

## THE MODERN ERA OF THE 1920S

*My candle burns at both ends;  
It will not last the night;  
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—  
It gives a lovely light!*

Edna St. Vincent Millay, "First Fig," 1920

The armistice ending World War I was two years in the past in November 1920 when the American people—women as well as men—went to the polls to cast their votes for president. Their choice was between two men from Ohio: Governor James Cox, a Democrat who urged the adoption of the League of Nations, and Senator Warren G. Harding, a Republican who was unclear about where he stood on every issue. The only memorable phrase in Harding's campaign was his assertion that the American people wanted a "return to normalcy." Harding apparently was right, because he was elected by a landslide. It was a sign that the idealism and activism that had characterized the prewar years of the Progressive era were over.

### **Republican Control**

Through the 1920s, three Republican presidents would control the executive branch. Congress too was solidly Republican through a decade in which U.S. business boomed, while farmers and unions struggled.

### ***Business Doctrine***

The great leader of the progressive wing of the Republican party, Theodore Roosevelt, died in 1919. This loss, combined with public disillusionment over the war, allowed the return of the old-guard (conservative) Republicans. Unlike the Republicans of the Gilded Age, however, Republican leadership in the 1920s did not preach laissez-faire economics but rather accepted the idea of limited government regulation as an aid to stabilizing business. The regulatory commissions established in the Progressive era were now administered by appointees who were more sympathetic to business than to the general public. The prevailing idea of the Republican party was that the nation would benefit if business and the pursuit of profits took the lead in developing the economy.

## ***The Presidency of Warren Harding***

Harding had been a newspaper publisher in Ohio before entering politics. He was handsome and well-liked among the Republican political cronies with whom he regularly played poker. His abilities as a leader, however, were less than presidential. When the Republican national convention of 1920 deadlocked, the party bosses decided “in a smoke-filled room” to deliver the nomination to Harding as a compromise choice.

**A Few Good Choices** Harding recognized his limitations and hoped to make up for them by appointing able men to his cabinet. He appointed the former presidential candidate and Supreme Court justice Charles Evans Hughes to be secretary of state; the greatly admired former mining engineer and Food Administration leader Herbert Hoover to be secretary of commerce; and the Pittsburgh industrialist and millionaire Andrew Mellon to be secretary of the treasury. When the Chief Justice’s seat on the Supreme Court became vacant, Harding filled it by appointing former President William Howard Taft.

**Domestic Policy** Harding did little more than sign into law the measures adopted by the Republican Congress. He approved (1) a reduction in the income tax, (2) an increase in tariff rates under the Fordney-McCumber Tariff Act of 1922, and (3) establishment of the Bureau of the Budget, with procedures for all government expenditures to be placed in a single budget for Congress to review and vote on.

Harding did surprise many people, particularly his conservative allies, by pardoning and releasing from federal prison Socialist leader Eugene Debs. Debs had been convicted of violating the Espionage Act during World War I. Though in prison, Debs received 920,000 votes in the 1920 presidential election. Harding’s decision to pardon Debs was prompted by the president’s generous spirit.

**Scandals and Death** Curiously, Harding’s postwar presidency was marked by scandals and corruption similar to those that had occurred under an earlier postwar president, Ulysses S. Grant. Having appointed some excellent officials, Harding also selected a number of incompetent and dishonest men to fill important positions, including Secretary of the Interior Albert B. Fall and Attorney General Harry M. Daugherty. In 1924, Congress discovered that Fall had accepted bribes for granting oil leases near Teapot Dome, Wyoming. Daugherty also took bribes for agreeing not to prosecute certain criminal suspects.

However, in August 1923, shortly before these scandals were uncovered publicly, Harding died suddenly while traveling in the West. He was never implicated in any of the scandals.

## ***The Presidency of Calvin Coolidge***

Harding’s vice president and successor, Calvin Coolidge, had won popularity in 1919 as the Massachusetts governor who broke the Boston police strike. He was a man of few words who richly deserved the nickname “Silent Cal.” Coolidge once explained why silence was good politics. “If you don’t say anything,” he said, “you won’t be called on to repeat it.” Also unanswerable was the president’s sage comment: “When more and more people are thrown out of work, unemployment

results.” Coolidge summarized both his presidency and his era in the phrase: “The business of America is business.”

**The Election of 1924** After less than a year in office, Coolidge was the overwhelming choice of the Republican party as their presidential nominee in 1924. The Democrats nominated a conservative lawyer from West Virginia, John W. Davis, and tried to make an issue of the Teapot Dome scandal. Unhappy with conservative dominance of both parties, liberals formed a new Progressive party led by its presidential candidate, Robert La Follette of Wisconsin. Coolidge won the election easily, but the Progressive ticket did extremely well for a third party in a conservative era. La Follette received nearly 5 million votes, chiefly from discontented farmers and laborers.

**Vetoes and Inaction** Coolidge believed in limited government that stood aside while business conducted its own affairs. Little was accomplished in the White House except keeping a close watch on the budget. Cutting spending to the bone, Coolidge vetoed even the acts of the Republican majority in Congress. He would not allow bonuses for World War I veterans and vetoed a bill (the McNary-Haugen Bill of 1928) to help farmers as crop prices fell.

### ***Hoover, Smith, and the Election of 1928***

Coolidge declined to run for the presidency a second time. The Republicans therefore turned to an able leader with a spotless reputation, self-made millionaire and Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover. Hoover had served three presidents (Wilson, Harding, and Coolidge) in administrative roles but had never before campaigned for elective office. Nevertheless, in 1928, he was made the Republican nominee for president.

Hoover’s Democratic opponent was the governor of New York, Alfred E. Smith. As a Roman Catholic and an opponent of Prohibition, Smith appealed to many immigrant voters in the cities. Many Protestants, however, were openly prejudiced against Smith.

Republicans boasted of “Coolidge Prosperity,” which Hoover promised to extend. He even suggested (ironically, as it proved) that poverty would soon be ended altogether. Hoover won in a landslide and even took a large number of the electoral votes in the South. In several southern states—including Texas, Florida, and Virginia—the taste of prosperity and general dislike for Smith’s religion outweighed the voters’ usual allegiance to the Democratic party.

## **Mixed Economic Development**

Politics took a backseat in the 1920s, as Americans adapted to economic growth and social change. The decade began with a brief postwar recession (1921), included a lengthy period of business prosperity (1922–1928), and ended in economic disaster (October 1929) with the nation’s worst stock market crash. During the boom years, unemployment was usually below 4 percent. The standard of living for most Americans improved significantly. Indoor plumbing and central heating became commonplace. By 1930, two-thirds of all homes had electricity. Real income for both the middle class and the working class increased substantially.



The prosperity, however, was far from universal. In fact, during the 1920s as many as 40 percent of U.S. families in both rural and urban areas had incomes in the poverty range—they struggled to live on less than \$1,500 a year. Farmers in particular did not share in the booming economy.

### ***Causes of Business Prosperity***

The business boom—led by a spectacular rise of 64 percent in manufacturing output between 1919 and 1929—resulted from several factors.

**Increased Productivity** Companies made greater use of research, expanding their use of Frederick W. Taylor’s time-and-motion studies and principles of scientific management. The manufacturing process was made more efficient by the adoption of improved methods of mass production. In 1914, Henry Ford had perfected a system for manufacturing automobiles by means of an assembly line. Instead of losing time moving around a factory as in the past, Ford’s workers remained at one place all day and performed the same simple operation over and over again at rapid speed. In the 1920s, most major industries adopted the assembly line and realized major gains in worker productivity.

**Energy Technologies** Another cause of economic growth was the increased use of oil and electricity, although coal was still used for the railroads and to heat most homes. Increasingly, oil was used to power factories and to provide gasoline for the rapidly increasing numbers of automobiles. By 1930, oil would account for 23 percent of U.S. energy (up from a mere 3 percent in 1900). Electric motors in factories and new appliances at home increased electrical generation over 300 percent during the decade.

**Government Policy** Government at all levels in the 1920s favored the growth of big business by offering corporate tax cuts and doing almost nothing to enforce the antitrust laws of the Progressive era. Large tax cuts for higher-income Americans also contributed to the imbalance in incomes and increased speculation in markets. The Federal Reserve contributed to the overheated economic boom first through low interest rates and relaxed regulation of banks and then by tightening the money supply at the wrong time.

### ***Consumer Economy***

Electricity in their homes enabled millions of Americans to purchase the new consumer appliances of the decade—refrigerators, vacuum cleaners, and washing machines. Automobiles became more affordable and sold by the millions, making the horse-and-buggy era a thing of the past. Advertising expanded as businesses found that consumers’ demand for new products could be manipulated by appealing to their desires for status and popularity. Stores increased sales of the new appliances and automobiles by allowing customers to buy on credit. Later, as consumers faced more “easy monthly payments” than they could afford, they curtailed buying, contributing to the collapse of the economic boom. Chain stores, such as Woolworth’s and the A & P, proliferated. Their greater variety of products were attractively displayed and often priced lower than the neighborhood stores, which they threatened to displace.

**Impact of the Automobile** More than anything else, the automobile changed society. By 1929, a total of 26.5 million automobiles were registered, compared to 1.2 million in 1913. The enormous increase in automobile sales meant that, by the end of the decade, there was an average of nearly one car per American family. In economic terms, the production of automobiles replaced the railroad industry as the key promoter of economic growth. Other industries—steel, glass, rubber, gasoline, and highway construction—now depended on automobile sales. In social terms, the automobile affected all that Americans did: shopping, traveling for pleasure, commuting to work, even dating. Of course, there were new problems as well: traffic jams in the cities, injuries and deaths on roads and highways.

### ***Farm Problems***

Farmers did not share in the Coolidge prosperity. Their best years had been 1916–1918, when crop prices had been kept artificially high by (1) wartime demand in Europe and (2) the U.S. government’s wartime policy of guaranteeing a minimum price for wheat and corn. When the war ended, so did farm prosperity. Farmers who had borrowed heavily to expand during the war were now left with a heavy burden of debt. New technologies (chemical fertilizers, gasoline tractors) helped farmers increase their production in the 1920s, but did not solve their problems. In fact, productivity only served to increase their debts, as growing surpluses produced falling prices.

### ***Labor Problems***

Wages rose during the 1920s, but the union movement went backward. Membership in unions declined 20 percent, partly because most companies insisted on an *open shop* (keeping jobs open to nonunion workers). Some companies also began to practice welfare capitalism—voluntarily offering their employees improved benefits and higher wages in order to reduce their interest in organizing unions. In the South, companies used police, state militia, and local mobs to violently resist efforts to unionize the textile industry.

In an era that so strongly favored business, union efforts at strikes usually failed. The United Mine Workers, led by John L. Lewis, suffered setbacks in a series of violent and ultimately unsuccessful strikes in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Kentucky. Conservative courts routinely issued injunctions against strikes and nullified labor laws aimed at protecting workers’ welfare.

## **A New Culture**

The Census of 1920 reported that, for the first time, more than half of the American population lived in urban areas. The culture of the cities was based on popular tastes, morals, and habits of mass consumption that were increasingly at odds with the strict religious and moral codes of rural America. Moralists of the 1920s blamed the automobile, “a bordello on wheels,” for the breakdown of morals, especially among the young, but soon the music, dances, movies and fashions were added to the list.



## ***The Jazz Age***

High school and college youth expressed their rebellion against their elders' culture by dancing to jazz music. Brought north by African American musicians, jazz became a symbol of the "new" and "modern" culture of the cities. The proliferation of phonographs and radios made this new style of music available to a huge (and chiefly youthful) public.

**Entertainment** Newspapers had once been the only medium of mass communication and entertainment. In the 1920s, a new medium—the radio—suddenly appeared. The first commercial radio station went on the air in 1920 and broadcast music to just a few thousand listeners. By 1930 there were over 800 stations broadcasting to 10 million radios—about a third of all U.S. homes. The organization of the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) in 1924 and the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) in 1927 provided networks of radio stations that enabled people from coast to coast to listen to the same programs: news broadcasts, sporting events, soap operas, quiz shows, and comedies.

The movie industry centered in Hollywood, California, became big business in the 1920s. Going to the movies became a national habit in cities, suburbs, and small towns. Sexy and glamorous movie stars such as Greta Garbo and Rudolf Valentino were idolized by millions. Elaborate movie theater "palaces" were built for the general public. With the introduction of talking (sound) pictures in 1927, the movie industry reached new heights. By 1929, over 80 million tickets to the latest Hollywood movies were sold each week.

**Popular Heroes** In an earlier era, politicians such as William Jennings Bryan, Theodore Roosevelt, and Woodrow Wilson had been popularly viewed as heroic figures. In the new age of radio and movies, Americans radically shifted their viewpoint and adopted as role models the larger-than-life personalities celebrated on the sports page and the movie screen. Every sport had its superstars who were nationally known. In the 1920s, people followed the knockouts of heavyweight boxer Jack Dempsey, the swimming records of Gertrude Ederle, the touchdowns scored by Jim Thorpe, the home runs hit by Babe Ruth, and the golf tournaments won by Bobby Jones.

Of all the popular heroes of the decade, the most celebrated was a young aviator who, in 1927, thrilled the nation and the entire world by flying nonstop across the Atlantic from Long Island to Paris. Americans listened to the radio for news of Charles Lindbergh's flight and welcomed his return to the United States with ticker tape parades larger than the welcome given to the returning soldiers of World War I.

## ***Gender Roles, Family, and Education***

The passage of the Nineteenth Amendment did not change either women's lives or U.S. politics as much as had been anticipated. Voting patterns in the election of 1920 showed that women did not vote as a bloc, but adopted the party preferences of their husbands or fathers.

**Women at Home** The traditional separation of labor between men and women continued into the 1920s. Most middle-class women expected to spend

their lives as homemakers and mothers. The introduction into the home of such laborsaving devices as the washing machine and vacuum cleaner eased but did not substantially change the daily routines of the homemaker.

**Women in the Labor Force** Participation of women in the workforce remained about the same as before the war. Employed women usually lived in the cities, were limited to certain categories of jobs as clerks, nurses, teachers, and domestics, and received lower wages than men.

**Revolution in Morals** Probably the most significant change in the lives of young men and women of the 1920s was their revolt against sexual taboos. Some were influenced by the writings of the Austrian psychiatrist Sigmund Freud, who stressed the role of sexual repression in mental illness. Others, who perhaps had never heard of Freud, took to premarital sex as if it were—like radio and jazz music—one of the inventions of the modern age. Movies, novels, automobiles, and new dance steps (the fox-trot and the Charleston) also encouraged greater promiscuity. The use of contraceptives for birth control was still against the law in almost every state. Even so, the work of Margaret Sanger and other advocates of birth control achieved growing acceptance in the twenties.

A special fashion that set young people apart from older generations was the flapper look. Influenced by movie actresses as well as their own desires for independence, young women shocked their elders by wearing dresses hemmed at the knee (instead of the ankle), “bobbing” (cutting short) their hair, smoking cigarettes, and driving cars. High school and college graduates also took office jobs until they married. Then, as married women, they were expected to abandon the flapper look, quit their jobs, and settle down as wives and mothers.

**Divorce** As a result of women’s suffrage, state lawmakers were now forced to listen to feminists, who demanded changes in the divorce laws to permit women to escape abusive and incompatible husbands. Liberalized divorce laws were one reason that one in six marriages ended in divorce by 1930—a dramatic increase over the one-in-eight ratio of 1920.

**Education** Widespread belief in the value of education, together with economic prosperity, stimulated more state governments to enact compulsory school laws. Universal high school education became the new American goal. By the end of the 1920s, the number of high school graduates had doubled to over 25 percent of the school-age young adults.

### ***The Literature of Alienation***

Scorning religion as hypocritical and bitterly condemning the sacrifices of war-time as a fraud perpetrated by money interests were two dominant themes of the leading writers of the postwar decade. This disillusionment caused the writer Gertrude Stein to call these writers a “lost generation.” The novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and Sinclair Lewis, the poems of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, and the plays of Eugene O’Neill expressed disillusionment with the ideals of an earlier time and with the materialism of a business-oriented culture. Fitzgerald and O’Neill took to a life of drinking, while Eliot and Hemingway expressed their unhappiness by moving into exile in Europe.



**Source:** Edward Hopper. *Night on the El Train*, 1918. The Philadelphia Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY

### **Art and Architecture**

The fusion of art and technology during the 1920s and 1930s created a new profession of industrial designers. Influenced by Art Deco and streamlining styles, they created functional products from toasters to locomotives that had aesthetic appeal. Many skyscrapers, such as the Chrysler and Empire State buildings in New York, were also built in the Art Deco style that captured modernist simplification of forms, while using the machine age materials.

Painters, such as Edward Hopper, were inspired by the architecture of American cities to explore loneliness and isolation of urban life. Regional artists, such as Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton, celebrated the rural people and scenes of the heartland of America.

On the stage, Jewish immigrants played a major role in the development of the American musical theatre during this era. For example, composer George Gershwin, the son of Russian-Jewish immigrants, blended jazz and classical music in his symphonic *Rhapsody in Blue* and the folk opera *Porgy and Bess*.

### **Harlem Renaissance**

By 1930, almost 20 percent of African Americans lived in the North, as migration from the South continued. In the North, African Americans still faced discrimination in housing and jobs, but they found at least some improvement in their earnings and material standard of living. The largest African American community developed in the Harlem section of New York City. With a population of almost 200,000 by 1930, Harlem became famous in the 1920s for its



concentration of talented actors, artists, musicians, and writers. Because of their artistic achievements this period is known as the Harlem Renaissance.

**Poets and Musicians** The leading Harlem poets included Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, and Claude McKay. Commenting on the African American heritage, their poems expressed a range of emotions, from bitterness and resentment to joy and hope.

African American jazz musicians such as Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong were so popular among people of all races that the 1920s is often called the Jazz Age. Other great performers included blues singer Bessie Smith and the multitalented singer and actor Paul Robeson. While these artists sometimes performed before integrated audiences in Harlem, they often found themselves and their audiences segregated in much of the rest of the nation.

**Marcus Garvey** In 1916, the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) was brought to Harlem from Jamaica by a charismatic immigrant, Marcus Garvey. Garvey advocated individual and racial pride for African Americans and developed political ideas of black nationalism. Going beyond the efforts of W. E. B. Du Bois, Garvey established an organization for black separatism, economic self-sufficiency, and a back-to-Africa movement. Garvey's sale of stock in the Black Star Steamship line led to federal charges of fraud. In 1925, he was tried, convicted, and jailed. Later, he was deported to Jamaica and his movement collapsed.

W. E. B. Du Bois and other African American leaders disagreed with Garvey's back-to-Africa idea but endorsed his emphasis on racial pride and self-respect. In the 1960s, Garvey's thinking helped to inspire a later generation to embrace the cause of black pride and nationalism.

## Values in Conflict

The dominant social and political issues of the 1920s expressed sharp divisions in U.S. society between the young and the old, between urban modernists and rural fundamentalists, between prohibitionists and antiprohibitionists, and between nativists and the foreign-born.

### *Religion*

Divisions among Protestants reflected the tensions in society between the traditional values of rural areas and the modernizing forces of the cities.

**Modernism** A range of influences, including the changing role of women, the Social Gospel movement, and scientific knowledge, caused large numbers of Protestants to define their faith in new ways. Modernists took a historical and critical view of certain passages in the Bible and believed they could accept Darwin's theory of evolution without abandoning their religious faith.

**Fundamentalism** Protestant preachers in rural areas condemned the modernists and taught that every word in the Bible must be accepted as literally true. A key point in fundamentalist doctrine was that creationism (the idea that God had created the universe in seven days, as stated in the Book of Genesis) explained the origin of all life. Fundamentalists blamed the liberal views of modernists for causing a decline in morals.

**Revivalists on the Radio** Ever since the Great Awakening of the early 1700s, religious revivals swept through America periodically. Revivalists of the 1920s preached a fundamentalist message but did so for the first time making full use of the new tool of mass communication, the radio. The leading radio evangelists were Billy Sunday, who drew large crowds as he attacked drinking, gambling, and dancing; and Aimee Semple McPherson, who condemned the twin evils of communism and jazz music from her pulpit in Los Angeles.

### ***Fundamentalism and the Scopes Trial***

More than any other single event, a much-publicized trial in Tennessee focused the debate between religious fundamentalists in the rural South and modernists of the northern cities. Tennessee, like several other southern states, outlawed the teaching of Darwin's theory of evolution in public schools. To challenge the constitutionality of these laws, the American Civil Liberties Union persuaded a Tennessee biology teacher, John Scopes, to teach the theory of evolution to his high school class. For doing so, Scopes was arrested and tried in 1925.

**The Trial** The entire nation followed the Scopes trial both in newspapers and by radio. Defending Scopes was the famous lawyer Clarence Darrow. Representing the fundamentalists was three-time Democratic candidate for president William Jennings Bryan, who testified as an expert on the Bible.

**Aftermath** As expected, Scopes was convicted, but the conviction was later overturned on a technicality. Laws banning the teaching of evolution remained on the books for years, although they were rarely enforced. The northern press asserted that Darrow and the modernists had thoroughly discredited fundamentalism. However, to this day, questions about the relationship between religion and the public schools remain controversial and unresolved.

### ***Prohibition***

Another controversy that helped define the 1920s concerned people's conflicting attitudes toward the 18th Amendment. Wartime concerns to conserve grain and maintain a sober workforce moved Congress to pass this amendment, which strictly prohibited the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages, including liquors, wines, and beers. It was ratified in 1919. The adoption of the Prohibition amendment and a federal law enforcing it (the Volstead Act, 1919) were the culmination of many decades of crusading by temperance forces.

**Defying the Law** Prohibition did not stop people from drinking alcohol either in public places or at home. Especially in the cities, it became fashionable to defy the law by going to clubs or bars known as speakeasies, where bootleg (smuggled) liquor was sold. City police and judges were paid to look the other way. Even elected officials such as President Harding served alcoholic drinks to guests. Liquors, beers, and wines were readily available from bootleggers who smuggled them from Canada or made them in their garages or basements.

Rival groups of gangsters, including a Chicago gang headed by Al Capone, fought for control of the lucrative bootlegging trade. Organized crime became



big business. The millions made from the sale of illegal booze allowed the gangs to expand other illegal activities: prostitution, gambling, and narcotics.

**Political Discord and Repeal** Most Republicans publicly supported the “noble experiment” of Prohibition (although in private, many politicians drank). Democrats were divided on the issue, with southerners supporting it and northern city politicians calling for repeal. Supporters of the 18th Amendment pointed to declines in alcoholism and alcohol-related deaths, but as the years passed, they gradually weakened in the face of growing public resentment and clear evidence of increased criminal activity. With the coming of the Great Depression, economic arguments for repeal were added to the others. In 1933, the 21st Amendment repealing the Eighteenth was ratified, and millions celebrated the new year by toasting the end of Prohibition.

### ***Nativism***

The world war had interrupted the flow of immigrants to the United States, but as soon as the war ended, immigration shot upward. Over a million foreigners entered the country between 1919 and 1921. Like the immigrants of the prewar period, the new arrivals were mainly Catholics and Jews from eastern and southern Europe. Once again, nativist prejudices of native-born Protestants were aroused. Workers feared competition for jobs. Isolationists wanted minimal contact with Europe and feared that immigrants might foment revolution. In response to public demands for restrictive legislation, Congress acted quickly.

**Quota Laws** Congress passed two laws that severely limited immigration by setting quotas based on nationality. The first quota act of 1921 limited immigration to 3 percent of the number of foreign-born persons from a given nation counted in the 1910 Census (a maximum of 357,000). To reduce the number of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, Congress passed a second quota act in 1924 that set quotas of 2 percent based on the Census of 1890 (before the arrival of most of the “new” immigrants). Although there were quotas for all European and Asian nationalities, the law chiefly restricted those groups considered “undesirable” by the nativists. By 1927, the quota for all Asians and eastern and southern Europeans had been limited to 150,000, with all Japanese immigrants barred. With these acts, the traditional United States policy of unlimited immigration ended.

Canadians and Latin Americans were exempt from restrictions. Almost 500,000 Mexicans migrated legally to the Southwest during the 1920s.

**Case of Sacco and Vanzetti** Although liberal American artists and intellectuals were few in number, they loudly protested against racist and nativist prejudices. They rallied to the support of two Italian immigrants, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, who in 1921 had been convicted in a Massachusetts court of committing robbery and murder. Liberals protested that the two men were innocent, and that they had been accused, convicted, and sentenced to die simply because they were poor Italians and anarchists (who were against all government). After six years of appeals and national and international debates over the fairness of their trial, Sacco and Vanzetti were executed in 1927.



## ***Ku Klux Klan***

The most extreme expression of nativism in the 1920s was the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan. Unlike the original Klan of the 1860s and 1870s, the new Klan founded in 1915 was as strong in the Midwest as in the South. The Klan attracted new members because of the popular silent film, *Birth of a Nation*, which portrayed the KKK during Reconstruction as the heroes, and from the white backlash to the race riots of 1919. The new Klan used modern advertising techniques to grow to 5 million members by 1925. It drew most of its support from lower-middle-class white Protestants in small cities and towns. Northern branches of the KKK directed their hostility not only against blacks but also against Catholics, Jews, foreigners, and suspected Communists.

**Tactics** The Klan employed various methods for terrorizing and intimidating anyone targeted as “un-American.” Dressed in white hoods to disguise their identity, Klan members would burn crosses and apply vigilante justice, punishing their victims with whips, tar and feathers, and even the hangman’s noose. In its heyday in the early 1920s, the Klan developed strong political influence. In Indiana and Texas, its support became crucial for candidates hoping to win election to state and local offices.

**Decline** At first, the majority of native-born white Americans appeared to tolerate the Klan because it vowed to uphold high standards of Christian morality and drive out bootleggers, gamblers, and adulterers. Beginning in 1923, however, investigative reports in the northern press revealed that fraud and corruption in the KKK were rife. In 1925, the leader of Indiana’s Klan, Grand Dragon David Stephenson, was convicted of murder. After that, the Klan’s influence and membership declined rapidly. Nevertheless, it continued to exist and advocate for white supremacy into the 1960s.

## **Foreign Policy: The Fiction of Isolation**

During the 1920s, widespread disillusionment with World War I, Europe’s post-war problems, and communism in the Soviet Union (as Russia was renamed) made Americans fearful of being pulled into another foreign war. But despite the U.S. refusal to join the League of Nations, the makers of U.S. foreign policy did not retreat to the isolationism of the Gilded Age. Instead, they actively pursued arrangements in foreign affairs that would advance American interests while also maintaining world peace.

### ***Disarmament and Peace***

The Republican presidents of the 1920s tried to promote peace and also scale back expenditures on defense by arranging treaties of disarmament. The most successful disarmament conference—and the greatest achievement of Harding’s presidency—was held in Washington, D.C., in 1921.

**Washington Conference (1921)** Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes initiated talks on naval disarmament, hoping to stabilize the size of the U.S. Navy relative to that of other powers and to resolve conflicts in the Pacific.

Representatives to the Washington Conference came from Belgium, China, France, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, and Portugal. Three agreements to relieve tensions resulted from the discussions:

**1. Five-Power Treaty** Nations with the five largest navies agreed to maintain the following ratio with respect to their largest warships, or battleships: the United States, 5; Great Britain, 5; Japan, 3; France, 1.67; Italy, 1.67. Britain and the United States also agreed not to fortify their possessions in the Pacific, while no limit was placed on the Japanese.

**2. Four-Power Treaty** The United States, France, Great Britain, and Japan agreed to respect one another's territory in the Pacific.

**3. Nine-Power Treaty** All nine nations represented at the conference agreed to respect the Open Door policy by guaranteeing the territorial integrity of China.

**Kellogg-Briand Pact** American women took the lead in a peace movement committed to outlawing future wars. (For her efforts on behalf of peace, Jane Addams won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931.) The movement achieved its greatest success in 1928 with the signing of a treaty arranged by U.S. Secretary of State Frank Kellogg and the French foreign minister Aristide Briand. Almost all the nations of the world signed the Kellogg-Briand Pact, which renounced the aggressive use of force to achieve national ends. This international agreement would prove ineffective, however, since it (1) permitted defensive wars and (2) failed to provide for taking action against violators of the agreement.

### ***Business and Diplomacy***

Republican presidents believed that probusiness policies brought prosperity at home and at the same time strengthened U.S. dealings with other nations. Thus, they found it natural to use diplomacy to advance American business interests in Latin America and other regions.

**Latin America** Mexico's constitution of 1917 mandated government ownership of all that nation's mineral and oil resources. U.S. investors in Mexico feared that the government might confiscate their properties. A peaceful resolution protecting their interests was negotiated by Coolidge's ambassador to Mexico, Dwight Morrow, in 1927.

Elsewhere in Latin America, Coolidge kept U.S. troops in Nicaragua and Haiti but withdrew them from the Dominican Republic in 1924. While American military influence declined, American economic impact increased. U.S. investments in Latin America doubled between 1919 and 1929.

**Middle East** The oil reserves in the Middle East were becoming recognized as a major source of potential wealth. British oil companies had a large head start in the region, but Secretary of State Hughes succeeded in winning oil-drilling rights for U.S. companies.

**Tariffs** Passed by Congress in 1922, the Fordney-McCumber Tariff increased the duties on foreign manufactured goods by 25 percent. It was protective of U.S. business interests in the short run but destructive in the long run. Because of it, European nations were slow to recover from the war and had difficulty repaying their war debts to the United States. They responded to the high U.S. tariffs by imposing tariffs of their own on American imports. Ultimately, these obstacles to international trade weakened the world economy and were one reason for the Great Depression of the 1930s.

### ***War Debts and Reparations***

Before World War I, the United States had been a debtor nation, importing more than it exported. It emerged from the war as a creditor nation, having lent more than \$10 billion to the Allies. Harding and Coolidge insisted that Britain and France pay back every penny of their war debts. The British and French objected. They pointed out that they suffered much worse losses than the Americans during the war, that the borrowed money had been spent in the United States, and that high U.S. tariffs made it more difficult to pay the debts. To be sure, the Treaty of Versailles required Germany to pay \$30 billion in reparations to the Allies. But how were Britain and France to collect this money? Germany was bankrupt, had soaring inflation, and was near anarchy.

**Dawes Plan** Charles Dawes, an American banker who would become Coolidge's vice president, negotiated a compromise that was accepted by all sides in 1924. The Dawes Plan established a cycle of payments flowing from the United States to Germany and from Germany to the Allies. U.S. banks would lend Germany huge sums to rebuild its economy and pay reparations to Britain and France. In turn, Britain and France would use the reparations money to pay their war debts to the United States. This cycle helped to ease financial problems on both sides of the Atlantic. After the stock market crash of 1929, however, U.S. bank loans stopped and the prosperity propped up by the Dawes Plan collapsed.

**Legacy** Ultimately, Finland was the only nation to repay its war debts in full. The unpaid debts of the other nations left bad feelings on all sides. Many Europeans resented what they saw as American greed, while Americans saw new reasons to follow an isolationist path in the 1930s.



## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES: HOW CONSERVATIVE WERE THE 1920S?

By the 1930s, the 1920s seemed to be a unique decade—a period of social fun and business boom wedged between two calamities, World War I and the Great Depression. In his popular history *Only Yesterday* (1931), Frederick Lewis Allen gave support to the ideas of the leading social critics of the 1920s, H. L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis. He portrayed the period as one of narrow-minded materialism in which the middle class abandoned Progressive reforms, embraced conservative Republican policies, and either supported or condoned nativism, racism, and fundamentalism. Historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. generally accepted this view of the twenties, seeing it within the framework of his cyclical view of history. He argued that the politics of the decade represented a conservative reaction to the liberal reforms of the Progressive era.

Revisionist historians of the 1950s questioned whether the 1920s truly broke with the Progressive past. They argued that the period continued earlier protest movements such as Populism. Richard Hofstadter and other “consensus” writers distinguished between two middle classes: a new urban group with modern values and an older middle class with traditional values. William Leuchtenburg in *The Perils of Prosperity* (1958) portrayed the traditionalists as threatened by cultural pluralism and modern ideas.

A third assessment took a more positive view of the traditionalists. Some historians, including Alan Brinkley in the 1980s, argued that people in the “old” middle class, including fundamentalists and nativists, were understandably trying to protect their own economic and social self-interests. At the same time, they were seeking to preserve individual and community freedom in face of the modernist movement toward centralized bureaucratic and national control. This effort to maintain local control and independence from big government is seen as continuing from the 1920s to the present.

Given the extreme and deeply felt differences between the modernists and the traditionalists, some historians have wondered why there was not more conflict in the twenties. One explanation, which has grown from the 1960s to the present, is the importance of the consumer culture. Historians, including Stuart Ewen and Roland Marchand, have in diverse ways shown how the influence of growing materialism and prosperity caused people to accept increased bureaucratic control of their lives. They place varying emphasis on the ways in which material affluence, consumer goods, advertising, and a homogeneous mass culture redefined the social and political values of the United States. Though these historians agree on the importance of consumer culture, they differ greatly on its positive and negative influences. With their emphasis on materialism and consumption, historians have returned to the assessments of Mencken, Lewis, and Allen.

## KEY NAMES, EVENTS, AND TERMS

### 1920s Politics (POL)

Warren Harding  
Charles Evans Hughes  
Andrew Mellon  
Harry Daugherty  
Albert Fall  
Teapot Dome  
Fordney-McCumber  
Tariff Act  
Bureau of the Budget  
Calvin Coolidge  
Herbert Hoover  
Alfred E. Smith

### 1920s Economy (WXT)

business prosperity  
standard of living  
scientific management  
Henry Ford  
assembly line  
open shop  
welfare capitalism  
consumerism  
electric appliances  
impact of the  
automobile

### A Modern Culture (CUL)

jazz age  
radio, phonographs  
national networks  
Hollywood  
movie stars  
movie palaces  
popular heroes  
role of women  
Sigmund Freud  
morals and fashions  
Margaret Sanger  
high school education  
consumer culture  
Frederick Lewis Allen  
*Only Yesterday*

### Literature and the Arts (CUL)

Gertrude Stein  
Lost Generation  
F. Scott Fitzgerald  
Ernest Hemingway  
Sinclair Lewis  
Ezra Pound  
T. S. Eliot  
Eugene O'Neill  
industrial design  
Art Deco  
Edward Hopper  
regional artists  
Grant Wood  
George Gershwin

### African American Identity (CUL, ID)

northern migration  
Harlem Renaissance  
Countee Cullen  
Langston Hughes  
James Weldon Johnson  
Claude McKay  
Duke Ellington  
Louis Armstrong  
Bessie Smith  
Paul Robeson  
Back to Africa  
movement  
Marcus Garvey  
black pride

### Conflict over Religion (CUL)

modernism  
fundamentalism  
revivalists: Billy  
Sunday, Aimee  
Semple McPherson  
Scopes trial  
Clarence Darrow

### Conflict over Prohibition (CUL, POL)

Volstead Act (1919)  
rural vs. urban  
organized crime  
Al Capone  
21st Amendment

### Conflict over Immigration (CUL, POL, ID)

quota laws of 1921  
and 1924  
Sacco and Vanzetti  
Case  
Ku Klux Klan  
*Birth of a Nation*  
blacks, Catholics and  
Jews  
foreigners and  
Communists

### Foreign Policy (WOR)

disarmament  
Washington Conference (1921)  
Five-Power Naval  
treaty  
Nine-Power China  
Treaty  
Kellogg-Briand Treaty  
(1928)  
Latin America policy  
war debts  
reparations  
Dawes Plan (1924)