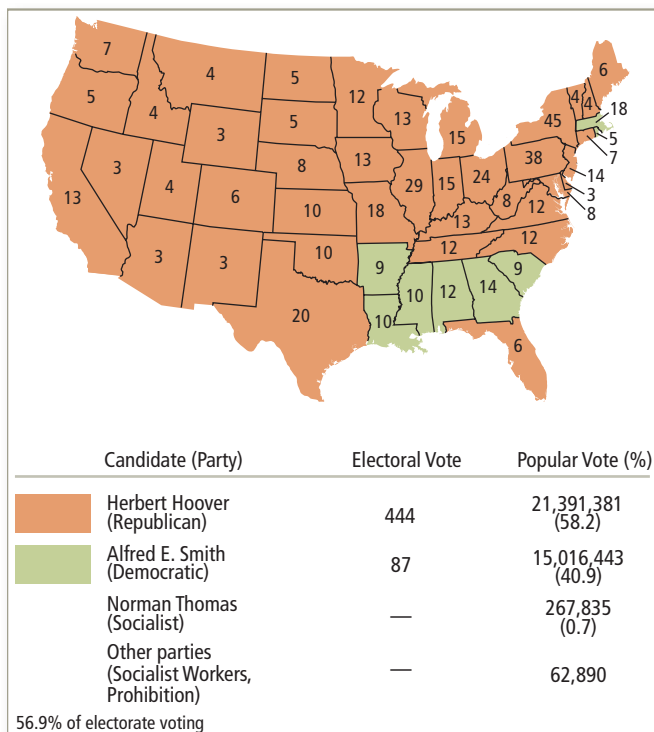
REPUBLICAN GOVERNMENT

For twelve years, beginning in 1921, both the presidency and the Congress rested securely in the hands of the Republican Party—a party in which the power of reformers had greatly dwindled since the heyday of progressivism before the war. 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 also attempted to serve as an active agent of economic change.

Harding and Coolidge

Nothing seemed more clearly to illustrate the unadventurous character 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 was elected to the presidency in 1920, having spent many years in public life doing little of note. 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 capable men to the most important cabinet offices, and he attempted to stabilize the nation's troubled foreign policy. But even as he attempted to rise to his office, 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



ELECTION OF 1928 The election of 1928 was, by almost any measure, highly one-sided. Herbert Hoover won over 58 percent of the vote to Alfred Smith's 41. Smith carried only Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and some traditionally Democratic states in the South. ♦ *Why did Smith do so poorly even in some of the South?*

For an interactive version of this map, go to www.mhhe.com/brinkley13ech22maps

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.

Harding lacked the strength to abandon the party hacks who had helped create his political success. One of them, Harry Daugherty, the Ohio party boss principally responsible for his meteoric political ascent, 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 (and perhaps also to Harding), Daugherty, Fall,

Teapot Dome

and others were engaged in fraud and corruption. 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 suffered severe pain, which his doctors wrongly diagnosed as food poisoning. A few days later, in San Francisco, he suffered two major heart attacks and died.

In many ways, Calvin Coolidge, who succeeded Harding in the presidency, was utterly different from his predecessor. Where Harding was genial, garrulous, and debauched,

Calvin Coolidge

Coolidge was dour, silent, even puritanical. And while Harding was, if not perhaps personally corrupt, then at least tolerant of corruption in others, Coolidge seemed honest beyond reproach. In other ways, however, Harding and Coolidge were similar figures. Both took an essentially passive approach to their office.

Like Harding, Coolidge had risen to the presidency on the basis of few substantive accomplishments. Elected governor of Massachusetts in 1919, he had won national attention with his 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. Robert La Follette, the candidate of the reincarnated Progressive Party, received 16 percent of the popular vote but carried only his home state of Wisconsin. Coolidge probably could have won renomination 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.”

HARDING AND FRIENDS President Warren G. Harding (center left, holding a rod) poses with companions during a fishing trip to Miami in 1921. He enjoyed these social and sporting events with wealthy friends and political cronies. Two of his companions here, Attorney General Harry Daugherty (to the left of Harding) and Interior Secretary Albert Fall (at far right) were later principal figures in the scandals that rocked the administration before and after Harding’s death. (Bettmann/Corbis)





CALVIN COOLIDGE AT LEISURE Coolidge was a silent man of simple tastes. But he was not really an outdoorsman, despite his efforts to appear so. He is shown here fishing in Simsbury, Connecticut, carefully attired in suit, tie, hat, and rubber boots. (*Bettmann/Corbis*)

Government and Business

The story of Harding and Coolidge themselves, however, is only a part—and by no means the most important part—of the story of their administrations. However passive the New Era presidents may have been, much of the federal government was working effectively and efficiently during the 1920s to adapt public policy to the widely accepted goal of the time: helping business and industry operate with maximum efficiency and productivity. The close relationship between the private sector and the federal government that had been forged during World War I continued. Secretary of the Treasury Andrew Mellon, a wealthy steel and aluminum tycoon, devoted himself to working for 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. The administration even managed to retire half the nation's World War I debt.

The most prominent member of the cabinet was Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover, who considered himself, and was considered by others, a notable progressive. During his eight years in the Commerce Department,

Hoover 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, should 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.

Hoover's
"Associationalism"

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—a prosperity without parallel in the previous history of the United States—shaped much of what exuberant contemporaries liked to call the “New Era.” In the years after World War I, America created a vibrant and extensive national culture. Its middle class moved increasingly to embrace consumerism. 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 roiling controversies and timeless injustices clamoring for redress. Although the prosperity of the

1920s was more widely shared than at any other 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 was attracting millions of urban, middle-class people. But many other Americans looked at this culture with alarm and fought against it with great fervor. 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.

INTERACTIVE LEARNING

The *Primary Source Investigator CD-ROM* offers the following materials related to this chapter:

- Interactive maps: **Breakdown of Rural Isolation** (M22); **Areas of Population Growth** (M25); and **U.S. Elections** (M7).
- Documents, images, and maps related to America in the 1920s. Some highlights include a text excerpt from the Ku Klux Klan’s Constitution and a speech

by their former leader, Hiram Wesley Evans; images showing the fashions of the “flapper”; and images of the new women of the 1920s.

Online Learning Center (www.mhhe.com/brinkley13e)

For quizzes, Internet resources, references to additional books and films, and more, consult this book’s Online Learning Center.

FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

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Coney Island (1990) is a documentary film re-creating the drama and fantasy of Coney Island. *That Rhythm, Those Blues* (1997) is a film documenting the one-night stands, makeshift housing, and poor transportation that were all a step toward the big time at the famed Apollo Theatre on Harlem's 125th Street. *Mr. Sears' Catalogue* (1997) is a film exploring how the Sears catalog became a symbol for the ambitions and dreams of a sprawling, fast-developing America.