

The Roaring Twenties



Darrow and Bryan at the Scopes Trial, Dayton, Tennessee, 1925

I. Postwar American Attitudes

A. Disillusionment following World War I, particularly among veterans, artists, and intellectuals (the Lost Generation)

1. Society was lacking in idealism and vision
2. Sense of personal alienation
3. Americans were obsessed with materialism and outmoded moral values

B. Fear of Bolshevism

1. Success of Russian Revolution combined with epidemic of strikes frightened Americans into "Red Scare" mentality of 1919-1920
2. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer arrested 6000 suspected radicals and deported many following several bombings

C. Fear of foreigners

1. Over 800,000 immigrants came to America in 1920-21, with 2/3 coming from southern and eastern Europe
2. To preserve the northern European racial composition of America, quotas were set up to restrict new immigration in a series of acts, including the National Origins Act of 1924 which cut immigration to 2% of each nationality from the 1890 census.
3. Sacco and Vanzetti, two Italian anarchists, were executed in 1927 for murder despite protests from within and outside the U.S. that anti-immigrant attitudes prejudiced their trial.

D. Rise of the nativist Ku Klux Klan

1. Reconstituted partly after the success of the movie *Birth of a Nation*, the new KKK was more antiforeign than antiblack. Its strength was in the midwest and South.
 - a) Targets: foreigners, Jews, Catholics, pacifists, communists, and evolutionists
 - b) By 1925, 5 million members had joined to march in parades, burn crosses, and hold secret meetings

2. Movement lost strength, particularly after it was exposed as a money-making scheme by organizers

II. Movements of the 1920s

A. Prohibition--authorized by passage of the 18th Amendment in 1919

1. Strong demand for alcohol and weak enforcement led to widespread hypocrisy
2. Saloons were replaced by illegal "speakeasies" serving high proof alcohol
3. Home-made alcohol (bathtub gin) sometimes resulted in blindness and death
4. Organized crime stepped in, most famously in Chicago, to meet consumers' needs to drink
 - a) Over 500 murders in Chicago in the 1920s by competing gangs
 - b) Gangsters used Prohibition profits to move into prostitution, gambling, and narcotics sales

B. Fundamentalism vs. Modernism

1. Fundamentalist Christians, stressing literal biblical interpretation, opposed any scientific teaching that cast doubt on veracity of scripture, particularly Genesis
2. Modernist Christians, mainly urban and better educated, attempted to adapt religion to the teachings of modern science and a changing world
3. Scopes Trial, Dayton, Tennessee, 1925
 - a) John Scopes purposely violated Butler Act forbidding the teaching of evolution
 - b) William Jennings Bryan assisted prosecution while Clarence Darrow defended Scopes
 - c) Scopes found guilty (conviction later overturned), but Darrow's cross-examination of Bryan exposed narrowness of fundamentalist position as anti-science and anti-progress

C. Prosperity and Consumerism

1. Tremendous performance of American economy in early 1920s. From 1920-1929:
 - a) Manufacturing output rose more than 60%
 - b) Gross national product (total of goods and services) rose 5% a year
 - c) Industrial output per worker grew 33%
 - d) Per capita income grew 30% with virtually no inflation
2. Causes of economic boom
 - a) Destruction of European economies during World War I left the U.S. as the only major industrial nation
 - b) Technology allowed for expansion, particularly in the auto industry
 - i) 1.5 million cars sold in 1920, 5 million cars sold in 1929
 - ii) Assembly line methods used by Ford and others made cars affordable to many

American families

- c) Radio and motion picture industry grew as a result of technological innovations
- d) Cheap, readily available energy sources (coal, oil) made expansion affordable
- e) Scientific management techniques promoted by Frederick Taylor were adopted widely in an attempt to improve efficiency

3. Consumerism fostered growth of advertising which benefited from expansion of national mass-circulation magazines, such as *Time*, *Reader's Digest*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*.

III. Republican Government

A. Three conservative presidents (Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover) encouraged a warm relationship between business and government

1. Harding--1921-1923-- ("I am a man of limited talents from a small town") delegated much of his responsibility to subordinates and friends, with whom he partied regularly

a. Teapot Dome Scandal--Secretary of Interior Albert Fall was jailed for a year for accepting bribes to provide oil leases in Wyoming and California to wealthy businessmen

b. Harding, largely unaware of the corruption that was riddling his administration, died in August 1923 on a trip to the West

2. Coolidge--1923-1929--("The business of America is business") was the least active president in history, taking daily afternoon naps and proposing no new legislation

3. Hoover--1929-1933-- was much more progressive than his predecessors and actively ran the Department of Commerce in the 1920s. (See "Great Depression" outline for Hoover's programs and demise)

B. Major goal of government in the 1920s: help business and industry to operate with maximum efficiency and productivity

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