Margaret Sanger, a nurse who moved with her family to New York in 1911, immersed herself in the city’s exciting political scene. She joined labor protests and the Socialist Party and volunteered in the immigrant wards of the Lower East Side. Horrified by women’s suffering from constant pregnancies—and remembering her devout Catholic mother, who had died young after bearing eleven children—Sanger launched a crusade for what she called “birth control.” Her column in the New York Call, “What Every Girl Should Know,” soon garnered an indictment for violating obscenity laws. Sanger fled to England, where she spent fourteen months talking with sex radicals and economists studying overpopulation. After returning to the United States, Sanger opened the nation’s first birth control clinic in Brooklyn, in 1916. Authorities shut it down, and Sanger spent a month in jail.

Sanger was in many ways a quintessential progressive reformer. She championed women’s rights and believed birth control could solve urgent problems of industrialization and poverty. By the eve of World War I, she had launched a grassroots movement. Letters flooded in from across the country—some hostile, others begging for help. “Please send me one of your Papers on birth control, I have seven children and cannot afford any more,” pleaded one woman. “Tell me how it is,” demanded another, “that the wealthier class of people can get information like that and those that really need it, can’t?” Allies set up clinics in St. Paul, Minnesota, and Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Yet, like many progressives, Sanger found herself on the defensive after World War I. Amid a postwar Red Scare that targeted the political left, Sanger’s alliance with Socialists collapsed. Critics charged that birth control represented the most sinful and dangerous trends of modern society. Sanger had to respond to new political realities. To attract middle-class support, she emphasized expert, scientific approaches to birth control. Though she had previously advocated woman-to-woman educational networks, she now argued that only medical personnel should dispense contraception. Her new American Birth Control League cultivated support from eugenicists, who called for sterilization of the “unfit” and warned that darker races were reproducing more quickly than whites. Sanger herself was eventually forced out of the league by leaders seeking to make the cause respectable.

In the 1920s, debates over Sanger’s work mirrored larger struggles between tradition and modernity, faith and secularism, and rural and urban ways...
of life. World War I placed new emphasis on centralized planning and expert control, not grassroots democracy. After the war, political leaders abandoned two decades of trust busting and regulation and deferred to business interests. Political initiative shifted to groups that sought to keep out immigrants and preserve America’s “racial purity.” Millions turned their attention to radio shows, movies, cars, and other products of a thriving consumer culture. Americans wanted prosperity, not progressivism—at least until 1929, when the nation met up with the consequences of economic instability and excessive debt, through the shock of the Great Depression.

Conflicted Legacies of World War I

“The World War has accentuated all our differences,” a journalist in the magazine World’s Work observed. “It has not created those differences, but it has revealed and emphasized them.” In the aftermath of the war, thousands of strikes revealed continuing class tensions. Violent race riots exposed determined white resistance to the rising expectations of African Americans, while an obsessive hunt for foreign radicals showed that ethnic pluralism would not win easy acceptance.

Racial Strife

African Americans emerged from World War I determined to insist on citizenship rights. Millions had loyally supported the war effort; 350,000 had served their country in uniform. 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.” The Great Migration also drew hundreds of thousands of blacks from the South to Northern industrial cities, where they secured good wartime jobs and found they could vote, advocate for political reforms, and use their new economic clout to build community institutions and work for racial justice.

Across the United States, these trends sparked white violence. In the South, the number of lynchings rose from 48 in 1917 to 78 in 1919, including several murders of returning black soldiers in their military uniforms. Such incidents continued through the 1920s. A brutal lynching in the quiet railroad town of Rosewood, Florida, in 1921 prompted black residents to arm for self-defense. Mobs of furious whites responded by torching houses and hunting down black residents. Police and state authorities refused to intervene; completely destroyed, the town of Rosewood vanished from the map.

In northern and midwestern cities, the arrival of thousands of southern blacks deepened existing racial tensions. Blacks competed with whites—including recent immigrants—for scarce housing and jobs. Unionized white workers resented blacks who served as strikebreakers. Racism turned such economic and political conflicts into violent confrontations. Attacks on African Americans broke out in more than twenty-five cities. One of the deadliest riots occurred in 1917 in East St. Louis, Illinois, where nine whites and more than forty blacks died. Chicago endured five days of rioting in July 1919. By that September, the national death toll from racial violence had reached 120.

The oil boom town of Tulsa, Oklahoma, was the site of a particularly horrific incident in June 1921. Sensational, false news reports of an alleged rape helped incite white mobs who resented increasing black prosperity. Anger focused on the 8,000 residents of Tulsa’s prosperous Greenwood district, locally known as “the black Wall Street.” The white mob—helped by National Guardsmen, who arrested any residents who resisted—burned thirty-five blocks of Greenwood and killed several dozen African Americans. 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, who refused to be driven out, to slowly rebuild Greenwood.

Erosion of Labor Rights

African Americans were not the only ones who faced challenges to hard-won recent gains. The war effort, overseen by a Democratic administration sympathetic to labor, had temporarily increased the size and power of
labor unions. The National War Labor Board (NWLB), formed in April 1918, established an eight-hour day for war workers, with time-and-a-half pay for overtime, and endorsed equal pay for women. In return for a no-strike pledge, the NWLB also supported workers’ right to organize. Membership in the American Federation of Labor (AFL) grew by a third, reaching more than 3 million by war’s end. Workers’ expectations rose as the war economy brought higher pay and better working conditions.

But when workers tried to maintain these standards after the war, employers cut wages and rooted out unions. These developments prompted a massive confrontation. In 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 city. Another major strike disrupted the steel industry, as 350,000 workers demanded union recognition and an end to twelve-hour shifts. Elbert H. Gary, the head of United States Steel Corporation, refused to negotiate; he hired Mexican and African American strikebreakers and eventually broke the strike. Meanwhile, business leaders in rising industries, such as automobile manufacturing, resolutely resisted unions, leading to the creation of more and more non-unionized industrial jobs.

Public employees fared no better. Late in 1919, Boston’s police force shocked many Americans by demanding a union and going on strike to get it. Massachusetts governor Calvin Coolidge won national fame by declaring, “There is no right to strike against the public safety by anybody, anywhere, anytime.” Coolidge fired the entire police force, and the strike failed. A majority of the public supported the governor, and Republicans rewarded Coolidge by nominating him for the vice presidency in 1920.

Antilabor decisions by the Supreme Court were an important factor in unions’ decline. In Coronado Coal Company v. United Mine Workers (1925), the Court ruled that a striking union could be penalized for illegal restraint of trade. The Court also struck down federal legislation regulating child labor; in Adkins v. Children’s Hospital (1923), it voided a minimum wage for women workers in the District of Columbia, reversing many of the gains that had been achieved before World War I through the groundbreaking decision.
in *Muller v. Oregon* (see Chapter 20). Such decisions, along with aggressive anti-union campaigns, caused membership in labor unions to fall from 5.1 million in 1920 to 3.6 million in 1929—only 10 percent of the nonagricultural workforce.

In place of unions, the 1920s marked the heyday of welfare capitalism, a system of labor relations that stressed management’s responsibility for employees’ well-being. Employers hoped this would build a loyal workforce and head off strikes and labor unrest. At a time when government unemployment compensation and Social Security did not exist, General Electric, U.S. Steel, and other large corporations offered workers health insurance and old-age pensions. But such plans covered only about 5 percent of the industrial workforce. In the tangible benefits that it offered workers, welfare capitalism had serious limitations.

**The Red Scare**

Many prosperous Americans sided with management in the upheavals of the postwar years. They blamed workers for the rapidly rising cost of living, which jumped nearly 80 percent between 1917 and 1919. The socialist outlook of some recent immigrants frightened native-born citizens, and the communist ideology of the Russian Bolsheviks terrified them. When Bolsheviks founded the Third International (or Comintern) in 1919, an organization intended to foster revolutions, some Americans began to fear that dangerous radicals were hiding everywhere. Hatred of Germans (disparaged as “Huns”) was replaced by hostility toward Bolsheviks (labeled “Reds,” after the color of Communist party badges and flags). Ironically, Communists remained few in number and had little political influence. Of the 50 million adults in the United States in 1920, no more than 70,000 belonged to either the fledgling U.S. Communist Party or the Communist Labor Party. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) had been weakened by wartime repression and internal dissent. Yet the public and the press blamed labor unrest on alien radicals.

In 1919, tensions mounted amid a series of threats and bombings. In April, alert postal workers discovered and defused thirty-four mail bombs addressed to government officials. In June, a bomb detonated outside the Washington townhouse of recently appointed attorney general A. Mitchell Palmer. Palmer escaped unharmed, but he used the incident to fan public fears. With President Woodrow Wilson incapacitated by stroke, Palmer had a free hand. He set up an antiradicalism division in the Justice Department and appointed his assistant J. Edgar Hoover to direct it; shortly afterward, it became the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Then, in November 1919, Palmer’s agents stormed the headquarters of radical organizations. The dragnet captured thousands of aliens who had committed no crimes but who held anarchist or revolutionary beliefs. Lacking the protection of U.S. citizenship, many were deported without formal 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, and denied the prisoners access to legal counsel. Then Palmer, ambitious for the presidency, overreached. He predicted that on May 1 a radical conspiracy would attempt to overthrow the U.S. government. State militia units and police went on twenty-four-hour alert to guard the nation against the alleged threat, but not a single incident occurred. As the summer of 1920 passed without major strikes or renewed bombings, the Red Scare began to abate.

Like other postwar legacies, however, antiradicalism persisted through the next decade. 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 aliens 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 Sacco and Vanzetti’s guilt or innocence. But it was clear that their trial was biased by prosecutors’ emphasis on their ties to radical groups. The execution of Sacco and Vanzetti was one of the ugly scars left by the ethnic and political hostilities of the Great War.

- What factors contributed to racial and labor violence after the war?
- What factors, both international and domestic, contributed to the emergence of the Red Scare?

Politics in the 1920s

As the plight of labor suggested, the 1920s were a tough decade for the progressives who had gained ground before World War I. After a few early victories for reform, including the achievement of national woman suffrage, the dominant motif of the 1920s was limited government. At the grass roots, native-born white Protestants rallied against what they saw as big-city values and advocated such goals as immigration restriction. A series of Republican presidents placed responsibility for the nation’s well-being in the hands of business interests. President Calvin Coolidge solemnly declared, “The man who builds a factory builds a temple. The man who works there worships there.” The same theme prevailed in continued interventions in Latin America and elsewhere: The United States sought to reshape other nations’ economies and finances to enhance American business needs.

Women in Politics

At the start of the 1920s, many progressive women hoped that the attainment of full voting rights would offer women new leverage to tackle industrial 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 to subsidize medical clinics, prenatal education programs, and visiting nurses. Though opponents warned that the act would lead to socialized medicine, Sheppard-Towner improved health care for the poor and significantly lowered infant mortality rates. It also marked the first time that Congress designated federal funds to the states and encouraged them to administer a social welfare program.
Moved by the immense scale of suffering caused by World War I, some women joined the growing international peace movement. While diplomats conducted negotiations at Versailles, women peace advocates from around the world convened in Zurich and called on all nations to use their resources to end hunger and promote human welfare. The treaty negotiators in Paris ignored them, but the women activists organized for sustained opposition to war. In 1919, they created the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), whose leading members included Jane Addams. Through the 1920s and beyond, members of WILPF denounced imperialism, stressed the suffering caused by militarism, and proposed social justice measures.

Despite such work, women’s activism suffered major setbacks in the 1920s. The WILPF came under fierce attack during the Red Scare because of the presence of Socialist women among its ranks. And though women proved to be effective lobbyists, they had difficulty gaining access to posts in the Republican and Democratic parties. Finding that women did not vote as a bloc, politicians in both parties began to take their votes for granted. New reforms failed to gain support, and a key achievement was rolled back. Many congressmen had initially supported the Sheppard-Towner Act because they feared the voting power of women, but Congress ended the program in the late 1920s.

**Republican “Normalcy”**

With President Wilson ailing 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 business wing, tapped genial Ohio senator Warren G. Harding. In a dig at Wilson’s sweeping idealism, Harding promised “not nostrums but normalcy.” On Election Day he won in a landslide, beginning an era of Republican dominance that lasted until 1932.

Harding’s most energetic appointee was Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, well-known 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 progressive reformers had sought through governmental regulation.

But more sinister links between government and corporate interests were soon revealed. When President Harding died suddenly of a heart attack in August 1923, evidence was just coming to light that parts of his administration were riddled with corruption. The worst scandal concerned the 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 $300,000 in bribes and became the first cabinet officer in U.S. history to serve a prison sentence.

Vice President Calvin Coolidge ascended to the presidency upon Harding’s death. He maintained Republican dominance while offering, with his austere Yankee morality, a contrast to his predecessor’s cronyism. Campaigning for election in his own right in 1924, Coolidge called for limited government, isolationism in foreign policy, and tax cuts for business. Rural and urban Democrats, deeply divided over such issues as prohibition and immigration restriction, deadlocked at their national convention; delegates cast 102 ballots before finally choosing John W. Davis, a Wall Street lawyer. Coolidge easily defeated Davis and staved off a challenge by Senator Robert M. La Follette of Wisconsin, who tried to resuscitate the Progressive Party. In the end, Coolidge received 15.7 million votes to Davis’s 8.4 million and La Follette’s 4.9 million.

For the most part, Republicans declined to carry forward progressive initiatives from the prewar years. The Republican-dominated Federal Trade Commission (FTC) failed to enforce antitrust laws. The Supreme Court, now headed by former Republican president William Howard Taft, refused to break up the mammoth U.S. Steel Corporation, despite evidence of its near-monopoly power. With the agricultural sector facing hardship, Congress sought to aid farmers with the McNary-Haugen bills of 1927 and 1928, which proposed a system of federal price supports for major crops. But President Coolidge opposed the bills as special-interest legislation and vetoed them both. While some state and municipal leaders continued to pursue ambitious agendas, they were shut out of power at the federal level.

**Dollar Diplomacy**

Political campaigns emphasized domestic issues in the 1920s, but the United States nonetheless remained deeply engaged in foreign affairs. Republican presidential administrations sought to advance U.S. business interests, especially by encouraging private banks to make
foreign loans. Policymakers hoped such loans would stimulate growth and increase demand for U.S. products in developing markets. Bankers, though, wanted government assurance of repayment in countries that they perceived as weak or unstable.

U.S. officials acted to provide 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. The diplomats also forced Bolivia to agree to financial oversight by a commission under the banks’ control. A similar arrangement was reached with El Salvador’s government in 1923, though efforts to broker such deals in Honduras and Guatemala fell through. Where stronger action was needed, the United States intervened militarily, often to force repayment of debt. 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.

In these lengthy military deployments Americans came to think of the occupied countries as essentially U.S. possessions, much like Puerto Rico and the Philippines. Sensational memoirs by marines who had served in Haiti popularized the island as the “American Africa.” White Americans became fascinated by vodou (voodoo) and other Haitian religious customs, reinforcing their view of Haitians as either dangerous 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 had 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 Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and the International Council of Women of the Darker Races, 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.

By the late 1920s, dollar diplomacy was on the defensive, in keeping with a broader mood of isolationism and disgust with international affairs. At the same time, political leaders became frustrated with their poor results. Dollar diplomacy usually managed to get loans repaid, securing bankers’ profits. But the loans often ended up in the pockets of local elites; U.S. policies failed to build broad-based prosperity overseas. Military intervention could have even more dire results. In Haiti, the marines crushed peasant protests and helped the Haitian elite consolidate its power. U.S. occupation thus helped create the conditions for harsh dictatorships that Haitians endured through the rest of the twentieth century.

Culture Wars

By 1929, ninety-three U.S. cities had populations of more than 100,000. New York City’s population exceeded 7 million, and Los Angeles’s had exploded to 1.2 million. The lives and beliefs of urban Americans—including millions of recent immigrants—often differed dramatically from those in small towns and farming areas. Native-born rural Protestants, faced with a dire perceived threat, rallied in the 1920s to protect what they saw as American values.

Religion in Politics

Rural and native-born Protestants started the decade with the achievement of a longtime goal: national prohibition of liquor (see Chapter 18). Wartime anti-German prejudice was a major spur. Since major breweries like Pabst and Busch were owned by German Americans, many citizens decided it was unpatriotic to drink beer. Mobilizing the economy for war, Congress also limited brewers’ and distillers’ use of barley, hops, and other scarce grains, causing consumption to decline. The nation’s decades-long prohibition campaign culminated with Congress’s passage of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1917. Ratified in 1919 by nearly every state and effective in January 1920, the amendment prohibited the “manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors” anywhere in the United States. Though widely circumvented in urban speakeasies and other illegal drinking sites, the amendment remained in force until its repeal in 1933. Defenders hailed the Eighteenth Amendment as a victory for health, morals, and Christian values.

At the state and local levels, controversy erupted as fundamentalist Protestants sought to mandate school curricula based on the biblical account of creation. In 1925, Tennessee’s legislature outlawed the teaching of “any theory that denies the story of the Divine creation of man as taught in the Bible” instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals.” The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which had been formed during the Red Scare to protect free speech rights, challenged the Tennessee law’s constitutionality. The ACLU intervened in the trial of John T. Scopes, a high school biology teacher who taught
Defining Beer

The Eighteenth Amendment banned the manufacture, sale, and transportation of “intoxicating liquors.” Over the strong objections of the beer industry, the Volstead Act of 1919 outlawed beverages with an alcoholic content of more than 0.5 percent. As support for prohibition declined in the early 1930s, former brewery owners and workers campaigned for the legalization of beer, as in this march. In March 1933, nine months before the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment, Congress amended the Volstead Act to allow the manufacture of beer with an alcoholic content of 3.2 percent. Library of Congress.

the theory of evolution to his class and faced a jail sentence for doing so. The case attracted national attention because Clarence Darrow, a famous criminal lawyer, defended Scopes, while William Jennings Bryan, the three-time Democratic presidential candidate, spoke for the prosecution.

Journalists dubbed the Scopes case “the monkey trial.” This label referred both to Darwin’s argument that human beings and other primates share a common ancestor and to the circus atmosphere at the trial, which was broadcast live over a Chicago radio station. (Proving that sophisticated urbanites had their own bitter prejudices, acerbic critic H. L. Mencken dismissed anti-evolutionists as “gaping primates of the upland valleys,” implying that they had not evolved.) The jury took only eight minutes to deliver its verdict: guilty. Though the Tennessee Supreme Court later overturned Scopes’s conviction, the controversial law remained on the books for more than thirty years.

Nativism Many native-born Protestants saw unrestricted immigration as the primary cause of cultural and religious disputes. A nation of 105 million people had added more than 23 million immigrants over the previous four decades. The newcomers included many Catholics and Jews from Southern and Eastern Europe, whom one Maryland congressman referred to as “indigestible lumps” in the “national stomach.” Such nativism, which recalled hostility toward the Irish and Germans in the 1840s and 1850s, was widely shared.
Resurgent nativism fueled a momentous shift in immigration policy. “America must be kept American,” President Coolidge declared in 1924. Congress had banned Chinese immigration in 1882, and Theodore Roosevelt had negotiated a so-called gentleman’s agreement that limited Japanese immigration in 1907. Now nativists charged that there were also too many European immigrants, some of whom undermined Protestantism and imported anarchism, socialism, and other radical doctrines. Responding to these concerns, Congress passed emergency immigration restrictions in 1921 and a permanent measure three years later. The National Origins Act (1924) used thirty-four-year-old census data to establish a baseline: in the future, annual immigration from each country could not exceed 2 percent of that nationality’s U.S. population as it had stood in 1890. Since only small numbers of Italians, Greeks, Poles, Russians, and other Southern and Eastern European immigrants had arrived before 1890, the law drastically limited immigration from those places. In 1929, Congress imposed even more restrictive quotas, setting a cap of 150,000 immigrants per year from Europe and continuing to ban most immigrants from Asia.

The new laws, however, permitted unrestricted immigration from the Western Hemisphere. Latin Americans arrived in increasing numbers, finding jobs in the West that had gone to Asian immigrants before exclusion. More than 1 million Mexicans entered the United States between 1900 and 1930, including many during World War I. Nativists lobbied Congress to cut this flow; so did labor leaders, who argued that impoverished migrants lowered wages for other American workers. But Congress heeded the pleas of employers, especially farmers in Texas and California, who wanted cheap labor. Only the coming of the Great Depression cut off migration from Mexico (see Reading American Pictures, “Patrolling the Texas Border,” p. 695).

Other expressions of nativism emerged at the state level. In 1913, by an overwhelming majority, California’s legislature had passed a law declaring that “aliens ineligible to citizenship” could not own “real property.” The law aimed to exclude Asians, especially Japanese immigrants, from owning land, though some had lived in the state for decades and built up prosperous farms. In the wake of World War I, California tightened these laws, making it increasingly difficult for Asian immigrant families to establish themselves. California, Washington, and Hawaii also severely restricted schools that taught Japanese language, history, and culture to young Japanese Americans. California, for example, passed a law forbidding any Japanese school from operating more than one hour per day; textbooks could make no references to samurai warriors, emperors, or other “controversial” elements of Japanese history. Relentless hostility, which denied Asians both citizenship and land rights, left Japanese Americans in a vulnerable position at the outbreak of World War II, when anti-Japanese hysteria swept the United States.

**The Klansman Revived**

The 1920s also brought a nationwide rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), the white supremacist group formed in the post–Civil War South. Soon after the premiere of Birth of a Nation (1915), a popular film that glorified the Reconstruction-era Klan, a group of southerners gathered on Georgia’s Stone Mountain to revive the group. With its blunt motto, “Native, white, Protestant supremacy,” the Klan recruited supporters across the country. KKK members did not limit their harassment to blacks but targeted Catholics and Jews as well, with physical intimidation, arson, and economic boycotts. The KKK also turned to politics, and hundreds of Klansmen won election to local offices and state legislatures (Map 22.1).

At the height of its power, the Klan wielded considerable political clout and counted more than three million members, including many women. The Klan’s mainstream appeal was illustrated by President Woodrow Wilson’s public praise for Birth of a Nation. Though it declined nationally after 1925, robbed of a potent issue by passage of the anti-immigration bill, the Klan remained strong in the South, and pockets of KKK activity persisted in all parts of the country. Klan activism also lent a menacing cast to other political issues. Some local Klansmen, for example, cooperated with members of the Anti-Saloon League to enforce prohibition laws through threats and violent attacks.

**The Election of 1928**

Conflicts over race, religion, and ethnicity created the climate for a stormy presidential election in 1928. Democrats had traditionally drawn strength from white voters in the South and immigrants in the North. In the 1920s, however, these groups divided over prohibition, immigration restriction, and the Klan. By 1928, the northern urban wing gained firm control. Democrats nominated Governor Al Smith of New York, the first presidential candidate to reflect the aspirations of the urban working class. The grandson of Irish peasants, Smith had risen through New York City’s Democratic machine and had become a dynamic reformer. But Smith offended many small-town and rural Americans. He spoke in a heavy New York accent and sported a brown derby that highlighted his ethnic working-class origins. Middle-class reformers questioned his ties to
During the 1920s, the antiblack and anti-Catholic Ku Klux Klan was a powerful force in American life. Perhaps as many as 500,000 women joined the Women of the Ku Klux Klan (WKKK), including these women who paraded down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C., in 1928. The organization was so deeply rooted in the daily lives of many southern and midwestern white Protestants that one woman from rural Indiana remembered her time in the KKK as “just a celebration ... a way of growing up.”

National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Tammany Hall; temperance advocates opposed him as a “wet.” The governor’s greatest handicap was his religion. Although Smith insisted that his Catholic beliefs would not affect his duties as president, many Protestant leaders opposed him. “No Governor can kiss the papal ring and get within gunshot of the White House,” vowed a Methodist bishop from Buffalo.

Smith proved no match for the Republican nominee, Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, an outstanding administrator who embodied the technological promise of the modern age. Women who had mobilized for Hoover’s food conservation campaigns during World War I enlisted as “Hoover Hostesses,” inviting friends to their homes to hear the candidate’s radio speeches.

Enjoying the benefit of eight years of Republican prosperity, Hoover promised voters that individualism and cooperative endeavors would banish poverty. He won a major victory, receiving 58 percent of the popular vote to Smith’s 41 percent and an overwhelming 444 electoral votes to Smith’s 87 (Map 22.2). Because many southern Protestants refused to vote for a Catholic, Hoover carried five ex-Confederate states, breaking the Democratic “Solid South” for the first time since Reconstruction. Despite his resounding defeat, though, Smith carried the industrialized states of Massachusetts and Rhode Island. He also carried the nation’s twelve largest cities—suggesting that urban voters were moving into the Democratic camp.
• What activist movements did women reformers undertake in the 1920s, and how successful were these?
• To what extent was Republicans' foreign policy during the 1920s consistent with their domestic agenda?
• How did grassroots conflicts over race, religion, and immigration shape politics in the 1920s?

Intellectual Modernism

Before World War I, dramatic forms of modernism had emerged in art and literature. In the 1920s, these became—like political campaigns—sites of struggle between modernity and tradition, secularism and faith. The horrors of the war prompted many American intellectuals, like their European counterparts, to question long-standing assumptions about civilization, progress, and the alleged superiority of Western cultures over so-called primitive ways of life. Some of these intellectual movements—such as the Harlem Renaissance—emerged from the social and economic upheavals that the Great War had wrought at home.

Harlem in Vogue

As the Great Migration tripled New York's black population in the decade after 1910, Harlem stood as "the symbol of liberty and the Promised Land to Negroes everywhere," as one black minister put it. Talented black artists and writers flocked to the district, where they broke with genteel traditions and asserted ties to Africa. Poet Langston Hughes drew on African American music in *The Weary Blues* (1926), a groundbreaking collection of poems. He captured the upbeat spirit of the Harlem Renaissance when he asserted, "I am a Negro—and beautiful."

Like Hughes, other writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance championed race pride. Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, and Jessie Fauset explored the black experience and represented in fiction what philosopher Alain Locke called the "New Negro." Painter Jacob Lawrence, who had grown up in crowded tenement districts of the urban North, used bold shapes and vivid colors to portray the daily life, aspirations, and suppressed anger of African Americans. Author Zora Neale Hurston spent a decade collecting folklore in the South and the Caribbean and incorporated that material into short stories and novels. This creative work embodied the ongoing struggle to find a way, as the influential black intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois explained, "to be both a Negro and an American."

Jazz

To millions of Americans, the most notable part of the Harlem Renaissance was jazz. Though the origins of the word jazz are unclear, many historians believe it was a slang term for sexual intercourse—an etymology that makes sense, given the association of early jazz with urban vice districts. As a musical form, jazz coalesced in New Orleans and other parts of the South before World War I. Borrowing from blues, ragtime, and other popular forms, jazz musicians developed an ensemble style in which individual performers, keeping a rapid ragtime beat, improvised over and around a basic melodic line. The majority of early jazz musicians were black, but white performers, some of whom had more formal training, injected elements of European concert music.
In the 1920s, as jazz spread nationwide, musicians developed its signature mode of performance, the improvised solo. The key figure in this development was cornetist and trumpeter Louis Armstrong. A native of New Orleans, Armstrong learned his craft while playing in the saloons and brothels of Storyville, the city's vice district. Armstrong showed an inexhaustible capacity for melodic invention. His dazzling solos inspired other musicians to try solos. The white trumpeter Bix Beiderbecke, for example, pioneered an influential bright-toned style. By the late 1920s, soloists had become the celebrities of jazz, thrilling audiences with their improvisational skills (see Voices from Abroad, "Patrick 'Spike' Hughes and Leo Vauchant: Europeans Encounter American Jazz," p. 700).

As jazz spread, it generally followed the routes of the Great Migration from the South to northern and western cities, where it met consumers primed to receive it. Before World War I, ragtime and other forms of dance music had created broad, enthusiastic audiences for African American music. Most cities had plentiful venues where jazz could be featured. By the 1920s, radio also helped popularize jazz, as the emerging record industry churned out records of the latest tunes. New York became the hub of this commercially lucrative jazz. While the New Orleans style persisted in Chicago, attracting enthusiasts across racial lines, New York's jazz, which featured less syncopation and fewer blues inflections, had more mainstream appeal. White listeners flocked to theaters, ballrooms, and expensive clubs to hear the "Harlem sound" from the orchestras of Duke Ellington and other stars. Yet those who hailed "primitive" black music rarely suspended their racial condescension: Visiting a mixed-race club became known as "slumming."
Through jazz, the recording industry began to develop products specifically aimed at urban working-class blacks. The breakthrough came in 1920, when Otto K. E. Heinemann, a producer who sold immigrant records in Yiddish, Swedish, and other languages, recorded singer Mamie Smith performing “Crazy Blues.” This smash hit prompted big recording labels like Columbia and Paramount to develop “race records” for black audiences. Yet, while its marketing reflected the segregation of American society at large, jazz brought black music to the center stage of American culture. It became the era’s signature music, so much so that novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald dubbed the 1920s the “Jazz Age.”

Marcus Garvey and the UNIA

Harlem produced not only a tremendous burst of artistic creativity but also broad political aspirations. It was no accident that the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which arose in the 1920s to mobilize African American workers, was based in Harlem. The UNIA’s charismatic leader, Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey, championed black separatism. Garvey urged followers to move to Africa, arguing that peoples of African descent would never be treated justly in white-run countries.

The UNIA grew rapidly in the early 1920s and soon claimed four million followers, including many recent migrants to northern industrial centers. It published a newspaper, Negro World, opened “liberty halls” in northern cities, and solicited funds for the Black Star Line steamship company, which Garvey intended to trade with the West Indies and carry American blacks back to Africa. But the UNIA declined as quickly as it had risen. In 1925, Garvey was imprisoned for mail fraud because of his solicitations for the Black Star Line. President Coolidge commuted his sentence but ordered his deportation to Jamaica. Without Garvey’s leadership, the movement collapsed.

The UNIA left a legacy of activism, however, especially among working-class blacks. Garvey and his followers represented an emerging pan-Africanism: They argued that people of African descent, in all parts of the world, had a common destiny and should cooperate in political action. Black men’s military service in Europe during World War I, the Pan-African Congress that had sought representation at the treaty table, protests against the U.S. occupation of Haiti, and modernist experiments in literature and the arts all contributed to this emerging transnational consciousness. One African American historian wrote in 1927: “The grandiose schemes of Marcus Garvey gave to the race a consciousness as such as it had never possessed before. The dream of a united Africa, not less than a trip to France, challenged the imagination, and the soul of the Negro experienced a new sense of freedom.”

Critiquing American Life

Paralleling the defiant creativity of Harlem, other artists and intellectuals of the 1920s registered various types of dissent. Some had experienced firsthand the shock and devastation of World War I, an experience so searing that American writer Gertrude Stein dubbed those who survived it the “Lost Generation.” Novelist John Dos Passos railed at the obscenity of “Mr. Wilson’s war” in The Three Soldiers (1921). Ernest Hemingway’s novels The Sun Also Rises (1926) and A Farewell to Arms (1929) portrayed the futility and dehumanizing consequences of war. Such work linked American writers to European counterparts such as Siegfried Sassoon,
Rebecca West, and Erich Maria Remarque, who explored the devastating impact of trench warfare. In a broad sense, the cataclysm of World War I challenged intellectuals' belief in progress. In his influential poem *The Waste Land* (1922), American expatriate T. S. Eliot, living in Britain, evoked the shattered fragments of a civilization in ruins.

The war also accelerated a literary trend of exploring the dark side of the human psyche. In such dramas as *Desire Under the Elms* (1924), for example, playwright Eugene O'Neill offered a Freudian view of humans' raw, ungovernable sexual impulses. O'Neill first made his mark with *The Emperor Jones* (1920), which appealed to Americans' fascination with Haiti. Telling the story of a black dictator driven from power by an uprising of his people, *The Emperor Jones* offered an ambiguous message. The drama's black protagonist was played not by the customary white actors made up in blackface, but by African Americans who won acclaim for their performances. W. E. B. Du Bois called the popular Broadway drama "a splendid tragedy." But many blacks were dissatisfied with the play's primitivism; one actor who played Emperor Jones altered the script to omit the offensive word "nigger." The white crowds who made *The Emperor Jones* a hit, much like those who flocked to Harlem's jazz clubs, indulged their fascination with "primitive" sexuality while projecting those traits onto people of African descent.

In a decade of conflict between traditional and modern worldviews, many writers exposed what they saw as the hypocrisy of small-town and rural life (see Comparing American Voices, "Urban Writers Describe Small-Town America," pp. 704–705). The most savage critic of conformity was Sinclair Lewis, whose novel *Babbitt* (1922) depicted the disillusionment of an ordinary small-town salesman. *Babbitt* was widely denounced as un-American; *Elmer Gantry* (1927), a satire about a greedy evangelical minister on the make, provoked even greater outrage. But critics found Lewis's work superb, and in 1930 he became the first American to win the Nobel Prize for literature. Even more famous was F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), which offered a scathing indictment of Americans' mindless pursuit of pleasure and material wealth.

- In what ways did the Harlem Renaissance and pan-Africanism reflect changes in African American experience?
- What were the origins of jazz, and what role did it play in the culture of the 1920s?
- What criticisms of mainstream culture did modernist American writers offer in the 1920s?

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**From Boom to Bust**

Spurred by rapid expansion during the war, American business thrived in the 1920s. Corporations expanded more and more into overseas markets, while at home the decade brought the flowering of a national consumer culture that emphasized leisure and amusement. But some sectors of the economy, notably agriculture, never recovered from a sharp recession in the wake of World War I. Meanwhile, close observers worried over the rapid economic growth and easy credit that fueled the "Roaring Twenties." Their fears proved well-founded. In 1929, these factors helped trigger the Great Depression.

**Business after the War**

By the 1920s, large-scale corporations headed by chief executive officers (CEOs) had replaced individual- or family-run enterprises as the major form of American business organization. Through successive waves of consolidation, the two hundred largest businesses came to control almost half of the country's nonbanking corporate wealth by 1929. The greatest number of mergers occurred in rising industries such as chemicals (with DuPont emerging as the leader) and electrical appliances (General Electric). Rarely did any single corporation monopolize an entire field; rather, an oligopoly of a few major producers tended to dominate each market. At the same time, mergers between Wall Street banks enhanced the role of New York City as the financial center of the United States and, increasingly, the world. U.S. companies exercised growing international 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. Republican "dollar diplomats" in Washington worked to support such enterprises.

Immediately after World War I, however, the United States experienced a series of economic shocks. They began with rampant inflation, as prices jumped by one-third in 1919 alone. Then came a sharp two-year recession that raised unemployment to 10 percent. Finally, the economy began to grow smoothly and more Americans began to benefit from the success of corporate enterprise. Between 1922 and 1929, the gross domestic product grew from $74 billion to $103 billion; in the same years, national per capita income rose an impressive 24 percent. Consumer goods, particularly the automobile, sparked this expansion. Not only did the
American Companies Abroad

United Fruit was one of the many American companies that found opportunities for investment in South America in the 1920s and introduced tropical foods to the United States. The company used elaborate and informative color advertisements to sell its products. Bananas were sufficiently exotic that the ads explained to consumers how to tell when bananas were ripe and how to store them ("Never place them in the ice-box"). Duke University Library, Special Collections.

Bananas
...a good mixer with every fruit that grows

Oranges, apples, grapefruit, pineapples, pears, melons, grapes—all these and many others—blend perfectly with bananas. The distinctive flavor of the banana, when added to a fruit cup, a fruit salad, or any fruit combination, brings out the flavor of the other fruits and makes them taste better.

EAT plenty of fresh fruits is now an accepted principle of diet—and the more right of mellow, luscious bananas is an invitation to serve many delicious and nourishing fruit combinations.

All year round from the tropics...All year round from the tropics...Aces, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, Christmas—every season, every day—bananas are available. Thanks to the unceasing and all-year-round productiveness of the tropics, they always can be had at your grocery or fruit store.

Children crave the typically flavored banana instinctively. And it is well that they do, for bananas are one of the most important energy-producing foods. Doctors and dieticians consider the banana not only one of the most nutritious foods, but also one of the most easily digested...as beneficial for growing-ups as for children.

Serve bananas with other fruits, with cereals, with milk or cream...or serve them plain. But always be sure they are fully ripe (genuinely flecked with brown spots). If they are not at the proper stage of ripeness when you buy them, let them ripen at room temperature. Never place them in the ice-box.

UNIFRUIT BANANAS
of United Fruit Company Product
Imported and Distributed by Fruit Dispatch Company
30 Murray Hill, New York, N.Y.

products themselves create growth, but manufacturing cars and refrigerators required huge quantities of steel, chemicals, and oil.

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 farmers 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 $725 (about $9,100 today). Many, especially rural tenants and sharecroppers, languished in conditions of poverty and malnutrition.

Consumer Culture

In homes across the country, middle-class Americans during the 1920s sat down to a breakfast of Kellogg's corn flakes. They got into Ford Model Ts to go to work or to shop at Safeway. In the evening, families gathered around their radios to listen to such popular programs as Great Moments in History; on weekends, they might go to see the newest Charlie Chaplin film at: the local theater. By 1929, 40 percent of American households owned a radio. At the same time, electric refrigerators and vacuum cleaners came into use in affluent homes. If one judged from the advertisements in Good Housekeeping, The Saturday Evening Post, and other popular magazines, all Americans wore fashionable clothes and drove the latest model cars. That, of course, was not true, but the advertising industry reached new levels
of ambition and sophistication, 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."

In practice, the question of who participated in consumer culture was contested. It was no accident that white mobs in the Tulsa race riot plundered radios and phonograph players from the homes of prosperous African Americans: The clear message was that whites deserved such items and blacks did not. But neither prosperity nor poverty was limited by race. Surrounded by exhortations to indulge in luxuries, millions of working-class Americans—white, black, Latino, immigrant, or native-born—barely squeaked by, with wives and mothers often taking paid work to provide basic necessities. In times of crisis, some families sold all their furniture, starting with pianos and phonograph players and continuing, if necessary, with dining tables and beds. In the Los Angeles suburb of South Gate, white working-class men secured jobs in the steel, automobile, and tire industries, but urban prices were high and families often found it difficult to make ends meet. Self-help was the watchword as husbands and wives pinched pennies, bartered with neighbors, and used their yards to raise large vegetable gardens, rabbits, and chickens.

When every dollar counted, the lure of consumer culture often created friction. Married women resented husbands who spent discretionary cash at the ballpark and expected wives to make do. Generational conflicts emerged, especially when wage-earning children challenged the long-standing expectation that their pay should go "all to mother." In St. Louis, a Czech-born woman was exasperated when her son and daughter stopped contributing to their room and board and pooled their wages to buy a car. In Los Angeles, one fifteen-year-old girl spent her summer earning $2 a day sorting tiles at a local factory. Planning to enroll in business school, she spent the resulting $75 on "a black coat with a red fox collar, costing $40," as well as shoes and other ready-made clothes. Her brother reported that "Mom is angry at her for 'squandering' so much money."

Poor and affluent families often had one thing in common: They stretched their incomes by taking advantage of new forms of borrowing, such as auto loans and installment plans. "Buy now, pay later," said the ads, and millions did—a factor that contributed to the country's broad economic overextension in the 1920s. 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 casually described his neighbor's financial situation: "She ain't got no money. Sure she buys on credit, clothes for the children and everything." Such borrowing turned out to be a contributing factor to the bust in 1929.

The Automobile No possession typified national consumer culture more than the automobile, a showpiece of modern consumer capitalism that revolutionized American economic and social life. Mass production of cars played a major role in the boom of the 1920s. In a single year, 1929, Americans spent $2.58 billion on automobiles. By the end of the decade, they owned 23 million cars—about 80 percent of the world's automobiles—or an average of one car for every six people.

The exuberant expansion of the auto industry rippled through the economy, with both positive and negative results. It stimulated the steel, petroleum, chemical, rubber, and glass industries and, directly or indirectly, provided jobs for 3.7 million workers. Highway construction became a billion-dollar-a-year enterprise, financed by federal subsidies and state gasoline taxes. Car ownership spurred the growth of suburbs and, in 1924, the first suburban shopping center: Country Club Plaza outside Kansas City, Missouri. But cars were expensive, and most Americans bought them on credit. This created risks not only for buyers but for the whole economy. Borrowers who could not pay off car loans lost their entire investment in their cars, and if they defaulted, banks were left holding unpaid loans. Amid the boom of the 1920s, however, such a scenario seemed remote.

Cars changed the way Americans spent their leisure time, as proud drivers took their machines on the road. An infrastructure of gas stations, motels, and drive-in restaurants soon catered to drivers. Cars also changed the dating patterns of young Americans. A Model T offered more privacy than did the family living room or front porch and contributed to increased sexual experimentation among the young. Though early cars were hardly comfortable places for sex, manufacturers learned to accommodate the market. The suggestive Playboy car was advertised, in 1923, as designed for the woman who "can do with eleven hundred pounds of steel and action when he's going high, wide and handsome." The Jewett, introduced in 1925, even had a fold-down bed—for camping on the road, or for other pleasures.

Railroad travel began to falter as automobiles became central to tourism. The American Automobile
Automobiles at Jacksonville Beach, Florida, 1923

The automobile transformed Americans' leisure pursuits. As proud car owners took to the road in ever-larger numbers, the "vacation" became a summer staple. Auto travel created a booming business in gas stations, roadside motels, campgrounds, and sightseeing destinations. A Florida vacation—once reserved for wealthy northeasterners who had traveled to Miami's exclusive hotels by first-class railcar—became an attainable luxury for middle-class and even some working-class families. © Curt Teich Postcard Archives, Lake County Museum.

Association, founded in 1902, estimated that in 1929 almost a third of the population took vacations by car, patronizing "autocamps" and cabins. Already, by 1923, there were 247 autocamps in Colorado alone. "I had a few days after I got my wheat cut," reported one Kansas farmer, "so I just loaded my family . . . and lit out." One elite Californian complained that automobile travel was no longer "aristocratic and exclusive." "All the mechanics, the clerks and their wives and sweethearts," observed a reporter, "driving through the Wisconsin lake

Burlington Farm Machinery Company, Wisconsin, 1926

The appeal of the internal combustion engine ranged far beyond urban consumers. In this Wisconsin showroom, farmers could view the latest combines and trucks for use on the farm. Farmers invested heavily in such equipment during the 1920s, where they could afford to do so. More and more rural laborers (along with horses and mules) were displaced by modern machines which did the work of planting and harvest. Wisconsin Historical Society.
country, camping at Niagara, scattering tin cans and pop bottles over the Rockies, made those places taboo for bankers and chairmen of the board."

In rural areas, cars contributed to a consolidation of churches, schools, and post offices: These could now be reached over longer distances, so fewer were needed. The automobile also stimulated intercommunity leagues for softball and other activities—as well as an insatiable interest in movies and other commercial pleasures. It was hard to find any corner of the United States untouched by the automobile. Rural southern blacks, if they could get use of a car, found they could travel three counties away and secure a loan that white bankers in their own county might be reluctant to offer. Whites in South Dakota were “amazed to see Sioux Indians whirl into town in family automobiles.” An anthropologist in California found, to his surprise, that men among the Pit River Achumawi people were well prepared to disassemble and repair the engine on his Model T.

Hollywood | Movies, which had their roots in the short silent films shown in turn-of-the-century nickelodeons, formed a second center of consumer culture in the 1920s. By 1910, the movie-making industry had moved 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. Adolph Zukor, for example, arrived in the United States from a Hungarian Jewish shtetl in the 1880s. Starting in Chicago with fur sales, Zukor and a partner 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 sought to produce high-quality, feature-length films. He succeeded, in part, by signing famous rising stars.

The Appeal of the Movies, 1921
Advertising in Ladies’ Home Journal in May 1921, Paramount Pictures suggested that the local movie theater could bring families closer together. Eager to make the show, father and son help the women of the family clean up after supper so they can drive together to the theater. Picture Research Consultants & Archives.
By the end of World War I, Hollywood reigned as movie capital of the world, producing nearly 90 percent of all films. New feature-length movies, exhibited in large, ornate theaters, attracted middle-class as well as working-class audiences. Early stars such as Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks became idols who set national trends in clothing and hairstyles. In Chicago, young Mexican American men sported sideburns like those of screen star Rudolph Valentino; they called each other “sheik,” a reference to one of Valentino’s famous roles. 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.

Flappers represented only a tiny minority of women, but thanks to the movies and advertising, they became an influential symbol of women’s sexual and social emancipation. In cities, young immigrant women eagerly bought American makeup and the latest flapper fashions and went dancing to jazz. Jazz stars helped popularize the style among working-class African Americans. Mexican American teenagers joined the trend, though they usually found themselves under the watchful eyes of la dueña, the chaperone. One corrido (ballad) commented sarcastically on the results:

The girls of San Antonio
Are lazy at the metate.
They want to walk out bobbed-haired,
With straw hats on.
The harvesting is finished,
So is the cotton;
The flappers stroll out now
For a good time.

American radio and film had an immediate global impact, and politicians grasped the potential benefits for the United States. In 1919, with government support, General Electric spearheaded the creation of Radio Corporation of America (RCA), to expand U.S. presence in foreign radio markets. During the 1920s, RCA — which had a federal appointee on its board of directors — emerged as a major provider of radio transmission in Latin America and East Asia. Meanwhile, by 1925, American films made up 95 percent of the movies screened in Britain, 80 percent in Latin America, and 70 percent in France. When Britain and Germany instituted quotas, requiring that the number of imported films not exceed the number of domestic ones, Hollywood studios set up European subsidiaries to churn out hundreds of “quota quickies,” allowing the flow of imports to continue unchecked.

As European and Latin American audiences embraced the American movie industry, critics understood it as a serious cultural challenge. Protestant missionaries with “pious brochures,” one Frenchman noted gloomily, had been replaced by their “more cheerful offspring,” who now deluged the world with “blond movie stars.” But, he added, both groups were “equally devoted to spreading the American way of life.” As early as 1920, movie stars Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford were greeted by immense crowds when they visited London and Paris on their honeymoon. The State Department, tracking their trip, arranged for the couple to gain extra publicity by meeting with European royalty. The United States was experimenting with what historians call soft power — the exercise of popular cultural influence — as radio and movies exuberantly celebrated the American Dream.