Unsettled Prosperity: From War to Depression
1919–1932

For the United States, World War I was neither the ghastly and devastating experience that it was for Europe nor the profoundly disillusioning one it was in many other parts of the world. Yet the war years marked a crucial historical divide for Americans, and the country entered a distinctly new era after 1919. Progressivism flagged and gave way to a business-centered philosophy of government. The manufacturing economy surged and delivered a cornucopia of consumer goods to a growing middle class. In the halls of government and in the streets, Americans clashed over what a pluralist, modern society should look like—who got to define what it meant to be “American”? In the complex and turbulent years between World War I and the coming of a new era of reform in 1933, these were the defining themes: limited government, consumerism, and cultural warfare.

In this decade and a half, economic growth and cultural conflict revealed patterns in American life that would hold for the remainder of the twentieth century. The nation had become urban. Mass media and Hollywood shaped popular culture. The automobile became an affordable mass commodity, even a necessity, changing forever the way people lived. Many Americans celebrated the dawning of what they called a “new era,” defined by freer individual lifestyles, convenient consumer technologies, and “modern” ways of thinking. Others saw this emerging modernity as a threat to their own social and cultural influence. Groups of native-born, Protestant Americans, for instance, battled with immigrants to define the meaning of race, religion, and national belonging. Many white Americans lashed out at black Americans—in often deadly ways—over economic opportunity. And Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and secular Americans clashed over everything from the prohibition of alcohol to the teaching of evolution.

By the end of the 1920s, political and cultural divides had hardened, and economic abundance proved short-lived, as the nation slid from consumer boom to Great Depression bust in 1929. The United States had grown more affluent, but it was an unsettled affluence. If the question in the decades of populist and progressive insurgent movements had been “whose government?” in the 1920s the question took on a broader cast: “whose country?”
Celebrating the Fourth of July, 1926  This Life magazine cover celebrates two famous symbols of the 1920s: jazz music and the “flapper,” in her droopy leggings and scandalously short skirt, who loves to dance to its rhythms. The flags at the top record the latest slang expressions, including “so’s your old man” and “step on it” (“it” being the accelerator of an automobile, in a decade when cars were America’s hottest commodity). Americans embraced new and exuberant forms of consumption and material well being in the 1920s, but in an age of alcohol prohibition and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, they also fought with one another over deeply held beliefs and values. Picture Research Consultants & Archives.
Resurgent Conservatism

World War I brought an end to the long period of reform stretching from the 1880s to the 1910s (Chapter 19). A resurgent political conservatism emerged in the war's aftermath. Progressivism survived, but limited government was the dominant motif of national political life from 1919 to the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932. In place of progressives' call for economic regulation, business priorities now came to the fore. President Calvin Coolidge declared, "The man who builds a factory builds a temple. The man who works there worships there." The same theme prevailed in continued U.S. foreign policy: American business needs were the top priority. The single year of 1919 set the tone for this resurgent conservatism. An anti-radical Red Scare, a massive strike wave, and white violence against African Americans together roiled the country and slowed the pace of social change.

The Red Scare

The war effort, overseen by a Democratic administration sympathetic to organized labor, had increased the size and power of labor unions. Membership in the American Federation of Labor (AFL) grew by a third during World War I, reaching more than 3 million by war's end. Workers' expectations also rose as the war economy brought higher pay and better working conditions. To extend these gains, in the first year after the armistice, 1919, more than 4 million wage laborers — one in every five — went on strike, a proportion never since equaled. A walkout of shipyard workers in Seattle sparked a general strike that shut down the entire city. Another strike disrupted the steel industry, as 350,000 workers demanded union recognition and an end to twelve-hour shifts. Most strikes were about basic economic issues — pay and hours — rather than revolution, but the bold exercise of worker power fueled dire warnings of rising radicalism from labor's opponents.

That same year, when the Soviet Union's new Bolshevik leaders founded the Third International with the intent to foster revolutions abroad, some Americans raised fears that the U.S. harbored dangerous radicals. Wartime hatred of Germans was replaced by hostility toward Bolsheviks (labeled "Reds," after the color of communist flags). In a telling example, Ole Hanson, Seattle's mayor during the general strike, wrote a book called Americanism Versus Bolshevism and toured the country lecturing about the
threat of revolution. Under the banner of "one hundred percent Americanism," groups such as the newly formed American Legion deserted socialists, communists, and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) as un-American. Ironically, American communists remained few in number and had little political influence. Of the 63 million adults in the United States in 1920, no more than 13,000 belonged to either the fledgling U.S. Communist Party or the Communist Labor Party.

The strike wave combined with anti-Bolshevism to create fertile conditions for repression. When alert postal workers discovered thirty-four mail bombs addressed to government officials in April 1919, and in June a bomb detonated outside the Washington town house of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, the repression came. Palmer escaped unharmed, but he used the incident to fan public fears, precipitating a convulsive Red Scare. He set up an antiradicalism division in the Justice Department and appointed his assistant J. Edgar Hoover to direct it; in 1935, it became the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). In November, Palmer's agents stormed the headquarters of radical organizations. The dragnet captured thousands of immigrants who had committed no crimes but who held anarchist or revolutionary beliefs. Lacking the protection of U.S. citizenship, many were deported without indictment or trial. The Palmer raids peaked on a notorious night in January 1920, when federal agents invaded homes and meeting halls, arrested six thousand citizens and aliens (immigrants without U.S. citizenship), and denied the prisoners access to legal counsel.

The Red Scare's fusion of antiradicalism and anti-immigrant sentiment had dire consequences in the case of Sacco and Vanzetti. In May 1920, at the height of the Red Scare, police arrested Nicola Sacco, a shoemaker, and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, a fish peddler, for the murder of two men during a robbery of a shoe company in South Braintree, Massachusetts. Sacco and Vanzetti were Italian immigrants and self-proclaimed anarchists who had evaded the draft. Convicted of the murders, Sacco and Vanzetti sat in jail for six years while supporters appealed their verdicts. In 1927, Judge Webster Thayer denied a motion for a new trial and sentenced them to death. Scholars still debate their guilt or innocence. But the case was clearly biased by prosecutors' emphasis on their ties to radical groups and perhaps on their foreign birth. The execution of Sacco and Vanzetti was one of the ugly scars left by the hostilities of the Red Scare.

Racial Backlash

Other forms of repression escalated during and after World War I. The Great Migration drew hundreds of thousands of African Americans from the South to northern and midwestern industrial cities, where they secured wartime jobs and found they could vote and use their new economic clout to build community institutions and work for racial justice. The arrival of these southern migrants during the war deepened existing racial tensions, as African Americans competed with whites—including recent immigrants from Europe—for jobs and scarce housing.

Racism turned such conflicts into violent confrontations during the war. One of the deadliest riots in American history occurred in 1917 in East St. Louis, Illinois, where rampaging whites burned more than 300 black homes and murdered between 50 and 150 black men, women, and children (the exact death toll remains unknown). "This is
Chicago Race Riot. Racial violence exploded in Chicago during the summer of 1919. The riot was sparked when a black teenager, who had violated the unofficial segregation of the city's beaches, was stoned to death by a group of white youths. A week of violent rioting led to 15 white and 23 black deaths and the destruction of more than 1,000 black residences. In this photograph taken during the rioting, white children cheer outside an African American home that the mob had set on fire. Bettmann/Getty Images.

A crime against the laws of humanity, said Marcus Garvey, the influential black leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Association.

Tensions also increased after the war because African Americans emerged from the conflict determined to achieve citizenship rights. Millions had loyally supported the war effort, and 370,000 had served in uniform. Returning veterans, empowered by their military service, often refused to accept second-class treatment at the hands of whites, whether North or South. The black man, one observer wrote, "realized that he was part and parcel of the great army of democracy.... With this realization came the consciousness of pride in himself as a man, and an American citizen."

These developments sparked white violence. In what became known as Red Summer because of bloody battles in more than twenty-four cities, Chicago endured five days of rioting in July 1919 after white youths stoned a black teenager to death on a Lake Michigan beach. By September, the national death toll from racial violence that year reached 120. There were also 78 lynchings in 1919, up from 48 in 1917. That number included several murders of returning black soldiers in uniform. Attacks on African Americans continued after 1919. The oil boomtown of Tulsa, Oklahoma, was the site of a horrific incident in June 1921. Sensational, false reports of an alleged rape helped incite white mobs who resented growing black prosperity. Anger focused on the 8,000 residents of Tulsa's prosperous Greenwood district, locally known as "the black Wall Street." The mobs helped National Guardsmen, who arrested African Americans who resisted—burned thirty-five blocks of Greenwood and killed several dozen people. The city's leading paper acknowledged that "semi-organized bands of white men systematically applied the torch, while others shot on sight men of color." It took a decade for black residents to rebuild Greenwood. And in the January 1923 Rosewood Massacre, mobs of furious whites in a small Florida town torched houses and hunted down African Americans, killing at least six. Police and state authorities refused to intervene, and the town of Rosewood vanished from the map.

The Business of America

African Americans were not the only ones who faced challenges to their hard-won gains. So did labor unions. Following the strike wave of 1919, business leaders and their political allies fought back against organized labor, which entered a decade of decline. Across the country, employers advocated what they called the American Plan of employment—refusing to negotiate with unions. Facing a strike of Boston's police force, Massachusetts governor Calvin Coolidge illustrated this defiant approach by declaring, "There is no right to strike against the public safety by anybody, anywhere, anytime." A majority of the public supported the governor, and Republicans rewarded Coolidge by nominating him for the vice-presidency in 1920.

Decisions by the Supreme Court were an additional factor in organized labor's decline. In Coronado Coal Company v. United Mine Workers of America (1925), the Court ruled that a striking union could be penalized for illegal restraint of trade. Such
decisions, along with the aggressive antiunion campaigns under the American Plan, caused membership in labor unions to fall from 5.1 million in 1920 to 3.6 million in 1929—just 10 percent of the nonagricultural workforce. Labor's long-sought goal of organizing the nation's workforce retreated further from realization.

In place of unions, the 1920s marked the heyday of welfare capitalism, a system of labor relations that stressed a company's responsibility for its employees' well-being. Employers hoped this would build a loyal workforce and head off labor unrest. Automaker Henry Ford, among others, pioneered this system before World War I, famously paying $5 a day. Ford also offered a profit-sharing plan to employees who met the standards of its Sociological Department, which investigated to ensure that workers' private lives met the company's moral standards. At a time when government unemployment compensation and Social Security did not exist, General Electric and U.S. Steel provided health insurance and old-age pensions. Other employers built athletic facilities and selectively offered paid vacations. Such plans covered only about 5 percent of the industrial workforce, however, and when faced with new financial pressures in the late 1920s, even Henry Ford cut back his $5 day. In the tangible benefits it offered workers, welfare capitalism had distinct limitations.

**Dollar Diplomacy** American business interests shaped foreign affairs as well. The thrust of U.S. foreign policy after World War I continued to be in Latin America. There, under a policy initiated by Taft and continued under Wilson, presidents worked to advance U.S. business interests, especially by encouraging private banks to make foreign loans. Policymakers hoped loans would stimulate growth and increase demand for U.S. products in developing markets. Bankers, for their part, wanted government guarantees of repayment in countries they perceived as weak or unstable.

Officials provided such assurance. In 1922, for example, when American banks offered an immense loan to Bolivia (at a hefty profit), State Department officials pressured the South American nation to accept it. A similar arrangement was reached with El Salvador's government in 1923. In other cases, the United States intervened militarily, often to force repayment of debt. To implement such policies, the U.S. Marines occupied Nicaragua almost continuously from 1912 to 1933, the Dominican Republic from 1916 to 1924, and Haiti from 1915 to 1934. White Americans viewed these nations through demeaning racial stereotypes. They regarded Haitians as primitive savages or childlike people who needed U.S. guidance and supervision. One commander testified that his troops saw themselves as "trustees of a huge estate that belonged to minors. . . . The Haitians were our wards."

At home, critics denounced loan guarantees and military interventions as dollar diplomacy. The term was coined in 1924 by Samuel
Guy Inman, a Disciples of Christ missionary who toured U.S.-occupied Haiti and the Dominican Republic. "The United States," Inman declared, "cannot go on destroying with impunity the sovereignty of other peoples, however weak." African American leaders also denounced the Haitian occupation. On behalf of the International Council of Women of the Darker Races and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, a delegation conducted a fact-finding tour of Haiti in 1926. Their report exposed, among other things, the sexual exploitation of Haitian women by U.S. soldiers.

Inman and other critics put dollar diplomacy on the defensive by the late 1920s. The poor results spoke for themselves. Loans got repaid, securing bankers' profits, but the proceeds often ended up in the pockets of local elites; U.S. policies failed to build broad-based prosperity overseas. Military intervention had even worse results. In Haiti, for example, the marines crushed peasant protests and helped the Haitian elite consolidate power. U.S. occupation thus contributed to the harsh dictatorships that Haiti endured through the rest of the twentieth century. President Franklin Roosevelt initiated the "Good Neighbor" policy with respect to Latin America in 1933 in an effort to reverse these ill effects.

Dollar diplomacy guided U.S. interests in Latin America, but behind the scenes many diplomats considered East Asia more critical to long-term American foreign policy. To ease growing tensions there, the United States signed a major treaty in 1922, known as the Four Powers Act, with Japan, Great Britain, and France, limiting naval strength in the Pacific. A diplomatic triumph for President Harding, the treaty failed to address underlying East-West international rivalries because it reinforced European and American naval superiority over Japan. That island nation would gradually come to see the United States, not the traditional European powers, as its principal adversary for dominance in Asia.

Politics of Normalcy

The postwar conservative turn was particularly evident in national politics. With President Woodrow Wilson ailing from a stroke, in 1920 Democrats nominated Ohio governor James M. Cox for president, on a platform calling for U.S. participation in the League of Nations and continuation of Wilson's progressivism. Republicans, led by their probusiness wing, tapped genial Ohio senator Warren G. Harding. In a dig at Wilson's idealism, Harding promised "not nostrums but normalcy." On election day, he won a landslide, beginning an era of Republican political dominance that lasted until 1932.

Harding's most energetic appointee was Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, well known as head of the wartime Food Administration. Under Hoover's direction, the Commerce Department helped create two thousand trade associations representing companies in almost every major industry. Government officials worked closely with the associations, providing statistical research, suggesting industry-wide standards, and promoting stable prices and wages. Hoover hoped that through voluntary business cooperation with government — an associated state — he could achieve what progressives had sought through governmental regulation.

Other changes were afoot in Washington, D.C. The practice of lobbying Congress was a long-standing tradition among businesses, trade unions, and other organized interests. That practice grew in scale and became more formal and systematic in the 1920s. Noting the change, one observer joked that "the lobbyists were so thick they were constantly falling over one another." Hundreds of groups set up offices to lobby members of Congress — from religious and civic organizations to the Anti-Saloon League — but business took the lead. The National Association of Manufacturers, the Chamber of Commerce, and public utilities (water and electric companies), among many other business organizations, assumed an ever-larger role in the legislative process.

More malign links between government and corporate interests were soon revealed. When President Harding died suddenly of a heart attack in August 1923, evidence was
just emerging that parts of his administration were riddled with corruption. The worst scandal concerned secret leasing of government oil reserves in Teapot Dome, Wyoming, and Elk Hills, California, to private companies. Secretary of the Interior Albert Fall was eventually convicted of taking over $300,000 in bribes and became the first cabinet officer in U.S. history to serve a prison sentence.

Vice President Calvin Coolidge became president upon Harding's death. He maintained Republican dominance, calling for limited government and tax cuts for business while campaigning for election in his own right in 1924. Rural and urban Democrats, deeply divided over such issues as prohibition and immigration restriction, deadlocked their national convention; after 102 ballots, delegates finally nominated John W. Davis, a Wall Street lawyer. Coolidge easily defeated Davis and staved off a challenge from Senator Robert M. La Follette of Wisconsin, who tried to resuscitate the Progressive Party. The 1924 Progressive platform called for stronger government regulation at home and international efforts to reduce weapons production and prevent war. "Free men of every generation," La Follette had once declared in a speech, "must combat the renewed efforts of organized force and greed." In the end, Coolidge received 15.7 million votes to Davis's 8.4 million and La Follette's 4.9 million.

As the progressive reform ethos faded and a conservative impulse grew stronger, the formative period between 1919 and 1932 revealed important tendencies in national political life. Antiradicalism became more pervasive. Business and government became more cooperative. Lobbying surged as a feature of the legislative process. Each development would remain important throughout the remainder of the twentieth century.

**IN YOUR OWN WORDS** How and why did the United States take a conservative turn in the 1920s?

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**Making a Modern Consumer Economy**

Spurred by rapid expansion during the war, and benefitting from earlier innovations in mass production such as the assembly line, American business thrived in the 1920s. Corporations expanded more and more into overseas markets, while at home a truly national consumer culture — emphasizing convenience, leisure, and fun — took shape. The years between 1922 and 1929 mark a crucial turning point in the emergence of a mass consumer economy in the United States.

**Postwar Abundance**

Productivity proved to be the key. Manufacturing efficiencies accumulated since the turn of the century — the assembly line, mechanization, electrification — made possible enormous increases in productivity. If an American worker who made 6 toasters a day in 1920 fell asleep and woke up in 1929, she or he could now make 10 toasters a day — an incredible 66 percent more. Also, national per capita income rose an impressive 24 percent in that period. Productivity gains and rising incomes, especially among the middle class, meant an explosion of consumer goods. From toasters and radios to telephones, vacuum cleaners, and automobiles, a vast array of consumer products became more affordable. Americans bought them in droves, spurring an economic boom that lasted until the onset of the Great Depression in 1929.

Large-scale corporations continued to replace small business in many sectors of the economy. By 1929, through successive waves of consolidation, the two hundred largest businesses had come to control almost half of the country's nonbanking corporate wealth. The greatest number of mergers occurred in rising industries such as chemicals (with DuPont in the lead) and electrical appliances (General Electric), as well as among
Wall Street banks. Aided by Washington's dollar diplomats, U.S. companies exerted growing global power. Seeking cheaper livestock, giant American meatpackers opened plants in Argentina; the United Fruit Company developed plantations in Costa Rica, Honduras, and Guatemala; General Electric set up production facilities in Latin America, Asia, and Australia.

Despite the boom, the U.S. economy had areas of significant weakness throughout the 1920s. Agriculture, which still employed one-fourth of all American workers, never fully recovered from the postwar recession. Once Europe's economy revived, its farm flooded world markets with grain and other farm products, causing agricultural prices to fall. Other industries, including coal and textiles, languished for similar reasons. As a consequence, many rural Americans shared little of the decade's prosperity. The bottom 40 percent of American families earned an average annual income of only $750 (about $10,000 today). Many, especially rural tenants and sharecroppers, languished in poverty and malnutrition.

**Consumer Culture**

In middle-class homes, Americans of the 1920s embraced a consumer ethos. They sat down to a breakfast of Kellogg's corn flakes before getting into Ford Model T's to drive to work or shop at Safeway. On weekends, they might head to the local theater to see the newest Charlie Chaplin film. By 1929, electric refrigerators and vacuum cleaners came into use in affluent homes; 40 percent of American households owned a radio. The advertising industry reached new levels of ambition, entering what one historian calls the era of the "aggressive hard sell." The 1920s gave birth, for example, to fashion modeling and style consulting. "Sell them their dreams," one radio announcer urged advertisers in 1923. "People don't buy things to have things.... They buy hope—hope of what your merchandise will do for them."

Many poor and affluent families shared one thing in common: they stretched their incomes, small or large, through new forms of borrowing such as auto loans and installment plans. "Buy now, pay later," said the ads, and millions did. Anyone, no matter how rich, could get into debt, but consumer credit was particularly perilous for those living on the economic margins. In Chicago, one Lithuanian man described his neighbor's situation: "She ain't got no money. Sure she buys on credit, clothes for the children and everything." Such borrowing brought consumer merchandise within reach of more and more Americans, but the accumulated debt also turned out to be a factor in the bust of 1929.

**Hollywood**

Movies became a centerpiece of consumer culture. In the 1910s, the moviemaking industry had begun relocating to southern California to take advantage of cheap land, sunshine, and varied scenery within easy reach. The large studios—United Artists, Paramount, and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer—were run mainly by Eastern European Jewish immigrants like Adolph Zukor, who arrived from Hungary in the 1880s. Starting with fur sales, Zukor and a partner then set up five-cent theaters in Manhattan. "I spent a good deal of time watching the faces of the audience," Zukor recalled. "With a little experience I could see, hear, and 'feel' the reaction to each melodrama and comedy." Founding Paramount Pictures, Zukor signed emerging stars and produced successful feature-length films.

By 1920, Hollywood reigned as the world's movie capital, producing nearly 90 percent of all films. Large, ornate movie palaces attracted both middle-class and working-class audiences. Idols such as Rudolph Valentino, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks set national trends in style. Thousands of young women followed the lead of actress Clara Bow, Hollywood's famous flapper, who flaunted her boyish figure. Decked out in knee-length skirts, flappers shocked the older generation by smoking and wearing makeup. They represented only a tiny minority of women, but thanks to the movies and advertising, flappers became influential symbols of women's sexual and social emancipation. In cities, young immigrant women eagerly bought makeup and the latest flapper fashions.
European film studios struggled after World War I to reach audiences who had fallen in love with American movies. Working-class Europeans, in particular, preferred Hollywood’s offerings to the films produced in Europe. In this 1928 article from a cinematography journal, German expressionist filmmaker Erich Pommer suggested new strategies for expanding an audience for European films. Expressionists, influenced by romanticism and modernism, explored dark themes such as spiritual crisis and insanity. (A famous example of expressionist painting is Edward Munch’s *The Scream*.) Pommer worked for American studios and later fled to the United States after the rise of Hitler.

**Spectacular Appeal.** The international appeal of a picture has its foundation in a story. It is totally independent of the capital invested and of the splendor and luxury used in its production. The fact that in most cases the supers and monumental pictures have proved to be such international successes, does not disprove this claim. Such productions always have a simple story of universal appeal, because it is simply impossible to use spiritual thoughts and impressions of the soul in a picture deluxe. The splendour in such production is not merely created for decoration — it is its outstanding purpose. … But splendour means show, and a show is always and everywhere easy to understand. …

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**QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS**

1. How does Pommer characterize the attraction of popular American films for European audiences? What does he mean when he calls those films “naïve”?

2. How does Pommer propose to produce German films that will compete with Hollywood? What constraints and challenges did he face?

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**AP EXAM TIP**

Analyze the influence of mass media on the rise of a national culture in the 1920s.

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**The Automobile and Suburbanization**

No possession proved more popular than the automobile, a showpiece of modern consumer capitalism that revolutionized American life. The Ford Motor Company introduced the first widely affordable automobile, the Model T, in 1908, but the industry experienced its most dramatic growth in the 1920s. Car sales played a major role in the decade’s economic boom: in one year, 1929, Americans spent $2.58 billion on...
Automobiles transformed American cities and the countryside alike. As more and more Americans made cars their primary form of transportation, auto travel created a booming business in gas stations, roadside motels, campgrounds, and sightseeing destinations. But cars also choked city streets that were once the province of horse-drawn carriages and electric trains. Cities needed new roads, traffic signs, and rules governing traffic, and the booming automobile industry stimulated highway construction across the country. The automobile was a technology but also a consumer item that changed virtually every aspect of American life.

Recognizing the impact of the automobile on American cultural, social, and economic life is critical to success on the AP® exam.

IN YOUR OWN WORDS What were the primary characteristics of the American economy in the 1920s?
CHAPTER 21  Unsettled Prosperity: From War to Depression, 1919–1932

The Politics and Culture of a Diversifying Nation

At the dawn of the 1920s, public life in the United States had grown immeasurably more diverse. Women could now vote. More than 24 million immigrants — hailing primarily from Europe but also from Latin America and East Asia — called the country home. They spoke different languages, practiced a variety of religions, and followed unique cultural traditions (AP* Interpreting the Past). The Great Migration brought more than one million African Americans from all parts of the South to northern cities such as Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia. Cities grew at the expense of rural areas. Such dramatic changes led to social tensions and pronounced conflict over how the nation would be defined.

Women in a New Age

At the start of the 1920s, many progressives hoped the attainment of women's voting rights would offer new leverage to tackle poverty. They created organizations like the Women's Joint Congressional Committee, a Washington-based advocacy group. The committee's greatest accomplishment was the first federally funded health-care legislation, the Sheppard-Towner Federal Maternity and Infancy Act (1921). Sheppard-Towner provided federal funds for medical clinics, prenatal education programs, and visiting nurses, improving health care for the poor and significantly lowering infant mortality rates. It also marked the first time that Congress designated federal funds for the states to encourage them to administer a social-welfare program. But other reforms stalled, and the decade proved not to be a watershed of welfare legislation.

Other activist women focused on securing legal equality with men. In 1923, Alice Paul, founder of the National Woman's Party, persuaded congressional allies to consider an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the U.S. Constitution. It stated simply that "men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States." Advocates were hopeful; Wisconsin had passed a similar law two years earlier, and it helped women fight gender discrimination. But opponents pointed out that the ERA would threaten recent labor laws that protected women from workplace abuses. Such laws recognized women's vulnerable place in a heavily sex-segregated labor market. Would a theoretical statement of "equality" help poor and working women more than existing protections did? This question divided women's rights advocates. Introduced repeatedly in Congress over the next five decades, the ERA was debated again and again until the bitter ratification struggle of the 1970s (Chapter 28).

African American Women  African American women had distinct priorities. Groups such as the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) fought for suffrage in the 1910s, just as white women had. But the constitutional right of black women to vote was meaningless in the South, where disfranchisement was law. Black women sought racial, not just gender, equality. When Addie Hunton, field secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and sixty black women from the NACW urged the National Woman's Party to take up their cause, Paul refused, declaring disfranchisement to be a racial not a gender injustice. Hunton countered that "five million women in the United States cannot be denied their rights without all women of
How Did Immigrants Experience America at the Turn of the Century?

OSCAR HANDLIN


Settlement in America had snipped the continuity of the immigrants' work and ideas, of their religious life . . . newcomers pushed their roots into many different soils. Along the city's unyielding asphalt streets, beside the rutted roads of mill or mining towns, amidst the exciting prairie acres, they established the homes of the New World. But . . . nowhere could they transplant the European village. . . . The pressure of that strangeness exerted a deep influence upon the character of resettlement, upon the usual forms of behavior, and upon the modes of communal action that emerged as the immigrants became Americans. . . . The old conditions of living could not survive in the new conditions of space.

JOHN BODNAR


Kin and friends were free to assist each other in entering America by providing access to jobs and homes and supplying important information of labor market conditions. New arrivals were adept at determining where they might enter a very large economy. The immigrant family economy survived and flourished among most newcomers in industrial America because new economic structures actually reinforced traditional ways of ordering life. . . . [1] Individual inclinations were muted and the household . . . superseded all other goals and objectives. . . . Members of nearly all groups received indoctrination in the need to remain loyal to the familial and household unit. . . . [1] In the movement to a capitalist world and in the initial decades of settlement, familial and communal networks abounded.

AP SHORT ANSWER PRACTICE

1. How does Handlin's argument about immigrants as "uprooted" people differ from Bodnar's description of them as "transplanted"?

2. According to each author, what role did family and community play in the immigrant experience?

3. Which point of view — Handlin's or Bodnar's — is better supported by the chapter narrative? Give specific examples to support your argument.

the United States feeling the effect of that denial. No women are free until all women are free."

Other challenges remained. Women proved to be effective lobbyists for a variety of causes, but the Republican and Democratic parties endured as largely male domains. Finding that women did not vote as a bloc, politicians in both parties began to accord their votes less weight. New reforms failed to gain support, and others were rolled back. Many congressmen, for example, had supported the Sheppard-Towner Act because they feared the voting power of women, but Congress ended the program in the late 1920s.

New Woman Magazines, advertisements, and Hollywood movies crafted an idealized image of the American "new woman" in the 1920s. She had thrown off Victorian
modesty and claimed a place for herself alongside men in a new culture of consumption and fun. Such images, used primarily to sell products to the middle class, exaggerated reality. But that did not mean women's lives remained unchanged. The nineteenth-century notion of separate spheres for men and women had eroded considerably by 1930. More women attended college than ever before. Female athletes such as the golfer Glenna Collett, adventurers such as the celebrated pilot Amelia Earhart, and performers such as the brilliant jazz singer Josephine Baker carved out new, more liberated roles for women in public life.

Social change takes time, however, and for the majority of American women in the 1920s ordinary life was far less glamorous. In some professions, such as medicine, women actually declined as a percentage of the workforce: only 3 percent of lawyers and 4 percent of physicians were women in the decade. Women's wages lagged far behind those of men, and women remained confined to strictly gendered occupations: sales clerks in the new department stores, secretaries in the growing corporate world, and low-paid assembly-line workers in industry, alongside their traditional roles as domestic servants. African American and Latino women could not even get jobs as clerks and secretaries. Thus although American women in this era, especially the young, left behind the Victorian prescriptions of feminine modesty and confinement to a female-only separate sphere, they had yet to fully transform women's second-class standing.

Culture Wars

By 1929, ninety-three U.S. cities had populations of more than 100,000. New York City's population exceeded 7 million; Los Angeles had exploded to 1.2 million. The 1920 census marked the first time there were more urban than rural Americans. The lives and beliefs of urban Americans, however, often differed dramatically from those in small towns and farming areas. One sharp critic, the writer Sinclair Lewis, wrote three satirical novels — *Main Street* (1920), *Babbitt* (1922), and *Elmer Gantry* (1927) — that mocked small-town life for its religiosity and, as Lewis saw it, hypocrisy and lack of sophistication (AP Analyzing Voices).

In a decade of conflict between traditional and modern worldviews, the urban-rural split embodied by Lewis represented one line of conflict among many. Others that came to the fore included Protestant versus Catholic and Jewish; religious versus secular; native born versus immigrant; and white versus black. A series of cultural battles in the 1920s revealed a stark conflict over the kinds of values, beliefs, and even people deemed "American."

Prohibition  Rural and native-born Protestants started the decade with the achievement of a longtime goal: national prohibition of liquor (Chapter 17). The two principal antialcohol organizations, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and the Anti-Saloon League, had long hailed temperance as good for health and Christian virtue. In the 1910s, some progressives joined the campaign, convinced that alcohol kept immigrant workers in poverty and the saloon was a source of political corruption. World War I, too, spurred the cause. Mobilizing the economy for war, Congress limited brewers' and distillers' use of barley and other scarce grains, causing consumption to decline. Moreover, anti-German hysteria identified the many German breweries in American cities, like Pabst and Anheuser-Busch, with the wartime enemy. The decades-long prohibition campaign culminated with Congress's passage of the *Eighteenth Amendment* in 1917. Ratified over the next two years by nearly every state and taking effect in January 1920, the amendment prohibited "manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors" anywhere in the United States. It was enforced by the federal government under the 1920 *Volstead Act*.

Defenders of prohibition, especially native-born Protestants in small towns, celebrated prohibition as a victory over sin and vice. In urban areas, though, thousands