

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_  
THE ROARING TWENTIES

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#### BACKGROUND:

After **World War I** came to an end, the United States reverted back to its decades-long policy of **neutrality**. America turned inward and concentrated on itself – shielding its industries with protectionist policies. The 1920's was an era of **rapid change and clashing values**. Many Americans believed society was losing its traditional values, and they took action to preserve these values. Other Americans embraced new values associated with a freer lifestyle and the pursuit of individual goals. Writers and artists pursued distinctly American themes, and the **Harlem Renaissance** gave African-Americans new pride. The 1920's left permanent legacies to American culture. During this era, national celebrities emerged in sports and film. **Jazz music** became part of American culture. During this era, **F. Scott Fitzgerald** and **Ernest Hemingway** wrote classics of American literature.

As you read these notes and complete the assignments, ask yourself the following questions:

- (1) What led to a resurgence of racism and nativism in the 1920's?
- (2) What effects did sports, movies, radio, and music have on popular culture in the U.S. during the 1920's?
- (3) What impact did the Harlem Renaissance have on U.S. society?
- (4) What factors led to an increase in African-American political activism?

#### I. **President Warren G. Harding** (1920-1923)

1. **"Return to normalcy"** Harding called for a return to the way things were (culturally, economically and politically) before WW I. This meant a return to international neutrality; business as usual
2. **Teapot Dome Scandal:** Secretary of the Interior Albert Fall was convicted of taking bribes in exchange for allowing oil companies to lease or rent government-owned oil reserves in Teapot Dome, Wyoming.
3. President Harding died while in his first term in office. Vice President Calvin Coolidge became President

#### II. **President Calvin Coolidge** (1923-1929)

1. Strong backer of big business; supported owners, management, and the wealthy over the rights and interests of workers
2. Coolidge championed **laissez-faire** as his strict economic policy

### III. The Economy of the 1920's

1. **Gross National Product ("GNP")**: is the sum total, in dollars, of all products and services produced by an economy in a fiscal year. Economists use GNP to measure if an economy is growing or receding.
2. Between 1923 and 1929, GNP rose a staggering 40%
3. Per capita income rose 30% during the period 1923-1929. Much of the 30% growth in income accounted for wealthier earners, rather than the working class.
4. There was an overall increase in the standard of living; there was little inflation and greater purchasing power. Again, these benefits were enjoyed more by wealthy earners.
5. Business Boom or "False Prosperity??"
  - Big business and the wealthy benefited from lower tax rates
  - Protectionism shielded U.S. industries from foreign competition
  - Regulatory agencies (ie. Federal Reserve, Federal Trade Commission, & Interstate Commerce Commission) saw their role as helping big business instead of regulating it.
  - There was a relaxed attitude toward corporate mergers. This had the effect of allowing many mergers – some that might have been against the public interest.

#### 6. Groups Left Out of Prosperity

##### a) Labor

- Government used court **injunctions** (orders) to prevent strikes
- The Supreme Court ruled against laws that prohibited child labor and laws that set minimum wages for workers
- Union membership declined 30% during the 1920's
- Real wages (wages adjusted for inflation) increased only slightly

##### b) Farmers

- During World War I, , farmers increased production to meet demand; they also borrowed heavily to buy new machinery and larger farms
- New technology increased output per acre
- After World War I, when European nations began producing again, the oversupply in America caused crop and land prices to fall dramatically
- Many farms were **foreclosed** – taken back by the bank/lender that held the mortgage, then sold at auction

#### 7. Flaws in the Stock Market

- Many investors bought stocks **on margin**
- When buying stocks **on margin**, investors would typically put down 5-10% and borrow the rest from their broker. They counted on the rise in value of their stocks – selling them for a quick profit – to pay off the debt to their broker.
- Buying on margin is also known as **leveraging** a purchase

#### IV. Foreign Policy

1. In 1914, prior to World War I, the U.S. was a **debtor nation**. This meant that the U.S. owed more to foreign nations than foreign nations owed to the U.S. By the 1920's, the U.S. became the world's leading **creditor nation**.
2. The War Debt Controversy
  - U.S. allies from World War I (Great Britain and France) owed the U.S. large amounts of money that was lent to them during the war. The big question was how would we get our Allies to pay us back?
  - The U.S. lent money to Germany, so it could pay its reparations to the victorious Allies (as per the Treaty of Versailles). The Allies, in turn, could then repay the U.S.
3. The Search for Peace and Arms Control
  - The **Washington Naval Conference** (1921)- a meeting of the U.S. and European nations that limited the number of warships on the seas
  - **The Kellogg-Briand Pact** (1928)- an international agreement that outlawed war
  - There was no means to enforce any of the agreements or treaties for arms reduction or outlawing war

#### V. The "Roaring" Twenties

1. The name "Roaring Twenties" refers to the struggle with social change in the U.S. as it changed from an agricultural nation of small and medium-sized towns to an industrialized nation increasingly dominated by cities. In fact, by 1920, for the first time, the number of Americans living in cities exceeded the number of Americans living elsewhere.
2. Changes in lifestyle, values, morals and manners increased tension and conflict between people living in traditional rural areas and those living in cities.
3. Technology
  - Led by **Henry Ford** and the auto industry, **mass production**, with its **moving assembly lines**, resulted in uniform products produced at **lower prices**.
  - New technology also made American culture more uniform. Americans from coast to coast tended to use the same products, wear the same styles, see the same movies, and listen to the same music.
  - Eventually, with the invention of **radio** and **motion pictures**, Americans all over the country began to hear the same news and admire the same public figures. These people became known as national heroes or celebrities.

## VI. Urban-Suburban Growth

1. More Americans than ever were living in **cities**
2. The 1920's also saw the growth of the **suburbs** – areas outside of cities that were neither urban nor rural
3. This growth created a **conflict** between urban and suburban needs, priorities, and values

## VII. Shifting Cultural Values

1. The 1920's saw a revolution in American lifestyle; with a shorter work week and higher wages, more vacation time and more consumer product choices, Americans had more leisure time
2. Popular movies of the 1920's included ***The Ten Commandments*** and ***The Jazz Singer***
3. Popular movie stars: **Charlie Chaplin**, **Clara Bow**, and **Rudolf Valentino**, who was adored by women as America's first *sex symbol*
4. American heroes included aviator **Charles Lindbergh**, who flew the first solo, non-stop airplane flight across the Atlantic Ocean. Also, **baseball** became America's favorite pastime. **Babe Ruth** was its first mega-star. Ruth's popularity enabled the New York Yankees to build **Yankee Stadium**, which opened in 1923 (*"The House That Ruth Built"*). Yankee Stadium would remain the home of the Yankees through 2008.
5. **The Jazz Age** – Jazz music was based on another genre of music known as the Blues, which emanated from black musicians in the American South. Blues and Jazz are distinctly American genres of music. Some of the best-known artists of the Jazz Age were **Duke Ellington**, **Louis Armstrong**, and female singer **Billie Holiday**.
6. **The Harlem Renaissance** – a cultural movement of black writers, poets, artists and musicians in the New York City neighborhood of **Harlem**. In their works, they expressed pride in Black culture and spoke out against prejudice and discrimination. Figures of this movement included **Langston Hughes**, **Alain Locke**, and **W.E.B. Du Bois**. One of the famous nightclubs in Harlem was **The Cotton Club**, which featured all-black entertainment and catered to an all-white audience. During this time, staff members and performers were forced to enter through the back door, while white customers entered through the front.

## VIII. Women's Changing Roles

1. By the 1920's, there were more working women. Many jobs were created with women in mind – like teaching, clerical work, social work, and retail sales
2. **The Women's Bureau** – created in 1920; a government agency within the Labor Department that tried to monitor and improve working conditions for women.
3. **The League of Women Voters** – established in 1920 with the goal of increasing the number of women voters. Today, the League publishes **non-partisan** (unbiased) information about candidates for office, and sponsors candidates' debates during the election season.
4. Culture/Style – "**Flappers**" was the name given to describe the "new woman" of the 1920's. Flappers tended to be young (20's), pretty, wear bobbed hair and short skirts. They tended to be independent-minded and single. They frequented nightclubs in cities, where they smoked cigarettes and drank

alcoholic beverages. This image was so different that it caused conflict between traditional-minded Americans in rural areas and progressive-minded Americans in cities.

## IX. Constitutional and Legal Issues During the 1920's

There are five main issues or events that provide the best examples of **the struggle between traditional and modern culture** that occurred during the 1920's:

### A. The "Red Scare"

- Public fear of **socialists** and **communists** in the U.S. during the 1920's
- Many people who had unpopular political views were arrested, jailed, or even deported
- Such views were considered by the majority of the population to be "**un-American**"
- These actions had the chilling effect of discouraging people to speak freely and from engaging in open debate

### B. Sacco and Vanzetti

- Two Italian immigrants who were accused and convicted of murder in Massachusetts
- The evidence was questionable; many believed that they were charged, convicted and executed mainly because of their unpopular political views and their Italian ancestry
- Sacco and Vanzetti were political **anarchists**. Anarchists support rebellion against all governments or established powers. They seek the elimination of all government.
- Acknowledging a lack of evidence and the bigotry of the past, the Governor of Massachusetts granted a posthumous pardon to Sacco and Vanzetti in 1977. **Posthumous** means *after* one's death.

### C. Ku Klux Klan

- The Klan experienced a rebirth and revival during the period 1915-1929
- The wrath of the Klan remained focused on black Americans, but also grew to include Catholics, Jews and immigrants.
- They stood for only what they believed to be "true 100% Americans." At the time, that meant people who were white, Protestant, and American-born.
- By 1927, the KKK claimed 20 million members, including some elected officials across the U.S.
- The KKK was immortalized in the silent film ***Birth of a Nation*** directed by D.W. Griffith

### D. Prohibition

- The movement to ban alcohol started in the mid-1800's with the **Temperance Movement**
- The **18<sup>th</sup> Amendment** was ratified in 1920; this made illegal the manufacture, transport, and sale of all alcoholic beverages in the U.S.

- Prohibition turned out to be virtually unenforceable; people found numerous ways to obtain alcohol, including from churches and in nightclubs called **speakeasies**, which were run by gangsters
- Prohibition made gangsters like **Al Capone** extremely rich
- The nation's experience with Prohibition during the 1920's made it clear that it is very difficult to legislate morality to the masses of people. Like the **Fugitive Slave Laws** of the 1850's, Prohibition was ignored by the masses of people who simply did not agree with the law on principle.
- Prohibition was ended when the **21<sup>st</sup> Amendment** was ratified in 1933. (Remember: the only way to do away with a constitutional amendment is by passing another amendment)

#### E. The Scopes Trial

- This event occurred in Dayton, Tennessee during the summer of 1925 and received national and worldwide attention
- Tennessee law dictated that only **biblical creationism** could be taught to explain the existence of humans on Earth. John Scopes was a biology teacher who deliberately violated state law by teaching **Darwin's theory of evolution**.
- The main issue was should it be constitutional to force the teaching of creationism, which was religious in nature, and not allow the teaching of other explanations like Darwin's scientific theories?
- This trial became a battleground between those who were trying to protect traditional culture and viewpoints and those who supported more modern viewpoints. This was a classic example of the cultural war between the cities and the rural areas.
- Scopes was convicted by a Tennessee jury, although prosecution and arguments and testimony weakened religious arguments that favored creationism.
- The main players in this trial were evangelical **William Jennings Bryan**, chief witness for the prosecution, and **Clarence Darrow**, Scopes' attorney
- Scopes was fined, but never jailed. His conviction was mostly forgotten, but the long-term effects changed America forever. Science became more widely accepted by Americans, but the science vs. religion battles would never really end.

The "roaring" twenties would come to a sudden end in **October of 1929** with the **crash of the stock market**. By the 1930, America was in the depths of an economic depression the likes of which it had never seen. In 1933 the U.S. would get a new President and by the time the U.S. entered World War II in 1941, the role of government in the U.S. would change forever.