

# *A Brief History of the United States*

By Adam McGarry  
Edited by John Braithwaite  
Unit Seven (B)

## 1920-1930 The Roaring 20's

The 1920's were a time period of sharp contrasts and a struggle between new and old ideas. More people lived in cities rather than the country side for the first time in the 1920 census. Technology, new consumer goods, and the new freedom possessed by young adults caused an intense reaction by some to return to the good old days as demonstrated by **fundamentalism**, **immigration restriction**, and **prohibition**.

The 1920 election was a "return to normalcy" as stated by the new president, Warren Harding. This meant that Americans were turning away from the tumultuous **Progressivism** and involvement in international affairs toward a calmer, more **isolationist** time.

Americans had also tired of the teeming refuse (immigrant hordes) from foreign shores. The congress passed strict **anti immigration laws**. The trial of immigrant anarchists **Sacco and Vanzetti** highlighted to the world just how **nativist** and anti immigrant that America had become. The pair were executed in a highly biased court case (the judge had made racial slurs in front of the jury). The new **Ku Klux Klan** was revived in 1915. This new incarnation of the Klan added immigrants, Jews, and Catholics to its hate list in addition to African Americans. It gained strength in the North and Midwest by espousing "traditional values". In a show of extreme arrogance, Klansmen and women marched from the Capital to the White House in Washington D.C. It all fell apart for the Klan when top members were caught embezzling (stealing) millions. By the end of the decade the Klan was a mere shell of its former strength.

African Americans in New York City, specifically the borough of Harlem, began a literary, artistic, and musical movement that was dubbed the **Harlem Renaissance**. **Langston Hughes**, **Duke Ellington**, and **Louie Armstrong** led the surge in the black artistic movement. Many white people came to Harlem to hear the new music of **jazz**.

The **movies** were very popular, having begun at the turn of the century. They were silent until the movie **The Jazz Singer** debuted in 1927 as the first talking picture. **Radio** was king for the decade though, with at least 90% of homes having at least one radio. People listened to the radio approximately four hours a day.

The **automobile** dominated the decade, with one out of every eight workers employed by an automobile related industry. Most people had a car due to the **assembly line**, which produced large numbers of cars which lowered the price. This made the car affordable for the middle class. Young people enjoyed new social freedoms on dates away from parental chaperones. They engaged in a naughty practice known as **petting** which quite naturally led to pre-marital sex. Modern young women who wore short hair, short skirts, smoked, caroused with men, and challenged social mores were known as **flappers**.

**Prohibition** gave rise to **bootlegging** alcohol. Everyday people began breaking the law by **smuggling** and making booze. The mob or gangsters took over **bootlegging** making millions in the illicit trade. It also increased violence with **Al Capone's** gang gunning down any rivals.

**Charles Lindbergh**, who visited **Thomas Edison** in Fort Myers, was the first person to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean. Air travel had begun in 1903 with the **Wright Brothers** flying the first airplane in **Kitty Hawk** North Carolina, but it was not a safe, practical machine until the 1920's.

The **Scopes "monkey" Trial** put Darwin's theory of evolution on trial. It was a dramatic demonstration of old beliefs and new ideas that were struggling for dominance. The new **Darwin** vs. the old **fundamentalist** belief in the Bible.

New modern conveniences such as refrigerators, washing machines, vacuums, ovens, toasters, and radios were advertised very heavily. People loved how the new conveniences made life easier and bought as many items as they could in a practice known as **consumerism**. Buying on an **installment plan** or **credit** made it seem affordable ("only a dollar down and a dollar forever"). There were writers and critics named the **Lost Generation** of this new **consumerism** and **conformity**, most prominent among them were **F. Scott Fitzgerald**, **Sinclair Lewis**, **John Steinbeck**, **Gertude Stein**, and **Ernest Hemingway**.

**Big Business ruled** in the 1920's. The official policy of the government was to assist business, not to regulate it. **President Coolidge** even said that a man who works in a factory worships in a temple. The business owners got rich, but the workers didn't fair as well. The **gap between rich and poor widened**, as it did again in the 1980's. The **stock market** was **unregulated** which led everyday people to **speculate** in the red hot market. People could **buy on the margin**, which is to place a small amount of money as a down payment. People also invested in Florida real estate (largely unseen swamp land). During the 1920's Barron Giff Collier completed the Tamiami Trail (U.S. 41) across the Everglades to Miami. Florida had experienced a land boom in the 1920's until two hurricanes put the breaks on. Small farmers were also hit hard in the 1920's; they owed a tremendous amount of money that they borrowed and began losing their farms to foreclosure.

The **Stock Market Crash of 1929** signaled the end of the roaring 20's and the beginning of the Great Depression. The causes of the **Great Depression** were: **Stock Speculation**, **Buying on the Margin**, **Overproduction**, **debt (due to buying on credit)**, and the yawning, monetary **gap between rich and poor**.

### **1930-1940 The Great Depression**

The **Great Depression** was a worldwide economic depression. In the United States and many other countries one out of every four people were unemployed. The government assumed that the economy would fix itself as it did after the economic panics of 1819, 1873, and 1892. So, the government did very little to help. The belief was that you helped yourself and didn't expect a handout or **direct relief** from the government. The President, **Herbert Hoover**, called this attitude **rugged individualism**. Some people even believed that it would hurt a person psychologically if they received a handout.

Things were so bad that World War I veterans went to Washington D.C. to ask for their bonus ten years early. They were called the **bonus army** and they lived in shacks for weeks around Washington. Hoover had **General Douglas MacArthur** remove them. MacArthur went overboard and viciously attacked the veterans. Some veterans ended up in the Florida Keys to build the overseas highway. Unfortunately, many of them were killed by the hurricane of 1935. People roamed from town to town looking for work. Men who traveled illegally by train were called **hobos**. The **dust bowl**, a dry region that blew away farms in the plains states, further added to the nation's misery as many of the so called **Arkies** or **Okies** moved to California. People who were evicted from their homes lived in shacks made from scrap materials called "**Hoovervilles**". Not surprisingly, Hoover was beaten in a landslide by **Franklin Delano Roosevelt**, or **FDR**, in the election of 1932.

**Roosevelt** came from a wealthy family, but unbeknownst to the public was paralyzed from the waist down due to polio. As a result of his struggles to walk he had affection for the common man, whom he referred to as the forgotten man. He utilized the radio to get his message across to the American public. He gave popular **fireside chats** on the radio to assure the public that "there is nothing to fear, but fear itself".

**FDR's** first order of business was to fix the banks that were collapsing. Thousands of people were losing their life savings to banks going out of business. He had legislation passed called **Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, FDIC**, which would insure bank deposits.

**FDR** pushed a plethora of major legislation through congress in the first 100 days of his term in office. Critics called his plans **alphabet soup** because each law and agency that was created went by initials. The **New Deal** included **relief** or immediate assistance, **recovery** to get businesses and people back to work, and **reform** to fix the system so a depression would never occur again.

Some of the most popular **New Deal programs** were: **Agriculture Adjustment Act (AAA)** to help struggling farmers, the **Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)** to put young men to work on public works projects, the **Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA)**, to provide flood control and energy for seven states, the **Works Progress Administration (WPA)** to put people to work on public projects, the **Social Security Act** to help the elderly, disabled and unemployed and the **Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC)** to regulate the stock market.

The **New Deal** didn't get America out of the **Great Depression**; it would take World War II to accomplish that. However, the **New Deal** gave people hope. Some of the societal and economic changes are still impacting America today. It is little wonder that **FDR** was elected as president a record four times.