

Chapter 32- American Life in the “Roaring Twenties,”

1919-1929

Seeing Red

- Americans turned inward in the 1920s shunning diplomatic commitments to foreign countries, denouncing “radical” foreign ideas, condemned “un-American” lifestyles, and clanged shut the immigration gates against foreign peoples—boom of the golden twenties showered benefits
- New technologies, new consumer products, and newer forms of leisure made the twenties roar
- Hysterical fears of red Russia followed the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 (Communist party)
- Tensions were heightened by an epidemic of strikes that convulsed the Republic at war’s end
- Americans jumped to the conclusion that the Bolsheviks fomented labor troubles
- The big “red scare” of 1919=19210 resulted in a nationwide crusade against left-wingers whose Americanism was suspect—Mitchell Palmer, the Fighting Quaker, “seeing red”
- Alien radicals deported on *Buford* to Russia, Wall Street bomb killing 38 people
- A number of State legislatures passed criminal syndicalism laws—made unlawful the mere advocacy of violence to secure social change—mere words were not criminal deeds
- The red scare was a godsend to conservative businesspeople—broke backs of unions
- Antiredism and Antiforeignism were reflected in notorious case regarded as a “judicial lynching”
- Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were convicted of two murders and the jury/judge were prejudiced in some degree against the defendants because they were Italians, atheists, anarchists, and draft dodgers—liberals/radicals rallied to their defense but they were electrocuted (martyrs)

Hooded Hoodlums of the KKK

- A new Ku Klux Klan, spawned by the postwar reaction, spread fearsomely in the early 1920s
- It was antiforeign, anti-Catholic, anti-black, anti-Jewish, anti-pacifist, anti-Communist, anti-internationalist, antievolution, anti-bootlegger, antigambling, anti-adultery, and anti-birth control
- It was pro-Anglo-Saxon, pro-“native” American, and pro-Protestant (ultraconservative uprising)
- The Klan spread rapidly in the Midwest and the South—peak in the mid-1920s with 5 million

- Capitalized on American love of adventure, camaraderie, and secret ritual—“conclaves,” huge flay-waving parades, and the chief warning was the blazing cross (reign of hooded horror)
- The movement collapsed in the late 1920s with a congressional investigation—initiation fee

Stemming the Foreign Flood

- Immigrants began to flood into the country as peace settled in the 1920s; some 800,000 stepped ashore in 1920-1921, about two-thirds of them from southern and eastern Europe
- Congress plugged the breach with the Emergency Quota Act of 1921—newcomers from Europe were restricted in any given year to a definite quota (set at 3 percent of the people of their nationality who had been living in the U.S. in 1910—favorable to southern/eastern Europeans)
- The Immigration Act of 1924 replaced the stopgap legislation of 1921—quotes were cut from 3% to 2% and the national-origins base was shifted from the census of 1910 to that of 1890
- Comparatively few southern Europeans had arrived there and the door was shut absolutely against Japanese immigrants (hate rallies in Japan); exempt were Canadians and Latin Americans
- The quote system was a departure in American policy—immigration dwindled to a mere trickle
- The Immigration Act of 1924 marked the end of virtually unrestricted immigration (by 1931)
- America was patchwork of ethnic communities separated (language, religion, customs)
- Efforts to organize labor unions repeatedly founded on the rocks of ethnic differences; ethnic variety thus undermined class and political solidarity—did not have a common language

The Prohibition “Experiment”

- The last pillar of the progressive reform was prohibition, loudly supported by crusading churches and by many women—Eighteenth Amendment in 1919 as implemented by the Volstead Act
- The legal abolition of alcohol was especially popular in the South and West (Southern whites wanted to keep blacks in place and West led an attack on all vices associated with saloons)
- Prohibitionists overlooked the tenacious American tradition of strong drink and of weak control by the central government, especially over private lives—majority of people were hostile to it
- Slaking thirst became a cherished personal liberty; frustrated soldiers complained about prohibition; workers bemoaned their loss of cheap beer; flaming youth of the jazz age drank
- State/federal agencies were understaffed and snoopers, susceptible to bribery, were underpaid
- Both men and women drank hard liquor in staggering volume—cases leaked from Canada

- “Home brew” and “bathtub gin” became popular but some produced blindness, even death
- Bank savings increased, absenteeism in industry decreased, less alcohol was consumed than in the days before prohibition, though strong drink continued to be available

The Golden Age of Gansterism

- Lush profits of illegal alcohol led to bribery of the police; violent wars broke out in the big cities between rival gangs who sought to corner the rich market in booze (bootlegging competitors)
- Arrests were few and convictions were even fewer—gangsters covered for one another (code)
- Chicago was by far the most spectacular example of lawlessness; “Scarface” Al Capone, a grasping and murderous booze distributor, began six years of gang warfare netting millions
- Capone could not be convicted of the St. Valentine’s Day massacre of 1929 but served ten years in jail for income-tax evasion—gangsters moved to prostitution, gambling, and narcotics
- Honest merchants were forced to pay protection money—organized crime became big business
- The kidnapping for ransom and eventual murder the son of aviator-hero Charles A. Lindbergh—Congress passed the Lindbergh Law in 1932, making interstate abduction in certain circumstances a death-penalty offense (annual take of underworld was \$12 to \$18 billion)

Monkey Business in Tennessee

- Education made giant strides in the 1920s; more and more states were requiring young people to remain in school until age sixteen or eighteen, or until graduation from high school (one in four)
- Professor John Dewey made the most revolutionary contribution to educational theory
- He set forth the principles of “learning by doing” that formed the foundation of so-called progressive education—he believed that the workbench was essential (“education for life”)
- A massive public-health program, launched by the Rockefeller Foundation in the South in 1909, had virtually wiped out the affliction of hookworm by the 1920s—better nutrition and health care
- Science and progressive education were subjected to unfriendly fire from the Fundamentalists
- They charged Darwinian evolution was destroying faith in God and the Bible (moral downfall)
- Numerous attempts were made to secure laws prohibiting the teaching of evolution in the public schools and three southern states adopted such shackling measures (included Tennessee)
- The “Monkey Trial” in Tennessee involved a high school teacher, John T. Scopes, who was indicted for teaching evolution—nationally known attorneys defended Scopes

- William Jennings Bryan, a Fundamentalist, joined the prosecuted and soon died of a stroke
- Clash between theology and biology proved inconclusive (Scopes found guilty and fined \$100)
- The Fundamentalists at best won only a hollow victory—the Bible still remained a vibrant force

The Mass-Consumption Economy

- Prosperity put much of the “roar” into the twenties; the economy advanced for seven years
- Both the recent war and Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon’s tax policies favored the rapid expansion of capital investment—ingenious machines greatly increased the productivity
- Assembly-line production reached perfection in Henry Ford’s plant (automobile in 10 seconds)
- Supplying electrical power for the new machines became a giant business in the 1920s
- Above all, the automobile now became the carriage of the common citizen (30 million in 1930)
- American manufacturers seemed to have mastered the problems of production; responding to this need, a new arm of American commerce emerged, advertising (persuasion, ploy, seduction)
- Founder of this new “profession” was Bruce Barton, who wrote *The Man Nobody Knows* (Jesus)
- Sports became big business in the consumer economy of the 1920s—sports icons were far better known than most statesmen (Babe Ruth, the “Sultan of Swat” and Jack Dempsey, boxing)
- Buying on credit was another innovative feature of the postwar economy (people in debt)

Putting America on Rubber Tires

- A new industrial revolution slipped into high gear in America in the 1920s
- Of all inventions of era, the automobile cut the deepest mark (assembly-line, mass production)
- Americans adapted rather than invented gasoline engine and a few daring American inventors and promoters, including Henry Ford and Ransom Olds were developing the automotive industry
- An enormous industry sprang into being, as Detroit became the motorcar capital of America, which owed much to the stopwatch efficiency techniques of Frederick W. Taylor (inventor)
- Best known of new crop of industrial wizards was Henry Fords who put America on rubber tires
- Ford’s Model T was cheap, rugged, and reasonably reliable, though rough and clattering
- So economical were his methods that in the mid-1920s he was selling the Ford roadster for \$260
- Fords were phenomenal and by 1930 the total had risen to 20 million from 0.5 million in 1914

The Advent of the Gasoline Age

- A gigantic new industry emerged, dependent on steel but displacing steel from its kingpin role
- Employing about 6 million people by 1930, it was a major wellspring of the nation's prosperity
- New industries boomed lustily; the petroleum business experienced an explosive development—states expanded wondrously and the wilderness frontier became an industrial frontier
- Speedy marketing of perishable foodstuffs was accelerated; a new prosperity enriched outlying farms, countless new roads ribboned out to meet demand of the American motorist
- Zooming motorcars were agents of social change; they changed from a luxury to a necessity
- Leisure hours could not be spent more pleasurably and women were further freed from men
- Autobuses made possible the consolidation of schools and to some extent of churches and the sprawling suburbs spread out still farther from the urban core—nation of commuters
- The demon machine exacted a terrible toll by catering to the American mania for speed
- The morals of flaming youth sagged corresponding—what might young people get up in a car?
- The automobile contributed notable to improved air and environmental quality despite its later notoriety as a polluter—automobile brought convenience, pleasure, and excitement

Humans Develop Wings

- The Wright brothers, Orville and Wilbur, performed “the miracle at Kitty Hawk,” North Carolina
- On December 17, 1903, Orville Wright took aloft a feebly engined plane that stayed airborne for 12 seconds and two obscure bicycle repairmen launched the air age
- The public was made increasingly air-minded by unsung heroes and airplanes were used with marked success for various purposes during the Great War of 1914-1918
- In 1927 Charles A. Lindbergh electrified the world by the first solo west-to-east conquest of the Atlantic—Lindbergh's exploit swept Americans off their feet (genuine hero?)
- Lindbergh's achievement gave a strong boost to the infant aviation industry
- The airship provided the restless American spirit with yet another dimension—by the 1930s and 1940s, travel by air on regularly schedule airlines was significantly safer than on the highways
- The floundering railroad received another setback through the loss of passengers and mail

The Radio Revolution

- Guglielmo Marconi, invented wireless telegraphy in the 1890s and his brainchild was used for long-range communication during World War I—next came the voice-carrying radio
- A red-letter day was posted in November 1920 when a Pittsburgh radio station broadcasted news
- Later miracles were achieved in transatlantic wireless phonographs, radiotelephones, and television—by the late 1920s, technological improvements made long-distance broadcasting possible, and national commercial networks drowned out much local programming
- The radio was drawing Americans back to the home (radio knitted the nation together)
- Educationally and culturally, the radio made a significant contribution—sports were further stimulated and politicians were now able to deliver their speeches over the radio (music)

Hollywood Filmland Fantasies

- The flickering movie was the fruit of numerous geniuses, including Thomas A. Edison
- It was available in the 1890s in naughty peep-show penny arcades but the real birth of the movie came in 1903 when the first story sequence reached the screen (The Great Train Robbery)
- Hollywood, in southern California, quickly became the movie capital of the world; an outraged public forced the screen magnates to set up their own rigorous code of censorship (propaganda)
- A new era began in 1927 with the success of the first “talkie”—*The Jazz Singer*
- Movies eclipsed all other new forms of amusement in the phenomenal growth of popularity
- Much of the rich diversity of the immigrants’ Old Country cultures was lost, but the standardization of tastes and of language hastened entry into the American mainstream

The Dynamic Decade

- The census of 1920 revealed that for the first time most Americans no longer lived in the countryside but in urban areas; women continued to find opportunities for employment in cities
- An organized birth-control movement, led by feminist Margaret Sanger, openly championed the use of contraceptives and Alice Paul’s National Woman’s party campaigned for Equal Rights
- Fundamentalist champions of the religion lost ground to the Modernists (God was a “good guy”)

- Advertisers exploited sexual allure to sell everything from soap to car tires—maidens now proclaimed their new freedom as “flappers” in bobbed tresses and dresses (sex o’ clock)
- Adventuresome females shocked their elders when they sported the new one-piece bathing suits
- Justification for this new sexual frankness could be found in the translated writings of Dr. Sigmund Freud who argued that sexual repression was responsible for a variety of illnesses
- If the flapper was the goddess of the “era of wonderful nonsense,” jazz was its sacred music
- Jazz moved up from New Orleans along with the migrating blacks during World War I
- A new racial pride blossomed in the northern black communities that burgeoned during/after war
- Harlem in New York City was one of the largest black communities in the world (Langston Hughes, Marcus Garvey: United Negro Improvement Association to promote resettlement back)
- The race pride that Garvey inspired among the 4 million blacks who were UNIA followers at the movement’s height helped newcomers to northern cities gain self-confidence and self-reliance

Cultural Liberation

- By the dawn of the 1920s, most of the custodians of an aging genteel literary culture had died
- In the decade after the war, a generation of writers burst upon the scene; many of them hailed from ethnic and regional backgrounds different from that of the Protestant New Englanders who traditionally had dominated American cultural life (exhibited the energy of youth, the ambition of excluded outsiders, and in many cases the smoldering resentment of ideals betrayed)
- A patron saint of many young authors was H.L. Mencken (*American Mercury* assailing marriage, patriotism, democracy, prohibition, Rotarians, the middle-class, and Puritanism)
- The war had jolted many young writers out of their complacency about traditional values and literary standards—new codes of morals and understanding, as well as fresh forms of expression
- F. Scott Fitzgerald published *This Side of Paradise* in 1920—aspiring flappers and ardent wooers, many of whom affected an air of bewildered abandon toward life, eagerly devoured it
- Catching the spirit of the hour, Fitzgerald this melancholy success with *The Great Gatsby*, a brilliant evocation of the glamour and cruelty of an achievement-oriented society
- Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* dealt with murder of girl by her young lover

- Ernest Hemingway was among the writers most affected by the war: in *The Sun Also Rises*, he told of a spiritually number American expatriates in Europe; in *A Farewell to Arms*, he crafted one of the finest novels in any language about the war experience
- Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* probed the American small-town life as well as Sinclair Lewis whose *Main Street* was of a woman's war against provincialism and *Babbitt* (materialism)
- William Faulkner penned a bitter war novel, *Soldier's Pay*, and powerful books like *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* that peeled back layers of time and consciousness
- Nowhere was innovation in the 1920s more obvious than in poetry
- Ezra Pound strongly influenced T.S. Eliot, who in "The Waste Land" produced one of the most impenetrable but influential poems of the century; Robert Frost and e.e. cummings (unorthodox)
- On the stage, Eugene O'Neill laid bar Freudian notions of sex in the *Strange Interlude*
- Architecture also married itself to the new materialism and functionalism—architects like Frank Lloyd Wright were advancing theory that buildings should grow from their sites and not imitate

Wall Street's Big Bull Market

- Signals abounded that economic joyride might end in a crash—hundreds of banks failed annually
- Florida boom that culminated in 1925 involved the selling of numerous underwater lots at preposterous sums—wildcat scheme collapse when peninsula was devastated by a hurricane
- The stock exchange provided even greater sensations—speculation ran wild and an orgy of boom-or-bust trading pushed the market up to dizzy peaks ("Be a bull on America")
- As the 1920s lurched forward, everybody seemed to be buying stocks "on margin"—with a small down payment (rags-to-riches Americans worshiped at the altar of the ticker-tape machine)
- Little was done by Washington to curb money-mad speculators (national debt sky-rocketed)
- A businesslike move toward economic sanity was made in 1921, with the creation of the Bureau of the Budget—assist president in preparing careful estimates of receipts and expenditures for submission to Congress as the annual budget (prevent haphazardly extravagant appropriations)
- The burdensome taxes inherited from the war were distasteful to the Secretary of the Treasury Mellon—their theory was that such high levies forced the rich to invest in tax-exempt securities rather than in the factories that provided prosperous payrolls (high taxes discouraged business and also brought a smaller net return to the Treasury than moderate taxes)

- Mellon helped engineer a series of tax reductions from 1921 to 1926 and Congress followed by repealing excess-profits tax, abolishing gift tax, and reducing excise taxes, surtax, income tax, and estate taxes (Mellon's spare-the-rich policies shifted tax burden to middle-income groups)
- True he reduced the national debt by \$10 billion (to \$16 billion) but he was accused of indirectly encouraging the bull market—single-mindedly probusiness regime that dominated political scene