

Boom Times: The 1920s

After the Great War

After WW1 was over, Americans were ready to concentrate on **making money** and **enjoying themselves**.

Reasons for the Prosperity of the 1920s

1. The Rise of the Automobile:

Probably the single most important factor in creating prosperity was that the automobile came into **widespread use**.

In the 1920s, ownership of automobiles jumped from **7 million to 23 million**. The enormous growth in automobile ownership greatly **affected many aspects of American life**.

Automobile production **helped stimulate other industries**, since cars required vast amounts of **steel, glass and rubber**.

By 1929, one out of every nine workers in America was employed in an auto-related industry.

Reasons cont.

2. **The Development of Other Industries:**

The widespread use of electricity led to the development of other new products, such as

the **vacuum cleaner, refrigerator and toaster.**

The **radio and motion picture industries** became big businesses.

Commercial air travel began.

These new industries **created jobs, produced large profits and changed the way Americans lived.**

Reasons cont.

3. More Efficient Production Techniques:

During WW1, improved production techniques were developed. These improvements were soon applied to manufacturing and industrial production.

The **assembly line** (where workers stayed in one place doing the same job, as products came to them on a conveyor belt, the use of **interchangeable standardized parts** and other labor-saving devices made **American industry more efficient and productive**).

Not All Shared in the Prosperity

Although these were prosperous times for many, some groups did not share in the good times of the 1920s. **Farmers, African Americans, Native Americans and workers in some industries** suffered from **declining incomes and unemployment.**

The Republican Presidents of the 1920s

Part of the reason for the business boom of the 1920s can be found in the **policies of the government**.

From 1920 to 1932, **three Republicans (Harding, Coolidge and Hoover)** serves as Presidents of the U.S.

In general, these presidents followed **policies favorable to American business**.

Each believed in **laissez-faire** – the principle that the government should interfere as little as possible in the affairs of business.



Republican Pro-Business Policies: 1920-1932

High Tariffs. Congress raised tariffs (taxes on goods imported into the U.S.), to protect American manufacturers. This discouraged foreigners from selling their goods here.

Lax Enforcement. Existing laws against monopolies were not enforced. As a result, big businesses grew larger and wealthier.

Tax Cuts. Taxes on big business and the wealthy were reduced. As a result of this, middle and lower class people had to pay more taxes.

Warren Harding as President (1921-1923)



Elected president in 1920;

He captured the national spirit with his call for a **“return to normalcy”** – bringing America back to a time when the **government was less involved** with foreign affairs and business.

Under Harding, the U.S. **refused to join the League of Nations**, placed **limits on immigration** and **raised tariffs**.

His administration became famous for **corruption in the Teapot Dome Scandal**, in which government officials were bribed by businessmen.

Calvin Coolidge as President (1923-1929)



When Harding died of a heart attack in 1923, Vice President Calvin Coolidge became President. He came to symbolize **old-fashioned values like honesty and thrift.**

Continuing Harding's policies, Coolidge's motto was: "**The business of America is business.**" During Coolidge's presidency, business expanded. Because he received much of the credit for the nation's prosperity, Coolidge was **re-elected president** in 1924.

He was still **very popular** in 1928, when he decided not to seek another term.

Herbert Hoover as President (1929-1933)



In campaigning for the Presidency in 1928, **Herbert Hoover** predicted that poverty in the United States would soon end.

He believed that the nation's **prosperity was the result of the American spirit of "rugged individualism."**

Hoover believed that **people did best when they were given a free education and individual opportunity, and when they had the will to succeed.**

Like Harding and Coolidge, Hoover believed that **too much government interference in business could threaten future progress and prosperity.** These ideas seemed reasonable in 1928, but they left Hoover badly prepared for the crisis he would soon face after his election as President.

Cultural Values in Conflict

The way Americans lived and what they believed in was strongly affected by new inventions such as automobiles and radios, by new discoveries in science, and by a greater awareness of the existence of other nations after World War One.

As a result, the 1920s saw the appearance of **new and conflicting values.**

Some groups – such as **women, the young and African-Americans** - felt a **new sense of power and freedom.**

African-Americans and women especially **benefited from new job opportunities created by industrialization and the war.**

Cultural Values in Conflict

1. Women.

The involvement of women on the **Home Front during WW1** and the passage of the **19th Amendment** gave them a **greater sense of equality**. New appliances reduced housework, allowing **more women to go to college or work outside the home**.

This new equality and economic independence brought about **changes in manners and morals, such as smoking and drinking in public**. Women wore **shorter skirts and had their hair cut short**. This style earned some women the nickname **“flappers.”**



Cultural Values in Conflict

2. Youth and the Lost Generation

Young adults were responsible for **fads like flagpole sitting and marathon dancing**. A group of **writers** known as the “**Lost Generation**” rejected the desire for material wealth and expressed disillusionment and the loss of ideals. Two of its leading writers were



Hemingway and
Fitzgerald



Harlem Renaissance



3. The Harlem Renaissance.

African-Americans began **migrating to northern cities**, where they developed a **new pride in their culture** and asserted **new demands for equality**. **African-American writers** such as **Langston Hughes** expressed these new views in what became known as the Harlem Renaissance.

Jazz music, with its roots in black spirituals, flourished in **Harlem(NYC)**. The 1920s is often called **the Jazz Age**, reflecting the importance of African-American music. Among the more important musicians were **Louis Armstrong** and **Duke Ellington**.



Cultural Values in Conflict cont.

4. Popular New Heroes.

More leisure time gave people greater opportunity for entertainment. They turned to spectator sports, radio, movies and magazines. This had a great impact on popular culture and values. New popular heroes emerged, such as boxer Jack Dempsey and the movie star Rudolph Valentino.



Conflict Between Traditional and Modern Values

Some people were upset by these changes. Many Americans felt **traditional values were being threatened** by the growth of **cities and the development of new values**.

- 1. Prohibition.** Some people saw liquor as the cause of poverty, crime and the breakdown of families. In 1919, the states approved the 18th Amendment, banning the manufacture or sale of alcoholic drinks. However, by 1933 it was obvious that Prohibition had failed. The law was unpopular, and a large part of the population refused to accept the ban on alcoholic drinks. The ban was lifted with the passage of the 21st Amendment, demonstrating that unpopular laws are often unenforceable.
- 2. The Scopes “Monkey Trial.”** In 1925, John Scopes, a biology teacher in Tennessee, was brought to trial for teaching the theory of evolution. State law required that the theory of Creation, as described in the Bible, should be taught instead of the modern theory of evolution. Scopes was convicted and forced to pay a small fine. The trial spotlighted the conflict between science and fundamentalist traditional religious teaching.

Threats to Civil Liberties

The development of new values and new ideas sometimes led to unfortunate **reactions**. The 1920s saw **new attacks on some people's basic rights**. Some Americans **feared that foreign ideas and problems would "infect" the United States**. Newly arriving **immigrants and racial and religious minorities** became special **targets of hostility**.

Threats to Civil Liberties cont.

A. Rise of Nativism:

1. One reason for **attacks on foreign immigrants** was the **Red Scare** – a fear that communists would take over the United States as they did in Russia in 1917. **Thousands of people who were thought to be communist supporters were arrested in 1919-1920.**
2. Two Italian immigrants, **Sacco and Vanzetti**, were **executed for murder in 1927 after being convicted with little evidence.** Many believed Sacco and Vanzetti were executed **more for their political beliefs than for any crime they had committed.** Their trial, as well as the **Red Scare**, **contributed greatly to the rise of nativism**(a distrust and dislike of foreigners). **New laws were passed restricting immigration.**

Threats to Civil Liberties cont.

B. Rise of Racism

Racism (a belief that one's race is superior to other races) also **increased**. **Many Americans felt threatened** by the changes of the 1920s. They **distrusted those who looked, spoke or worshipped differently**. **African-Americans** became the victims of **racial prejudice** and **mob-lynchings**. The **Ku Klux Klan**, which had been quiet for many years, became **active again during the 1920s**. Its **influence spread** rapidly throughout the Midwest and the South. The Klan, declaring that **African-Americans, Catholics, Jews and immigrants were inferior**, gained significant public support.

A Return to Isolationism

In WW 1, ten million people were killed and twenty million were wounded. Many of these were Americans. By 1920, **Americans felt let down by the results of the war.** Although the U.S. had been on the winning side, the world was not “safe for democracy,” as President Wilson had promised. In the 1920s, the **US returned to its traditional policy of isolationism**-keeping away from involvement in Europe’s troubles. Americans **focused more on events at home**, feeling safe beyond the oceans that separated them from Europe and Asia. This was one major reason why the U.S. never joined the League of Nations.

U.S. Isolationism After WW1

- The U.S. **refused to join the League of Nations**
- A number of Americans became pacifists, **renouncing participation in any war.**
- The U.S. **insisted on collecting war debts** from its former allies, Britain and France.
- The U.S. passed **high tariffs against European goods** and also **restricted European immigration.**