

Chapter 21 Notes

The decade of the 1920s began with troubling economic signs but soon became an era of economic prosperity for many Americans. Prosperity was accompanied by pro-business attitudes and unparalleled consumerism. The federal government remained active in its support of business interests, and it became more passive in its regulation of those interests. During this period, the Supreme Court handed down antiregulatory decisions and organized labor suffered setbacks. Furthermore, pro-business attitudes reminiscent of the Gilded Age marked the Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover administrations. Most reforms took place at the state and local levels. Interest in reform concerning Indian affairs led to the reorganization of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, but Indian policy matters continued to be characterized by paternalism. Furthermore, while newly enfranchised women lobbied and gained passage of some legislation helpful to them, women generally struggled to find their political voice.

In section two, “Government, Politics, and Reform,” involvement in disarmament talks and arms limitation treaties, acceptance of the Kellogg-Briand Pact outlawing war, and international economic expansion by the United States serve as examples of the independent internationalist approach to foreign policy undertaken by the United States during the 1920s. These examples also illustrate the drawbacks of such an approach. United States acceptance of arms limitations treaties that did not limit the use of some of the most dangerous weapons of the age—submarines, destroyers, and cruisers—meant the continuation of rearmament. Acceptance of a treaty that outlawed war but had no enforcement provisions served a useful educational purpose but did not prevent war.

The consumerism of the age, described in “A Consumer Society,” was fueled by the growing purchasing power of many American families and the accompanying ability to acquire the goods associated with a consumer society. Both the automobile and the sophisticated techniques of modern advertising transformed the American life style.

The urbanization of American society continued in the 1920s. Although movement to cities offered opportunities to many, African American migrants found that white racism was as prevalent in urban areas as it had been in the rural South. However, blacks’ urban ghetto experience aroused their class and ethnic consciousness, as seen both in Marcus Garvey’s Black Nationalist movement and in the cultural outpouring known as the Harlem Renaissance. Racism also shaped the lives of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and other newcomers to American cities and contributed to “white flight” from the inner city and to suburban growth.

The way in which Americans spent their time changed. For instance, labor-saving devices lightened the tasks of women working in the home. But since women were still expected to clothe and feed the family, and since few women produced clothes and preserved food at home, they spent their time shopping for these goods and became the primary consumers in society.

Altered attitudes and values brought about by societal changes found expression in new clothing and hair styles and in a new openness about human sexuality. Increased longevity resulting from improved diets and improved healthcare led to an increase in the number of older Americans and to limited attempts to respond to their needs. At the same time, compulsory-school-attendance laws increased the influence of the peer group in the socialization of children. Furthermore, a combination of consumerism and economic necessity caused more women, including married women, to work outside the home. The work they performed and the wages they earned were largely determined by the sex-segregated characteristics of the labor market and, for nonwhites, by racial bias. In spite of sexism and racism, however, many women placed family needs above individual needs.

Many people felt threatened by change, and some, attempting to protect traditional attitudes and values, reacted defensively, sometimes with attempts to blame change on scapegoats. The emergence of the “new” Klan and the increase in nativism and fear of radicalism (evidenced in the Sacco and Vanzetti

case) may be seen in this light. Religious fundamentalism also gained strength, as the Scopes trial revealed.

More leisure time and a search for entertainment meant that spectator sports and the movies became big business. As the conformist aspects of mass culture caused individuality to fade, Americans found heroes in sports figures, movie idols, and media-created personalities. Caught between two value systems, many Americans gave lip service to the old, as evidenced in their professed support of the Prohibition experiment, but chose the new, as the breakdown of Prohibition in the cities shows.

In literature, the 1920s saw the work of the Lost Generation and of the Harlem Renaissance. In music, it was the age of jazz, America's most distinctive art form, and of such talented composers as Aaron Copland and George Gershwin. In architecture, Frank Lloyd Wright predominated. Overall, the period stands as one of the most creative in American history.

In politics, the presidency remained in Republican hands in 1928 as most Americans affirmed their confidence in the building of a New Era of prosperity for all. But with the stock market crash of 1929, the optimism of 1928 gave way to concern and ultimately, with the onset of the Great Depression, to despair. The Jazz Age ended. The American economic system would have to be rebuilt.