

CHAPTER
12

TELESCOPING THE TIMES

Politics of the Roaring Twenties

Summary

CHAPTER OVERVIEW Americans lash out at those who are different while they enjoy prosperity and new conveniences produced by American businesses.

1 Americans Struggle with Postwar Issues

MAIN IDEA A desire for normalcy after the war and a fear of communism and “foreigners” led to postwar isolationism.

Events in faraway Russia had an effect on the United States after World War I. Massive protests led the Russian ruler to step down from the throne in March 1917. In November of that year, radicals seized the government and established the world’s first Communist state. Soon, this new government issued a call for worldwide revolution. Its leaders wanted to overthrow the capitalist system and abolish private property.

About 70,000 people, called “Reds,” joined the new Communist party in the United States. Though their numbers were small, their radicalism and threats aroused fear among many people. As a “Red Scare” swept the nation, Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer decided to remove the threat.

Palmer formed a new agency in the Justice Department to find and punish radicals. His agents arrested Communists, Socialists, and anarchists, who opposed any government at all. The agents often disregarded the rights of the people they arrested. Hundreds of radicals were sent out of the country without a trial. But Palmer never found evidence of a conspiracy to overthrow the government, and the fear passed.

The U.S. was actually becoming isolationist again—pulling away from world affairs. Dislike of foreigners resulted in a new immigration law. With the Emergency Quota Act of 1921, Congress limited the number of people admitted into the country each year. A revised version passed in 1924 cut the flow of immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe. It put a stop to Japanese immigration altogether. In 1929, Congress voted to further limit the number of immigrants admitted each year.

Many suffered in the hysteria. A celebrated case involved two Italian immigrants, Nicola Sacco and

Bartolomeo Vanzetti. The pair—both admitted radicals—were arrested for a double murder during a robbery in Massachusetts. Although the case was not strong, they were convicted and executed. Protests poured in from around the world.

The “Red Scare” revealed a general sense of unease in society, as did the revival of the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan began to flourish in the early 1920s. Klan leaders opposed African Americans, Jews, immigrants, and Catholics. By 1924, KKK membership numbered about 4.5 million, and the Klan helped elect officeholders in many states. Its popularity declined with increased criminal activity.

The postwar period also saw a revival of labor troubles. A strike of Boston police officers was forcefully put down by Massachusetts Governor Calvin Coolidge. Violence erupted over a massive 1919 steel strike, with workers demanding the right to unionize. Steel makers labeled the workers as Communists, and the strike was broken in 1920. Later, a church group revealed the harsh conditions in steel mills. Embarrassed steel makers shortened the workday to eight hours. However, the steel workers still had no union.

United Mine Workers president John L. Lewis was able to win wage increases for coal miners. A. Philip Randolph also successfully organized an African-American union of railroad porters. Unions were not generally successful in the 1920s, however, as union membership dropped from about 5 million to about 3.5 million workers.

2 The Harding Presidency

MAIN IDEA The Harding administration appealed to America’s desire for calm and peace after the war, but resulted in scandal.

In the presidential election of 1920, Republicans nominated Warren G. Harding, a pleasant man of little ability. Harding and Calvin Coolidge swept into office in a landslide victory.

In the 1920s, the United States promoted world peace. A 1921 conference in Washington produced a historic agreement among five major naval powers to dismantle some of their naval ships. For the first time, nations had agreed to reduce their weapons. In 1928, virtually all the world powers signed the Kellogg-Briand Pact. In doing so, each nation renounced war.

However, new conflicts arose. The U.S. wanted Britain and France to pay their war debts. This was difficult, since Congress had enacted a high tariff that made it impossible for them to sell their goods to the United States. The two countries pressured Germany to meet its payments for reparations, but Germany's economy was destroyed. A series of U.S. loans to Germany left Britain and France angry.

On the home front, President Harding's cabinet choices were just as burdensome. While some of his Cabinet appointments were distinguished, a number were soon found to be engaged in bribery and corruption. The biggest scandals involved tracts of public land called Teapot Dome and Elk Hills. The lands held oil, and Secretary of the Interior Albert Fall secretly leased the land to two oil companies. He received money and property in return.

Amidst rumors of corruption in his administration, Harding died. Calvin Coolidge became president.

3 The Business of America

MAIN IDEA *Consumer goods fueled the business boom of the 1920s as America's standard of living soared.*

American business was transforming American society, and the automobile led the way. America became a car culture. By the late 1920s, about 80 percent of all motor vehicles in the world were in the United States. States and cities built an elaborate network of new roads and highways. As cars made it possible for workers to live farther from their homes, cities grew larger. Cities in Ohio and especially Michigan grew as major centers of automobile manufacturing.

The airplane industry grew as well. Planes carried the nation's mail, and passenger service was introduced.

Another major change was the spread of electricity. Whereas electricity had been found only in central cities before, it now stretched to the suburbs although farms still lacked electric power. Electrical appliances—radios, washing machines, and vacuum cleaners among them—began appearing in homes across America.

To convince people to buy these new appliances, businesses adopted new methods of advertising. No longer content only to give information about products, they now used ads to sell an image. Widespread advertising meant that certain brand names became nationally known. A new form of mass entertainment—radio—provided advertisers a way of reaching huge audiences.

The prosperity that business was generating seemed unstoppable. National income rose from \$64 billion in 1921 to \$87 billion in 1929. This prosperity masked problems, however.

First, the business scene was not completely healthy. As workers produced more in the same number of hours, businesses grew, sometimes producing more goods than they could sell. Chain stores spread across the nation. With this growth, however, the difference in income between business managers and workers grew. Also, mining companies, railroads, and farms were suffering.

Second, consumer debt rose to alarming levels. Businesses helped promote consumer spending by allowing customers to buy on credit. By making the payments low and spreading them over a long period of time, businesses made it easy for consumers to decide to purchase all the goods that the businesses were producing.

Review

1. How did people reveal distrust of others in the 1920s?
2. What happened to the labor movement in the 1920s?
3. What progress was made toward world peace in the 1920s?
4. What problems arose in Harding's cabinet?
5. What problems did the business boom hide?