

## **AN AMERICAN STORY**

**BORN IN 1863 ON A FARM IN DEARBORN, MICHIGAN, HENRY FORD at sixteen fled rural life for Detroit, where he became a journeyman machinist. In 1893, he put together one of the first successful gasoline-driven carriages in the United States. In 1903, Ford gathered twelve workers in a 250-by-50-foot shed and created the Ford Motor Company. By 1920, he had already produced six million automobiles; by 1927, the figure reached fifteen million. In 1920, a Ford car cost \$845; in 1928, the price was less than \$300, within range of most of the country's skilled workingmen. Henry Ford put America on wheels, and in the eyes of most Americans he was an authentic American hero.**

**Ford's early cars were custom-made one at a time. By 1914, his cars were being built along a continuously moving assembly line. Workers bolted on parts brought to them by cranes and conveyor belts. In 1920, one car rolled off the Ford assembly line every minute; in 1925, one appeared every ten seconds. Ford made only one kind of car, the Model T, which became synonymous with mass production ([Map 23.1](#)).**

**When Ford began his rise, progressive critics condemned the industrial giants of the nineteenth century as “robber barons” who lived in luxury while reducing their workers to wage slaves. Ford, however, identified with the common folk and saw himself as the benefactor of average Americans. But like the age in which he lived, Ford was more complex and more contradictory than this simple image suggests.**

**A man of genius whose compelling vision of modern mass production led the way in the 1920s, Ford was also cranky, tightfisted, and mean-spirited. He hated Jews and Catholics, bankers and doctors, liquor and tobacco, and his money allowed him to act on his prejudices. His automobile plants made him a billionaire, but their regimented assembly lines reduced workers to near robots. On the cutting edge of modern technology, Ford nevertheless remained nostalgic about rural values. He sought to revive the past in Greenfield Village, where he relocated buildings from a bygone era, including his parents’ farmhouse. His museum contrasted sharply with the roaring Ford assembly plant at River Rouge. Yet Ford insisted that if Americans remained true to their farming past and managed to be modern and scientific at the same time, all would be well.**

**Tension between traditional values and modern conditions lay at the heart of the conflicted 1920s. For the first time, more Americans lived in urban than in rural areas, and cities seemed to harbor everything rural people opposed. While millions admired urban America's sophisticated new style and consumer products, others condemned postwar society for its loose morals and vulgar materialism. The Ku Klux Klan and other champions of an older America resorted to violence as well as words when they condemned the era's "new woman," "New Negro," and surging immigrant populations. Those who sought to dam the tide of change proposed prohibition, Protestantism, and patriotism.**

**The public, disillusioned with the outcome of World War I, turned away from the Christian moralism and idealism of the Progressive Era. In the 1920s, Ford and businessmen like him replaced political reformers such as Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson as the models of progress. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce crowed, "The American businessman is the most influential person in the nation." The fortunes of the era rose, then in 1929 crashed, according to the values and practices of the business community. When prosperity collapsed, the nation**

**entered the most serious economic depression of all time.**



# **How did big business shape the “New Era” of the 1920s?**

Once Woodrow Wilson left the White House, government activism and civic reform declined and private economic endeavor took on new energy. The rise of a freewheeling economy and a heightened sense of individualism caused Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover to declare that America had entered a “New Era,” one of many labels used to describe the complex 1920s.

Some terms focus on the decade’s high-spirited energy and cultural change: Roaring Twenties, Jazz Age, Flaming Youth. Others echo the rising importance of money — Dollar Decade, Golden Twenties — or reflect the sinister side of gangster profiteering — Lawless Decade. Still others emphasize the lonely confusion of the Lost Generation and the stress and anxiety of the Aspirin Age.

America in the twenties was many things, but President Calvin Coolidge got at an essential truth when he declared, “The business of America is business.” Politicians and diplomats proclaimed business the heart of American civilization as they promoted its products at home and abroad. Average men and women bought into the idea that

business and its wonderful products were what made America great, as they snatched up the flood of new consumer items American factories sent forth. Nothing caught Americans' fancy more powerfully than the automobile.

## A Business Government

Republicans controlled the White House from 1921 to 1933. The first of the three Republican presidents was Warren Gamaliel Harding, the Ohio senator who in his 1920 campaign called for a "return to normalcy," by which he meant the end of public crusades and a return to private pursuits. Harding appointed a few men of real merit to his cabinet. Herbert Hoover, for example, the former head of the wartime Food Administration, became secretary of commerce. But wealth and friendship also counted: Andrew Mellon, one of the richest men in America, became secretary of the treasury, and Harding handed out jobs to his friends, members of his old "Ohio gang." This curious combination of ability and favoritism made for an uneven administration.

When Harding was elected in 1920 (see [chapter 22, Map 22.6](#)), the unemployment rate hit 20 percent, the highest ever up to that point. The bankruptcy rate of farmers increased tenfold. Harding pushed measures to regain

national prosperity — high tariffs to protect American businesses, price supports for agriculture, and the dismantling of wartime government control over industry in favor of unregulated private business. “Never before, here or anywhere else,” the U.S. Chamber of Commerce said proudly, “has a government been so completely fused with business.”

Harding’s policies to boost American enterprise made him very popular, but ultimately his small-town friendliness and trusting ways did him in. Some of his friends in the Ohio gang were up to their necks in crime. Three of Harding’s appointees went to jail. Interior Secretary Albert Fall was convicted of accepting bribes of more than \$400,000 for leasing oil reserves on public land in Teapot Dome, Wyoming, and “**Teapot Dome**” became a synonym for political corruption.

On August 2, 1923, when Harding died from a heart attack, Vice President Calvin Coolidge became president. Coolidge, who once said that “the man who builds a factory builds a temple, the man who works there worships there,” continued and extended Harding’s policies of promoting business and limiting government. Secretary of the Treasury Andrew Mellon reduced government’s control of the economy and cut taxes for corporations and wealthy individuals. New rules for the Federal Trade Commission

severely restricted its power to regulate business. Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover hedged government authority by encouraging trade associations that ideally would keep business honest and efficient through voluntary cooperation.

Coolidge found an ally in the Supreme Court. For years, the Court had thwarted federal regulation of hours, wages, and working conditions on the grounds that such legislation was the proper concern of the states. In the 1920s, the Court found ways to limit even a state's ability to regulate business. It ruled against closed shops — businesses where only union members could be employed — while confirming the right of owners to form trade associations. In 1923, the Court declared unconstitutional the District of Columbia's minimum-wage law for women, asserting that the law interfered with the freedom of employer and employee to make labor contracts. The Court and the president attacked government intrusion in the free market, even when the prohibition of government regulation threatened the welfare of workers.

The election of 1924 confirmed the defeat of the progressive belief that the state should take a leading role in ensuring the general welfare. To oppose Coolidge, the Democrats nominated John W. Davis, a corporate lawyer whose conservative views differed little from Republican principles.

Only the Progressive Party and its presidential nominee, Senator Robert La Follette of Wisconsin, offered a genuine alternative. When La Follette championed labor unions, regulation of business, and protection of civil liberties, Republicans coined the slogan “Coolidge or Chaos.” Voters chose Coolidge in a landslide. Coolidge was right when he declared, “This is a business country, and it wants a business government.” What was true of the government’s relationship to business at home was also true abroad.

## Promoting Prosperity and Peace Abroad

After leading the Senate’s successful effort to block U.S. membership in the League of Nations, Henry Cabot Lodge boasted, “We have torn Wilsonism up by the roots.” But repudiation of Wilson’s internationalism and rejection of collective security through the League of Nations did not mean that the United States retreated into isolationism. The United States emerged from World War I with its economy intact and enjoyed a decade of stunning growth. New York replaced London as the center of world finance, and the United States became the world’s chief creditor. Trade with the world and continuing chaos in Europe made withdrawal impossible.

One of the Republicans' most ambitious foreign policy initiatives was the Washington Disarmament Conference, which convened in 1921 to establish a global balance of naval power. Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes shaped the [\*\*Five-Power Naval Treaty of 1922\*\*](#) committing Britain, France, Japan, Italy, and the United States to reductions of their navies. The treaty led to the scrapping of more than two million tons of warships, by far the world's greatest success in disarmament. By fostering international peace, Hughes also helped make the world a safer place for American trade.

A second major effort on behalf of world peace came in 1928, when Secretary of State Frank Kellogg joined French foreign minister Aristide Briand to produce the Kellogg-Briand pact. Nearly fifty nations signed the solemn pledge to renounce war and settle international disputes peacefully.

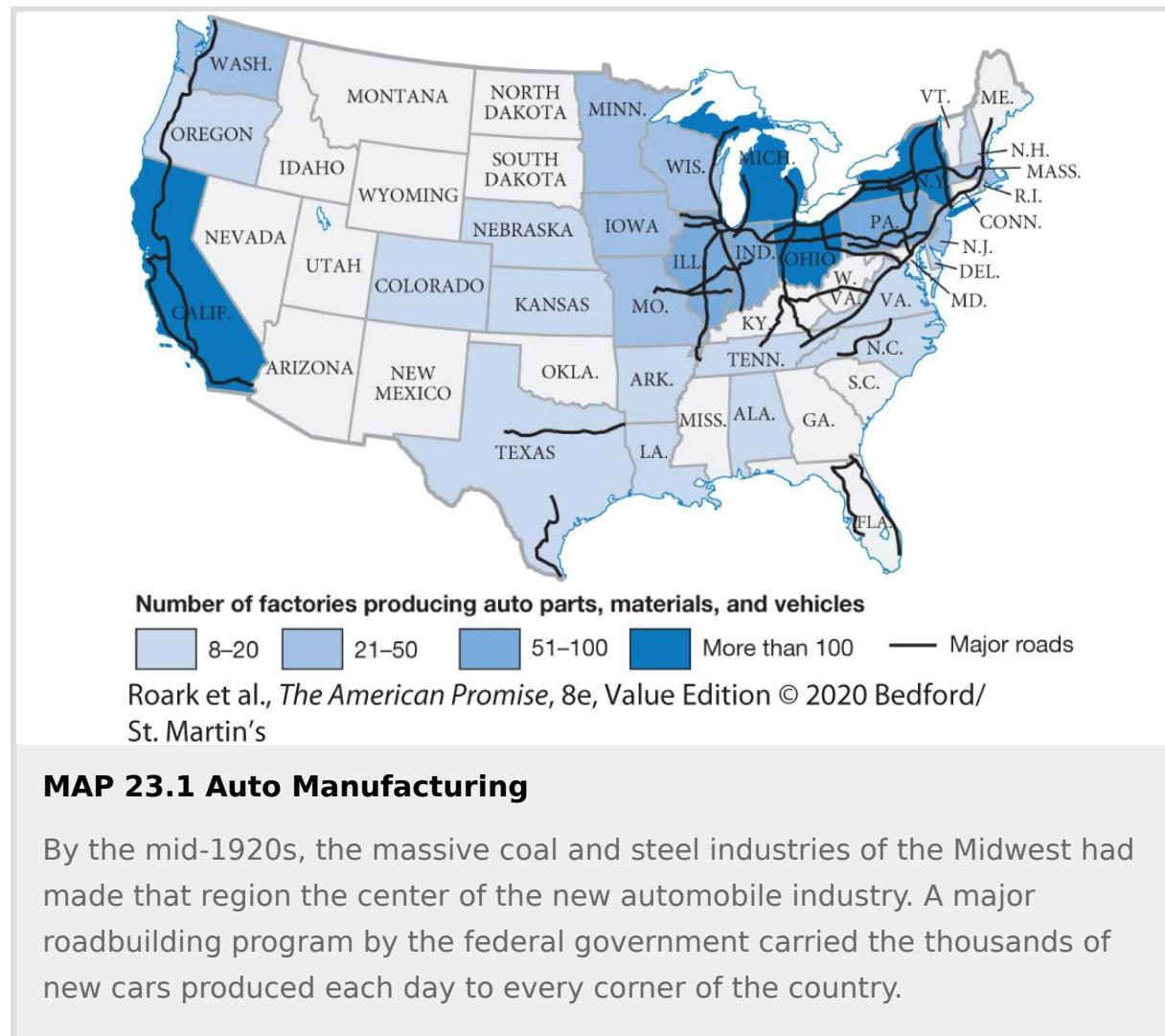
But Republican administrations preferred private-sector diplomacy to state action. With the blessing of the White House, a team of American financiers led by Charles Dawes swung into action when Germany suspended its war reparation payments in 1923. Impoverished, Germany was staggering under the massive bill of \$33 billion presented by the victorious Allies in the Versailles treaty. When Germany failed to meet its annual payment, France occupied Germany's industrial Ruhr Valley, creating the worst

international crisis since the war. In 1924, the Dawes Plan halved Germany's annual reparation payments, initiated fresh American loans to Germany, and caused the French to retreat from the Ruhr. Although the United States failed to join the League of Nations, it continued to exercise significant economic and diplomatic influence abroad. These Republican successes overseas helped fuel prosperity at home.

## **Automobiles, Mass Production, and Assembly-Line Progress**

The automobile industry emerged as the largest single manufacturing industry in the nation. Henry Ford shrewdly located his company in Detroit, knowing that key materials for his automobiles were manufactured in nearby states ([Map 23.1](#)). The heart of the American economy, the automobile industry not only employed hundreds of thousands of workers directly but also created whole new industries — filling stations, garages, fast-food restaurants, and “guest cottages” (motels). The need for tires, glass, steel, highways, oil, and refined gasoline for automobiles provided millions of related jobs. By 1929, one American in four found employment directly or indirectly in the automobile industry. “Give us our daily bread” was no longer

addressed to the Almighty, one commentator joked, but to Detroit.



### MAP 23.1 Auto Manufacturing

By the mid-1920s, the massive coal and steel industries of the Midwest had made that region the center of the new automobile industry. A major roadbuilding program by the federal government carried the thousands of new cars produced each day to every corner of the country.

#### Description

"The map highlights the states according to the number of factories producing auto parts, materials, and vehicles as follows:

8 to 20: New Hampshire; Rhode Island; Delaware; Virginia; North Carolina; Tennessee; Alabama; Arkansas; Louisiana; Nebraska; Kansas; Texas; Colorado; and Oregon.

21 to 50: Massachusetts; New Jersey; Wisconsin; Minnesota; Iowa; Missouri; and Washington.

51 to 100: Pennsylvania; Indiana; and Illinois.

More than 100: New York; Ohio; Michigan; and California.

The map also shows major roads connecting most of the northern states of Maine, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Virginia, Tennessee, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, and Wisconsin. Major roads were also in North Carolina, Florida, and Texas. In the west, major roads connect Washington, Oregon, and California."

Automobiles changed where people lived, what work they did, how they spent their leisure, even how they thought. Hundreds of small towns decayed because the automobile enabled rural people to skip them on their way to cities. In cities, streetcars began to disappear as workers moved to the suburbs and commuted to work along crowded highways. Nothing shaped modern America more than the automobile, and efficient mass production made the automobile revolution possible.

Mass production by the assembly-line technique became standard in almost every factory, from automobiles to meatpacking to cigarettes. To improve efficiency, corporations reduced assembly-line work to the simplest, most repetitive tasks. Changes on the assembly line and in management, along with technological advances, significantly boosted overall efficiency. Between 1922 and

1929, productivity in manufacturing increased 32 percent. Average wages, however, increased only 8 percent.



ullstein bild via Getty Images.

**Auto Assembly Line** This photograph of an automobile assembly line in the 1920s makes clear that workers stayed in one place while work came to them.

Industries also developed programs for workers that came to be called welfare capitalism. Some businesses improved safety and sanitation inside factories. They also instituted paid vacations and pension plans. Welfare capitalism encouraged loyalty to the company and discouraged traditional labor unions. One labor organizer in

the steel industry bemoaned the success of welfare capitalism. “So many workmen here had been lulled to sleep by the company union, the welfare plans, the social organizations fostered by the employer,” he declared, “that they had come to look upon the employer as their protector, and had believed vigorous trade union organization unnecessary for their welfare.”

## Consumer Culture

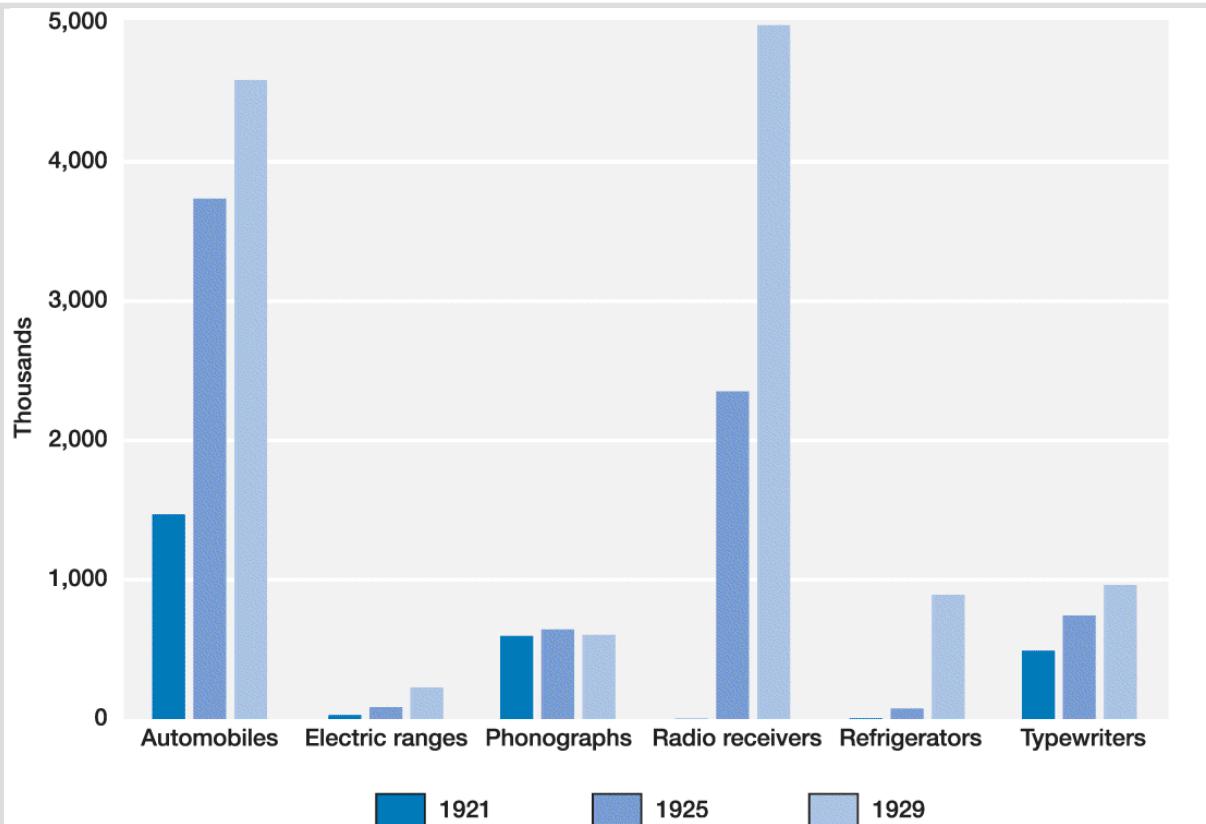
Mass production fueled corporate profits and national economic prosperity. During the 1920s, personal income increased by one-third, the cost of living stayed the same, and unemployment remained low. But the rewards of the economic boom were not evenly distributed. Americans who labored with their hands inched ahead, while white-collar workers enjoyed significantly more money and more leisure time to spend it. Mass production of new products — automobiles, radios, refrigerators, electric irons, washing machines — produced a consumer goods revolution.

In this new era of plenty, more people than ever conceived of the American dream in terms of the things they could acquire. *Middletown* (1929), a study of the inhabitants of Muncie, Indiana, revealed that Muncie had become, above all, “a culture in which everything hinges on money.” Faced with technological and organizational change beyond their

understanding, many citizens had lost confidence in their ability to play an effective role in civic affairs. More and more, they became passive consumers, deferring to the supposed expertise of leaders in politics and economics.

The rapidly expanding business of advertising stimulated the desire for new products and attacked the traditional values of thrift and saving. Advertising linked material goods to the fulfillment of every spiritual and emotional need. Americans increasingly measured their social status, and indeed their personal worth, on the yardstick of material possessions. Happiness itself depended on owning a car and choosing the right cigarettes and toothpaste.

By the 1920s, the United States had achieved the physical capacity to satisfy Americans' material wants ([\*\*Figure 23.1\*\*](#)). The economic problem shifted from production to consumption: Who would buy the goods flying off American assembly lines? One solution was to expand America's markets in foreign countries, and government and business joined in that effort. Another solution to the problem of consumption was to expand the market at home.



Roark et al., *The American Promise*, 8e, Value Edition © 2020 Bedford/St. Martin's

### **FIGURE 23.1 Production of Consumer Goods, 1921-1929**

Transportation, communications, and entertainment changed the lives of consumers in the 1920s. Laborsaving devices for the home were popular, but the vastly greater sales of automobiles and radios showed that consumerism was powerful in moving people's attention beyond their homes.

#### **Description**

"The bar graph shows types of consumer goods on the horizontal axis and production in thousands on the vertical axis.

1921: Automobiles, 1,400,000; Electric ranges, 10,000; Phonographs, 520,000; Radio receivers, 5,000; Refrigerators, 8,000; and Typewriters, 460,000.

1925: Automobiles, 380,000; Electric ranges, 12,000; Phonographs, 600,000; Radio receivers, 2,300,000; Refrigerators, 12,000; and Typewriters, 750,000.

1929: Automobiles, 4,500,000; Electric ranges, 250,000; Phonographs, 550,000; Radio receivers, 4,900,000; Refrigerators, 900,000; and Typewriters, 990,000.

All data are approximate."

Henry Ford realized early on that "mass production requires mass consumption." He understood that automobile workers not only produced cars, but would also buy them if they made enough money. "One's own employees ought to be one's own best customers," Ford said. In 1914, he raised wages in his factories to \$5 a day, more than twice the going rate. High wages made for workers who were more loyal and more exploitable, and high wages returned as profits when workers bought Fords.

Many people's incomes, however, could not satisfy the growing desire for consumer goods. The solution was installment buying — a little money down, a payment each month, which allowed people to purchase expensive items they could not otherwise afford or to purchase items before saving the necessary money. As one newspaper announced, "The first responsibility of an American to his country is no longer that of a citizen, but of a consumer." During the 1920s, America's motto became spend, not save. Old values

— “Use it up, wear it out, make it do or do without” — seemed about as pertinent as a horse and buggy. American culture had shifted.

**REVIEW**

How did mass production transform the United States?



# In what ways did the Roaring Twenties challenge traditional values?

The theme of personal freedom resulted in a whirl of activity that earned the decade the name “Roaring Twenties.”

Prohibition made lawbreakers of millions of otherwise decent folk. Flappers and “new women” challenged traditional gender boundaries. Other Americans enjoyed the Roaring Twenties through the words and images of vastly expanded mass communication, especially radio and movies. In America’s big cities, particularly New York, a burst of creativity produced the “New Negro,” who disturbed white Americans. The “Lost Generation” of writers, profoundly disillusioned with mainstream America’s culture, fled the country.

## Prohibition

Republicans generally sought to limit the powers of government, but the twenties witnessed a great exception to this rule when the federal government implemented one of the last reforms of the Progressive Era: the Eighteenth Amendment, which banned the manufacture and sale of alcohol. It took effect in January 1920 (see [chapter 22](#)).

Enforcement of **prohibition** led to marked growth in the

federal government, as it created a huge apparatus to fight crime and built new prisons to house the influx of convicts.

Drying up the rivers of liquor that Americans consumed, supporters of prohibition claimed, would eliminate crime, boost production, and lift the nation's morals. Prohibition would destroy the saloon, which according to a leading "dry" was the "most fiendish, corrupt and hell-soaked institution that ever crawled out of the slime of the eternal pit." Instead, prohibition initiated a fourteen-year orgy of lawbreaking unparalleled in the nation's history.

The Treasury Department agents charged with enforcing prohibition faced a staggering task. Although they smashed more than 172,000 illegal stills in 1925 alone, loopholes in the law almost guaranteed failure. Sacramental wine was permitted, allowing fake clergy to party with fake congregations. Farmers were allowed to ferment their own "fruit juices." Doctors and dentists could prescribe liquor for medicinal purposes.

In 1929, a Treasury agent in Indiana reported intense local resistance to enforcement of prohibition. "Conditions in most important cities very bad," he declared. "Lax and corrupt public officials great handicap ... prevalence of drinking among minor boys and the ... middle or better classes of adults." The "speakeasy," an illegal nightclub,

became common in American cities. Speakeasies' dance floors led to the sexual integration of the formerly all-male drinking culture, changing American social life forever. Detroit, probably America's wettest city, was home to more than 20,000 illegal drinking establishments, making the alcohol business the city's second-largest industry, behind automobile manufacturing.

Eventually, serious criminals took over the liquor trade. During the first four years of prohibition, Chicago witnessed more than two hundred gang-related killings as rival mobs struggled for control of the liquor trade. The most notorious event came on St. Valentine's Day 1929, when Alphonse "Big Al" Capone's Italian-dominated mob machine-gunned seven members of a rival Irish gang. Capone's bootlegging empire brought in \$95 million a year, when a chicken dinner cost 5 cents. Federal authorities finally sent Capone to prison for income tax evasion. "I violate the Prohibition law — sure," he told a reporter. "Who doesn't? The only difference is, I take more chances than the man who drinks a cocktail before dinner."

Capone's self-serving statement made a valid point. Enforcement of prohibition was less than evenhanded. Vigilante groups, including the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, the Anti-Saloon League, and the Ku Klux Klan, helped enforce prohibition and targeted immigrants,

working people, and African Americans. Working-class Americans asked why “the poor man’s club is raided while the rich man is left alone.” The answer was that the war on alcohol was fueled by the same class, ethnic, and religious discrimination that permeated so much of life in the 1920s.

By the end of the “dry” years, Americans overwhelmingly favored the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment, the “noble experiment,” as Herbert Hoover called prohibition. In 1931, a panel of experts reported that the experiment had failed. The social and political costs of prohibition outweighed the benefits. Prohibition fueled criminal activity, corrupted the police, demoralized the courts, and caused ordinary citizens to break the law. In 1933, the nation ended prohibition, making the Eighteenth Amendment the only constitutional amendment to be repealed.

## The New Woman

Of all the changes in American life in the 1920s, none sparked more heated debate than changes in the traditional roles of women. Increasing numbers of women worked and went to college, defying older gender norms. Even mainstream magazines such as the *Saturday Evening Post* began publishing stories about young, college-educated women who drank gin cocktails, smoked cigarettes, and wore skimpy dresses and dangly necklaces. Before the

Great War, the **new woman** dwelt in New York City's bohemian Greenwich Village, but afterward the mass media brought her into middle-class America's living rooms.

When the Nineteenth Amendment, ratified in 1920, granted women the vote, feminists felt liberated and expected women to reshape the political landscape. A Kansas woman declared, "I went to bed last night a *slave*[;] I awoke this morning a *free woman*." Women began pressuring Congress to pass laws that especially concerned women, including measures to protect women in factories. Black women lobbied particularly for federal courts to assume jurisdiction over the crime of lynching. But women's only significant national legislative success came in 1921 when Congress enacted the Sheppard-Towner Act, which extended federal assistance to states seeking to reduce high infant mortality rates.

A number of factors helped check women's political influence. Male domination of both political parties, the rarity of female candidates, and lack of experience in voting, especially among recent immigrants, kept many women away from the polls. In some places, male-run political organizations actually disfranchised women, despite the Nineteenth Amendment. In the South, poll taxes, literacy tests, and outright terrorism continued to decimate the vote of African Americans, men and women alike.

Most important, rather than forming a solid voting bloc, feminists divided. Some argued for women's right to special protection; others demanded equal protection. The radical National Woman's Party fought for an Equal Rights Amendment that stated flatly: "Men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States." The more moderate League of Women Voters feared that the amendment threatened state laws that provided women special protection, such as preventing them from working on certain dangerous machines. Congress defeated the Equal Rights Amendment in 1923, and radical women were forced to work for the causes of birth control, legal equality for minorities, and the end of child labor through other means.

Economically, more women worked for pay — approximately one in four by 1930 — but they clustered in "women's jobs." Women almost monopolized the occupations of librarian, nurse, elementary school teacher, secretary, typist, and telephone operator. Women also represented 40 percent of salesclerks by 1930. More female white-collar workers meant that fewer women were interested in protective legislation for women; new women wanted salaries and opportunities equal to men's.

Increased earnings gave working women more buying power in the new consumer culture. A stereotype soon emerged of the flapper, so called because of the short-lived

fad of wearing unbuckled rain boots. The flapper had short bobbed hair and wore lipstick and rouge. She spent freely on the latest styles, and she danced all night to wild jazz. As F. Scott Fitzgerald described her in his novel *This Side of Paradise* (1920), she was “lovely and expensive and about nineteen.”

The new woman both reflected and propelled the modern birth control movement. Margaret Sanger, the crusading pioneer for contraception during the Progressive Era (see [chapter 21](#)), restated her principal conviction in 1920: “No woman can call herself free until she can choose consciously whether she will or will not be a mother.” Shifting strategy in the twenties, Sanger courted the conservative American Medical Association and linked birth control with the eugenics movement, which advocated limiting reproduction among “undesirable” groups. Thus, she made contraception a respectable subject for discussion.

Flapper style and values spread from coast to coast through films, novels, magazines, and advertisements. New women challenged American convictions about separate spheres for women and men, the double standard of sexual conduct, and Victorian ideas of proper female appearance and behavior. Although only a minority of American women became flappers, all women, even those who remained at

home, heard about girls gone wild and felt the great changes of the era.

## The New Negro

The 1920s witnessed the emergence not only of the “new woman” but also of the “New Negro.” African Americans who challenged the caste system that confined dark-skinned Americans to the lowest levels of society confronted whites who insisted that race relations would not change.

As southern blacks flooded northern cities (see [chapter 22](#)), they found decent housing in short supply, even if they had the money to pay. Property owners resolved to keep their neighborhoods all white. Although the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a law requiring segregated housing in 1917, inventive white homeowners created other means to draw racial boundaries. Real estate agents refused to show blacks houses in white neighborhoods. Banks turned down blacks for mortgages. Whites signed agreements promising not to sell their homes to blacks. If a black family managed to slip through their defenses, whites resorted to violence. Housing was only one area of life that sparked racial violence.

The prominent African American intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) aggressively pursued the passage

of a federal anti-lynching law to counter mob violence against blacks in the South. At the same time, however, many disillusioned poor urban blacks turned to the new leadership of the Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey, who urged African Americans to rediscover the heritage of Africa, take pride in their own achievements, and maintain racial purity by avoiding miscegenation. In 1917, Garvey launched the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) to help African Americans gain economic and political independence entirely outside white society.

In 1919, the UNIA created its own shipping company, the Black Star Line, to support the “Back to Africa” movement among black Americans. In 1927, the federal government pinned charges of illegal practices on Garvey and deported him to Jamaica. Nevertheless, the issues Garvey raised about racial pride, black identity, and the search for equality persisted, and his legacy remains at the center of black nationalist thought.

Still, most African Americans maintained hope in the American promise. In New York City, hope and talent came together. The city’s black population jumped 115 percent (from 152,000 to 327,000) in the 1920s. In Harlem in uptown Manhattan, an extraordinary mix of black artists, sculptors, novelists, musicians, and poets set out to create a distinctive African American culture that drew on their

identities as Americans and Africans. As scholar Alain Locke put it in 1925, they introduced to the world the “New Negro” to proclaim African Americans’ creative genius.

The emergence of the New Negro came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance. Building on the achievement and pride displayed by black soldiers during the war, black artists sought to defeat the fresh assault of racial discrimination and violence with poems, paintings, and plays. “We younger Negro artists ... intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame,” poet Langston Hughes said of the Harlem Renaissance. “If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly, too.”

The Harlem Renaissance produced dazzling talent. Black writer James Weldon Johnson, who in 1903 had written the Negro national anthem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” wrote *God’s Trombones* (1927), in which he expressed the wisdom and beauty of black folktales from the South. The poetry of Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Countee Cullen celebrated the vitality of life in Harlem. Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) explored the complex passions of black people in a southern community. Black painters, led by Aaron Douglas, linked African art, which had recently inspired European artists, to the concept of the New Negro.

Despite such ferment, Harlem for most whites remained a separate black ghetto known only for its lively nightlife. Fashionable whites crowded into Harlem's segregated nightclubs, the most famous of which was the Cotton Club, where they believed they could hear "real" jazz, a relatively new musical form, in its "natural" surroundings. The vigor of the Harlem Renaissance left a powerful legacy for black Americans, but the creative burst did little in the short run to dissolve the prejudice of white society.

## Entertaining the Masses

In the 1920s, popular culture, like consumer goods, was both mass-produced and mass-consumed. The rise of movies, radios, music, and sports meant that Americans found plenty to do, and in doing the same things, they helped create a national culture.

Nothing offered entertainment like the movies. Hollywood, California, discovered the successful formula of combining wealth, sex, and adventure. Admission was cheap, and by 1929 the movies were drawing more than 80 million people in a single week. Hollywood created "movie stars," glamorous beings whose every move was tracked by fan magazines. Rudolph Valentino, described as "catnip to women," and Clara Bow, the "It Girl" (everyone knew what *it* was), became household names. Most loved of all was the

comic Charlie Chaplin, whose famous character, the Little Tramp, showed an endearing inability to cope with the complexities of modern life.

Americans also found heroes in sports. Baseball became the national pastime in the 1920s. It remained essentially a game played by and for the working class. In George Herman “Babe” Ruth, baseball had the most cherished free spirit of the time. The rowdy escapades of the “Sultan of Swat” demonstrated that sports offered a way to break out of the ordinariness of everyday life. By “his sheer exuberance,” one sportswriter declared, Ruth “has lightened the cares of the world.”

The public also fell in love with a young boxer from the grim mining districts of Colorado. As a teenager, Jack Dempsey had made his living hanging around saloons betting he could beat anyone in the house. When he took the heavyweight crown just after World War I, he was revered as the people’s champ, the hero of average Americans who felt increasingly confined by bureaucracy and routine. In Philadelphia in 1926, a crowd of 125,000 fans saw challenger Gene Tunney pound and defeat the people’s champ.

Football, mostly a college sport, appealed to the upper classes. The most famous coach, Knute Rockne of Notre

Dame, celebrated football for its life lessons of hard work and teamwork. Let the professors make learning as exciting as football, Rockne advised, and the problem of getting young people to learn would disappear. But in keeping with the times, football moved toward a more commercial enterprise. Harold "Red" Grange, "the Galloping Ghost," led the way by going from stardom at the University of Illinois to the Chicago Bears in the new professional football league.

The decade's hero worship reached its peak in the celebration of Charles Lindbergh, a young pilot who set out on May 20, 1927, to become the first person to fly solo nonstop across the Atlantic. Newspapers tagged Lindbergh "the Lone Eagle," the perfect hero for an age that celebrated individual accomplishment. "Charles Lindbergh," one journalist proclaimed, "is the stuff out of which have been made the pioneers that opened up the wilderness. His are the qualities which we, as a people, must nourish." Lindbergh realized, however, that technical and organizational complexity was fast reducing chances for solitary achievement. Consequently, he titled his book about the flight *We* (1927) to include the machine that had made it all possible.

Another machine, the radio, became crucial to mass culture in the 1920s. The nation's first licensed radio station, KDKA in Pittsburgh, began broadcasting in 1920, and soon

American airwaves buzzed with news, sermons, soap operas, sports, comedy, and music. Because they could now reach prospective customers in their own homes, advertisers bankrolled radio's rapid growth. Between 1922 and 1929, the number of radio stations in the United States increased from 30 to 606. In just seven years, homes with radios jumped from 60,000 to a staggering 10.25 million.

## The Lost Generation

Some writers and artists felt alienated from America's mass-culture society, which they found shallow and materialistic. Silly movie stars disgusted them. They believed that business culture blighted American life. In their minds, Henry Ford made a poor hero. Young, white, and mostly college educated, these expatriates, as they came to be called, felt embittered by the war and renounced the progressives who had promoted it as a crusade. For them, Europe — not Hollywood or Harlem — seemed the place to seek their potential.

The American-born writer Gertrude Stein, long established in Paris, remarked famously as the young exiles gathered around her, "They are the lost generation." Most of the expatriates, however, believed to the contrary that they had finally found themselves. The Lost Generation helped launch the most creative period in American art and literature in

the twentieth century. The novelist whose simple, clean style best illustrated the expatriate efforts to make art mirror basic reality was Ernest Hemingway. Admirers found the clipped language and hard lessons of his novel *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) to be perfect expressions of a world stripped of illusions.

Many writers who remained in America were expatriates in spirit. Before the war, intellectuals had eagerly joined progressive reform movements. Afterward, they were more likely critics of vulgar American culture. Novelist Sinclair Lewis in *Main Street* (1920) and *Babbitt* (1922) poked fun at his native Midwest as a cultural wasteland. Writers like James Thurber used humor to criticize America's ridiculous habits. And southern writers, led by William Faulkner, explored the South's tragic class and race heritage. Worries about alienation surfaced as well. F. Scott Fitzgerald spoke sadly in *This Side of Paradise* (1920) of a disillusioned generation "grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken."

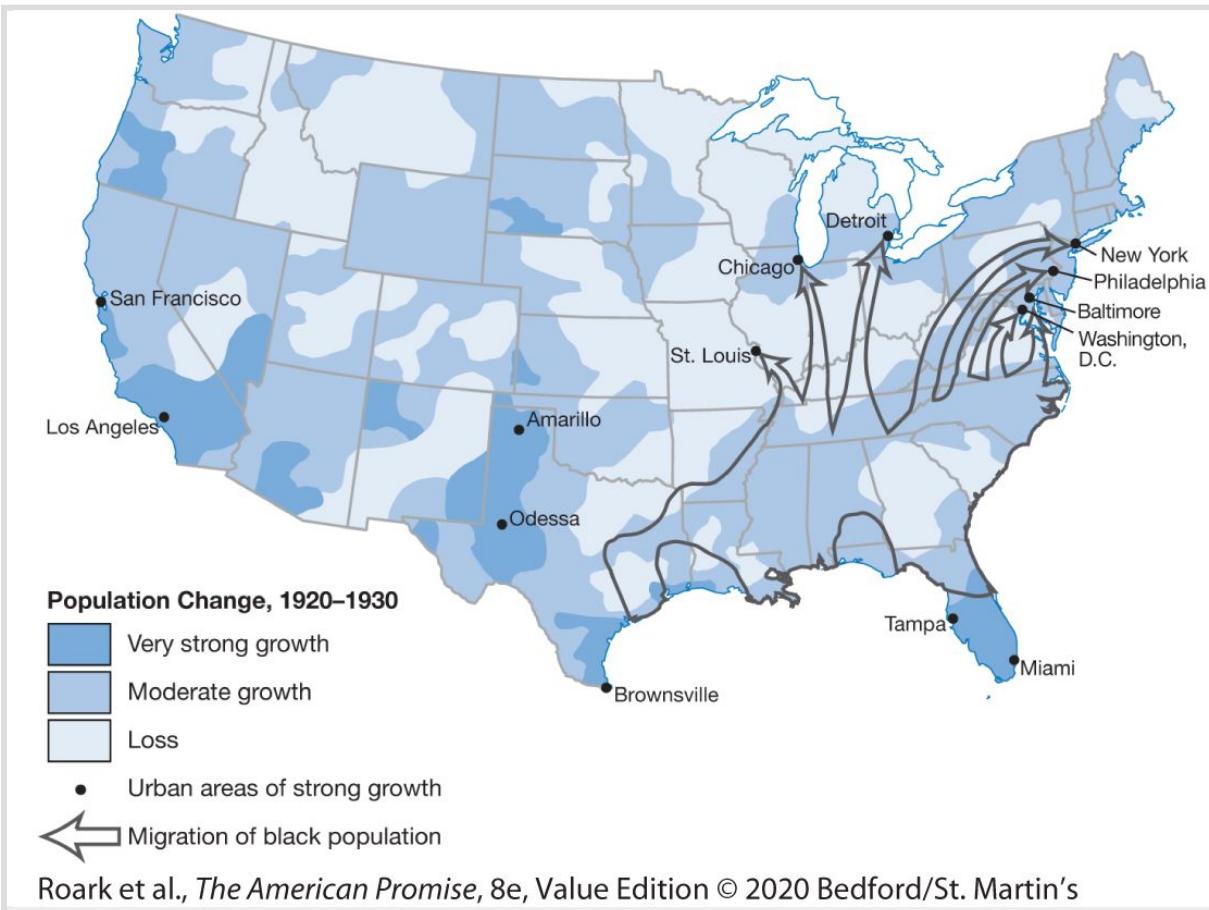
#### REVIEW

How did the new freedoms of the 1920s challenge older conceptions of gender and race?



# Why did the relationship between urban and rural America deteriorate in the 1920s?

Large areas of the country did not share in the wealth of the 1920s. By the end of the decade, 40 percent of the nation's farmers were landless, and 90 percent of rural homes lacked indoor plumbing, gas, or electricity. Rural America's traditional distrust of urban America turned to despair in the 1920s when the census reported that the majority of the population had shifted to the city ([Map 23.2](#)). Once the "backbone of the republic," rural Americans had become poor country cousins. Urban domination over the nation's political and cultural life and sharply rising economic difference drove rural Americans in often ugly, reactionary directions.



### MAP 23.2 The Shift from Rural to Urban Population, 1920–1930

The movement of whites and Hispanics toward urban and agricultural opportunity made Florida, the West, and the Southwest the regions of fastest population growth. By contrast, large numbers of blacks left the rural South to find a better life in the North. Almost all migrating blacks went from the countryside to cities in distant parts of the nation, while white and Hispanic migrants tended to move shorter distances toward familiar places.

#### Description

"The map shows the following:

Urban areas of strong growth: New York; Philadelphia; Baltimore; Washington D. C; Tampa; Miami; Detroit; Chicago; St. Louis; Amarillo; Odessa; Brownsville; Los Angeles; and San Francisco.

Regions with very strong growth: Florida (southern half); along the southeastern border and northwestern part of Texas; southern part of Arizona; southern California; southeastern region of Nevada; southwest part of Oregon; and a small area in the southern region of South Dakota.

Regions of loss: Eastern parts of Maine; southern part of New York; central part of Pennsylvania; eastern Virginia; most of Georgia, Kentucky, Idaho, Ohio, and Indiana; most of Illinois except Chicago and other northeastern regions; eastern Iowa; Missouri; northwestern Arkansas; eastern Kansas; most of Wisconsin except the southeastern region bordering Illinois; northeastern half of Minnesota; and most of Idaho and Montana.

Moderate growth: This includes the regions not covered under regions showing very strong growth and regions of loss in the United States.

Migration of black population took place from Mississippi, Louisiana, eastern Texas, Alabama, lower Arkansas, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia to St. Louis, Chicago, Detroit, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington D. C."

Cities seemed to stand for everything rural areas stood against. Rural America imagined itself as solidly Anglo-Saxon (despite the presence of millions of African Americans in the South and Mexican Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans in the West), and the cities seemed to be filled with undesirable immigrants. Rural America was the home of old-time Protestant religion, and the cities teemed with Catholics, Jews, liberal Protestants, and atheists. Rural America championed old-fashioned moral standards — abstinence and self-denial — while the cities spawned every imaginable vice. In the 1920s, frustrated rural people

sought to recapture their country by helping to push through prohibition, dam the flow of immigrants, revive the Ku Klux Klan, defend the Bible as literal truth, and defeat an urban Roman Catholic for president.

## Rejecting the Undesirables

Before the war, when about a million immigrants arrived each year, some citizens warned that foreigners who would never become truly American were drowning the nation. War against Germany and its allies expanded nativist and antiradical sentiment. After the war, large-scale immigration resumed (another 800,000 immigrants arrived in 1921) at a moment when industrialists no longer needed new factory laborers. Returning veterans, as well as African American and Mexican migration, had relieved labor shortages. Union leaders feared that millions of poor immigrants would undercut their efforts to organize American workers. Rural America's God-fearing Protestants were particularly alarmed that most of the immigrants were Catholic or Jewish. In 1921, Congress responded by severely restricting immigration.

Three years later, Congress very nearly slammed the door shut. The **Johnson-Reed Act** of 1924 limited the number of immigrants to no more than 161,000 a year and established quotas for each European nation. The act revealed the fear

and racism that fueled anti-immigration legislation. While it cut immigration by more than 80 percent, it squeezed some nationalities far more than others. Backers of Johnson-Reed, who declared that America had become the “garbage can and the dumping ground of the world,” manipulated quotas to ensure entry only to “good” immigrants from western Europe. The law, for example, allowed Great Britain 62,458 entries, but Russia could send only 1,992. Johnson-Reed reversed the trend toward immigration from southern and eastern Europe, which by 1914 had amounted to 75 percent of the yearly total.

The 1924 law also reaffirmed the 1880s legislation barring Chinese immigrants and added Japanese and other Asians to the list of the excluded. But it left open immigration from the Western Hemisphere because farmers in the Southwest demanded continued access to cheap agricultural labor. During the 1920s some 500,000 Mexicans crossed the border legally. In addition, Congress in 1924 passed the Indian Citizenship Act, which extended suffrage and citizenship to all Native Americans.

Rural Americans, who had most likely never laid eyes on a Polish packinghouse worker, a Slovak coal miner, an Armenian sewing machine operator, or a Chinese laundry worker, strongly supported immigration restriction, as did industrialists and labor leaders. The laws of the 1920s

marked the end of the era symbolized by the Statue of Liberty's open-armed welcome to Europe's "huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

Antiforeign hysteria climaxed in the trial of two anarchist immigrants from Italy, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. Arrested in 1920 for robbery and murder in South Braintree, Massachusetts, the men were sentenced to death by a judge who openly referred to them as "anarchist bastards." In response to doubts about the fairness of the verdict, a blue-ribbon review committee found the trial judge guilty of a "grave breach of official decorum" but refused to recommend a motion for retrial. When Massachusetts executed Sacco and Vanzetti on August 23, 1927, fifty thousand American mourners followed the caskets, convinced that the men had died because they were immigrants and radicals, not because they were murderers.



Bettmann/Getty Images.

**Sacco and Vanzetti** Murder suspects Bartolomeo Vanzetti (left) and Nicola Sacco (right) talk with Sacco's wife, Rosina, while waiting in the prisoners' dock. Even today, the 1927 executions symbolize for some the shortcomings of American justice.

## The Rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan

Members of the [\*\*Ku Klux Klan\*\*](#) shared the nation's sour antiforeign mood. The Klan first appeared in the South during Reconstruction to thwart black freedom and ended with the reestablishment of white supremacy (see [chapter](#)

[16](#)). In 1915, the Klan was reborn at Stone Mountain, Georgia, but when the new Klan extended its targets beyond black Americans, it quickly spread beyond the South. Under a banner proclaiming “100 percent Americanism,” the Klan promised to defend family, morality, and traditional American values against the threats posed by blacks, immigrants, radicals, feminists, Catholics, and Jews.

Building on the frustrations of rural America, the Klan in the 1920s spread throughout the nation, helping to shape politics in Indiana, Illinois, California, Oregon, Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Kansas. The Klan believed that its America was under siege. “One by one all our traditional moral standards went by the boards or were so disregarded that they ceased to be binding,” Klan imperial wizard Hiram Wesley Evans explained in 1926. “The sacredness of our Sabbath, of our homes, of chastity, and finally even our right to teach our own children in schools [represented] fundamental facts and truth torn away from us.” The Klan cast its members as outcasts in their own land.

Eventually, social changes, along with criminal behavior, crippled the Klan. Immigration restrictions eased the worry about invading foreigners, and sensational wrongdoing by Klan leaders cost it the support of many supporters. Grand Dragon David Stephenson of Indiana, for example, went to

jail for the kidnapping and rape of a woman who subsequently committed suicide. Yet the social grievances, economic problems, and religious anxieties of the countryside and small towns remained alive, ready to be ignited.

## The Scopes Trial

In 1925 in a Tennessee courtroom, old-time religion and the new spirit of science went head-to-head. The confrontation occurred after several southern states passed legislation against the teaching of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution in the public schools. Scientists and civil liberties organizations called for a challenge to the law, and John Scopes, a young biology teacher in Dayton, Tennessee, offered to test his state's ban on teaching evolution. When Scopes came to trial, Clarence Darrow, a brilliant defense lawyer from Chicago, volunteered to defend him. Darrow took on the prosecution's William Jennings Bryan, three-time Democratic nominee for president, fundamentalist Christian, and symbol of rural America.

The Scopes trial quickly degenerated into a media circus. The first trial to be covered live on radio, it attracted a nationwide audience. When under relentless questioning by Darrow, Bryan declared on the witness stand that he did indeed believe that the world had been created in six days

and that Jonah had lived in the belly of a whale, most urban observers ridiculed Bryan as a simpleton. Nevertheless, the Tennessee court upheld the law and punished Scopes with a \$100 fine. Although fundamentalism won the battle, it lost the war.

Baltimore journalist H. L. Mencken had the last word in a merciless obituary for Bryan, who died just a week after the trial ended. Portraying the “monkey trial” as a battle between the country and the city, Mencken denounced Bryan as a “charlatan, a mountebank, a zany without shame or dignity,” motivated solely by “hatred of the city men who had laughed at him for so long.”

As Mencken’s acid words indicated, Bryan’s humiliation was not purely a victory of reason and science. It also revealed the disdain urban people felt for country people and the values they clung to. The Ku Klux Klan revival and the Scopes trial dramatized and inflamed divisions between city and country, intellectuals and the uneducated, the privileged and the poor, the doubters and the faithful.

## **Al Smith and the Election of 1928**

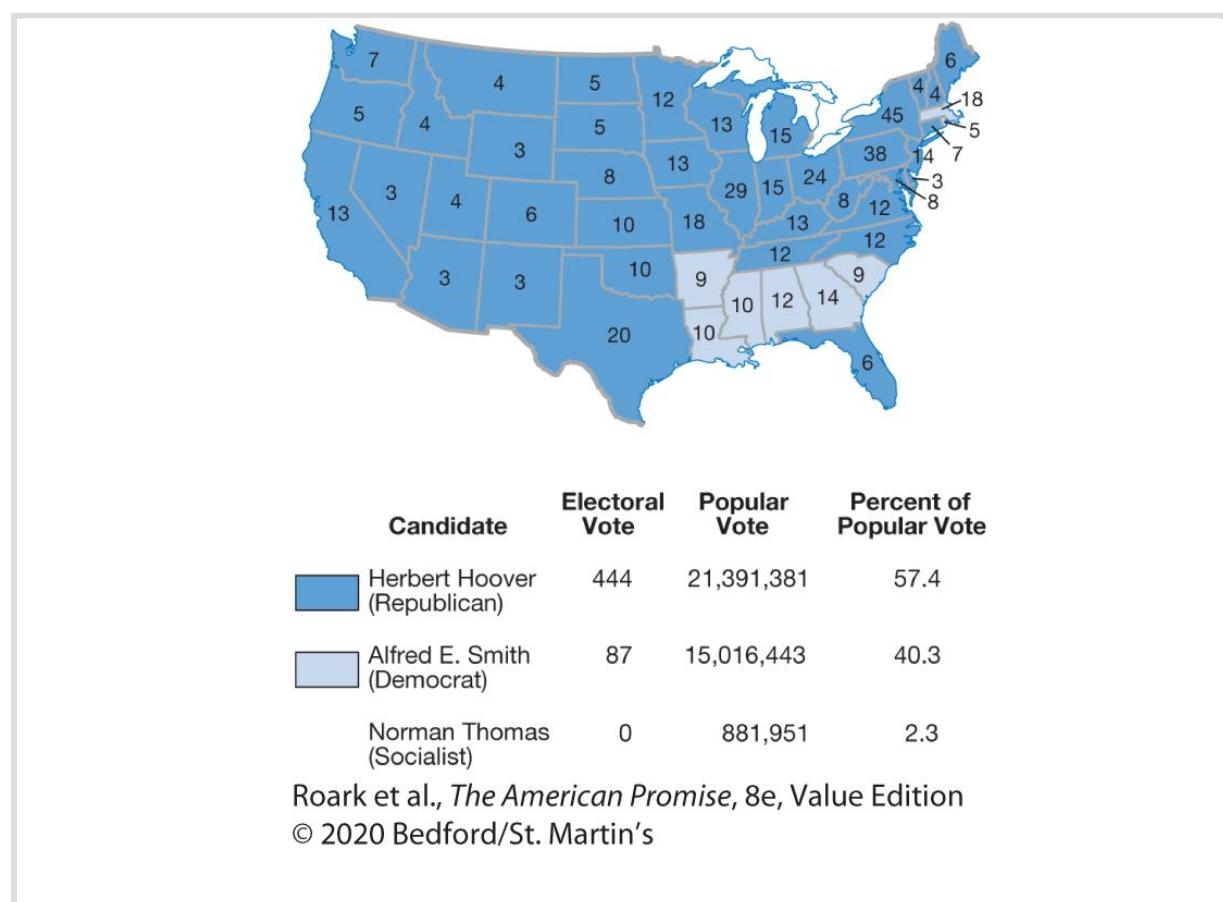
The presidential election of 1928 brought many of the developments of the 1920s — prohibition, immigration,

religion, and the clash of rural and urban values — into sharp focus. Republicans emphasized the economic success of their party's pro-business government and turned to Herbert Hoover, the energetic secretary of commerce and symbol of 1920s prosperity. But because both parties generally agreed that the American economy was basically sound, the campaign turned on social issues that divided Americans.

The Democrats nominated four-time governor of New York Alfred E. Smith. Smith adopted "The Sidewalk of New York" as a campaign theme song and seemed to represent all that rural Americans feared and resented. A child of immigrants, Smith got his start in politics with the help of New York City's Irish-dominated Tammany Hall political machine, to many the worst example of big-city corruption. He denounced immigration quotas, signed New York State's anti-Klan bill, and opposed prohibition, believing that it was a nativist attack on immigrant customs. When Smith admitted enjoying an occasional beer, prohibition forces dubbed him "Alcohol Al." But Smith's greatest vulnerability in the heartland was his religion. He was the first Catholic to run for president. A Methodist bishop in Virginia denounced Roman Catholicism as "the Mother of ignorance, superstition, intolerance and sin" and begged Protestants not to vote for a candidate who represented "the kind of

dirty people that you find today on the sidewalks of New York."

Hoover, who neatly combined the images of morality, efficiency, service, and prosperity, won the election by a landslide ([Map 23.3](#)). He received nearly 58 percent of the vote and gained 444 electoral votes to Smith's 87. The only bright spot for Democrats was the nation's cities, which voted Democratic. The decade-long war on alcohol had succeeded in bringing into the Democratic Party millions of new voters, especially immigrants and African Americans, who previously voted Republican.



### MAP 23.3 The Election of 1928

#### Description

"The map shows the votes won by the presidential candidates of 1928 election in each state:

Herbert Hoover (Republican): Maine, 6; New Hampshire, 4; Vermont, 4; Connecticut, 7; New Jersey, 14; New York, 45; Delaware, 3; Maryland, 8; Pennsylvania, 38; West Virginia, 8; Virginia, 12; North Carolina, 12; Tennessee, 12; Kentucky, 13; Ohio, 24; Michigan, 15; Indiana, 15; Illinois, 29; Wisconsin, 13; Minnesota, 12; Iowa, 13; Missouri, 18; North Dakota, 5; South Dakota, 5; Nebraska, 5; Kansas, 10; Oklahoma, 10; Texas, 20; Montana, 4; Wyoming, 3; Colorado, 6; New Mexico, 3; Idaho, 4; Nevada, 3; Utah, 4; Arizona, 3; Washington, 7; Oregon, 5; Nevada, 3; and California, 13.

Electoral vote: 444; Popular vote, 21,391,381; Percent of popular vote, 57.4 percent.

Alfred E. Smith (Democrat): Massachusetts, 18; Rhode Island, 5; South Carolina, 9; Georgia, 14; Alabama, 12; Mississippi, 10; Kansas, 9; and Louisiana, 10.

Electoral vote: 87; Popular vote, 15,016,443; Percent of popular vote, 40.3 percent.

Norman Thomas (Socialist): Electoral vote, 0; Popular vote: 881,951; Percent of popular vote, 2.3 percent."

#### REVIEW

How did some Americans resist cultural change?