

Postwar Economic Downturn

- **Postwar Economic Downturn** After World War I ended in 1919, the U.S. economy suffered a serious downturn. The national income dropped severely from \$79 billion in 1920 to \$63 billion in 1922, and average annual personal incomes from \$835 to \$672. The recession was due in part to the end of wartime production, which had created millions of jobs and expanded factories throughout the United States. As soldiers returned from the war to claim jobs, and wartime factories closed, many people found themselves out of work. Many women, who had been encouraged to join the war effort, were pushed out of jobs to make way for returning male workers. Farmers, seamstresses, and coal miners, many of them recent immigrants from Russia, Eastern Europe, Mexico, and East Asia, often lost their jobs to native white workers or accepted extremely low pay to stay employed. Unlike the wealthier sectors of American society, these laborers were unable to afford the modern technology of the time, like cars and radios.
- **African Americans** African Americans were hit particularly hard by the postwar recession. Encouraged by wartime jobs, approximately two million African Americans migrated and settled in northern cities between 1910 and 1930. From 1910 to 1920, Detroit's black population grew eightfold from 5,000 to 41,000, and Chicago's more than doubled to 109,500. African Americans left the rigid Jim Crow segregation laws and lynching of the south for the "Land of Hope" in the northern states. However, as African Americans had "just [begun] to feel like a man" earning wages to support their families, the war ended, severely limiting their employment opportunities. Blacks faced harsh workplace discrimination, and were often forced out of industry jobs into menial labor positions such as janitors and domestic servants. As Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes wryly observed when the Great Depression struck down the nation's economy at the end of the decade, blacks "had but a few pegs to fall."
- **Competition for Jobs** The severe downsizing of many industries led to competition for resources across all sectors of society. This competition in turn developed into class and racial tensions and burgeoning intolerance, as societal groups struggled to claim and protect their pieces of the U.S. economic pie. Workers staged strikes for better wages and working conditions and were often met with violence. Under the leadership of the attorney general, the government raided and arrested members of left-leaning political parties and instituted anti-immigration legislation. White supremacy groups like the Ku Klux Klan harassed and persecuted members of minority groups, and the U.S. government jailed black leaders advocating black power, like Marcus Garvey. Adding to the tension, religious fundamentalists battled with scientists over the teaching of evolution. The government did little to ameliorate the building tensions, and instead was plagued with corruption and political scandals.

Labor Unrest

- **Labor Unrest** The dissatisfaction of underprivileged workers led to one of the key societal tensions of the era: labor unrest. During 1919 alone, 4 million workers held 3,600 strikes protesting wage cuts and long hours with no overtime pay. Some strikers met with modest success; for example, the United Mine Workers' coal strike won workers a 14 percent wage increase. However, most laborers faced rigid and violent opposition from companies, the government, and the public. When Seattle's 60,000 shipyard and metal-trades workers struck against low pay, the mayor called in the U.S. Marines to forcefully end the strike, serving the workers a crushing defeat. The steel strike around the Great Lakes region, in which 350,000 workers protested their 36-hour shifts, and the Boston Police strike against painfully low wages, ended similarly. In both cases, when state troopers clubbed strikers or ran them out of town, the public sympathized with company employers and future president Calvin Coolidge, who declared "There is no right to strike against the public safety by anybody, anywhere, any time." Discouraged by unsuccessful strikes and violence, many workers turned away from the unions and sought work—even low-paying work—to feed their families. During the 1920s, labor union membership declined from 5 million to 3.4 million.
- **Labor Linked to Anti-Communist Fears** Although union membership declined, many Americans continued to view labor with suspicion. This was due in part to the fact that a large proportion of the laboring classes in the United States were of Russian or Eastern European extraction. In the wake of the Russian Revolution of 1917, in which communist leaders took power in Russia and pledged to inspire worldwide revolution among the working class, many Americans feared that striking laborers were really subversives and radicals. When the American Communist Party was established in 1919 with a membership that was 25 percent Russian and 50 percent Eastern European, distressed Americans became convinced that recent immigrants aimed to carry out a communist revolutionary plot in the United States. Anti-communist sentiment was further fueled by corporations and the government, who saw organized labor as a threat to the stability of the country and the economy.

Political Scandals

- **Harding and Political Scandal** The first U.S. president of the 1920s, Warren G. Harding, failed to diffuse the tensions that were rife in postwar society. Instead his actions often contributed to the nation's political and economic strife. Harding, who served from 1921 until his death in 1923, is sometimes ranked by historians as the worst president in U.S. history. On the surface, he was more likable than his stern-faced wartime predecessor, Woodrow Wilson. Harding was also more open-minded; he advocated for anti-lynching laws and received labor leader Eugene Debs in the White House. However, Harding's cabinet appointments proved disastrously corrupt, and the president supported rather than dismissed his faulty officials.
- Attorney General Harry Daugherty regularly allowed political allies to break the law and was overly harsh in crushing miners' strikes. Harding's friend, Jesse L. Smith, sold public offices for cash or political promises. Worst of all, in a scandal known as the Teapot Dome, Secretary of the Interior Albert Fall leased the U.S. Navy's petroleum reserves to private interests for a bribe. When uncovered, evidence in the Teapot Dome scandal implicated Harding with assisting Fall, turning the public against the president. Without positive intervention from the federal government, tensions grew into violence throughout the 1920s.

Rising Intolerance

- **Nationwide Racial Discrimination** After World War I, a growing number of white Americans alarmed by the country's diverse population participated in individual and organized racial discrimination. In California, for example, carpenter unions barred Japanese laborers from membership, white residents complained of Asian immigrants as a "Yellow Peril," and white schoolchildren threw rocks at American-born Asians shouting, "Go back to China!" In the northern Midwest, white nativists resisted the influx of African Americans by harshly segregating real estate and public services. Some corporate leaders, such as Henry Ford, threatened by Jewish business success, circulated anti-Semitic literature. In the southwest, some white restaurant owners barred Mexican customers from eating their food, directing them to eateries "For Colored People." Ironically, Mexicans in turn discriminated against the "colored" population—African Americans—because they considered blacks to hold the lowest ethnic status in America.
- **The New Ku Klux Klan** Arising from many Americans' intolerance and racism was the philosophy that to be truly American, a person must belong to one race, religion, and political and economic philosophy. In 1915 "nativists," most of whom were white Protestants who believed only "natives" were real Americans, rebirthed the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), a white supremacist organization born just after the Civil War. During the 1920s to mid 1930s, Hiram Wesley Evans served as the "Imperial Wizard," or leader, of the Klan. Publicly, Evans denied that the KKK centered around hatred of others, emphasizing that the Klan was a patriotic, benevolent organization that supported education, morality, charity, and honoring the American flag. But Evans' followers actually opposed a long list of people: Catholics, blacks, Jews, immigrants, homosexuals, Asians, drug dealers, "wild women," the Pope, and politician Franklin Delano Roosevelt.
- The KKK's newspaper *Searchlight* ordered members to "Search everywhere for hidden enemies, vipers at the heart's blood of our sacred republic." The Ku Klux Klan's "Invisible Empire" attracted more than four million members at its height in 1924, and made striking public displays of its strength in parades such as one down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, DC, that included over 40,000 Klansmen. Klansmen in the Invisible Empire's strongest states such as Ohio and Indiana served as mayors, governors, congressmen, ministers, and police officers.
- **KKK Violence** In addition to its exclusively native white Protestant membership, the Ku Klux Klan demonstrated its intolerance in violent ways. With inroads into local police departments, and its own committee for violent acts, the Klan conducted "swift justice" on people they believed deserved punishment. Klansmen, dressed in white sheets with their trademark pointed caps, rode through black neighborhoods at night flogging people and dumping them at garbage sites, yanked and beat romantic couples from cars on "lovers' lanes," and tarred and feathered whites who supported racial equality. Although the KKK was responsible for dozens of beatings and killings in U.S. cities, its mainstream acceptance continued until a Klan leader by the name of David Stephenson was sentenced for second-degree murder in 1925. His conviction unraveled the Ku Klux Klan's host of well-kept secrets about its criminal activities.

The Red Scare

- **The Red Scare** With anti-communist hysteria on the rise, the government orchestrated organized attacks on radicals and foreigners during a period that became known as the "Red Scare." Attorney General Palmer mobilized thousands of federal, state, and local officials to arrest or deport "Reds," or communists. Palmer secured \$500,000 from Congress to conduct investigations and raids on the headquarters of anarchists, communists, and socialists across the country. In these "Palmer Raids," conducted from November 1919 to February 1920, government agents arrested between 4,000 and 10,000 radicals and jailed them without formal charges for as long as several months. Over 600 people were deported, 249 sent to Russia on a "Soviet Ark." Additionally, Palmer's officials ransacked office buildings, fined suspected criminals, seized records, and marched some of the "potential murderers and potential thieves" through city streets handcuffed. Many communists went into hiding or met in secret until 1921, and socialists disguised themselves with clever names such as "Social Problems Club" instead of "Socialist Club." Although most recent immigrant families were not radicals, Americans who worked to suppress "unpatriotic" opinions convinced themselves that the raids and investigations would purify and restore peace to the United States.
- **Anti-Immigration Laws** Increased immigration, along with discrimination and distrust held by many Americans toward newcomers, exacerbated the repressive climate of the Red Scare. Between 1880s and World War I, over 18 million people had immigrated to the United States. Most of the new arrivals, who were of Slavic or Italian background, moved to urban ethnic "ghettos" that maintained aspects of their homeland culture. During World War I, President Wilson inflamed anti-foreign sentiment, warning "citizens...born under other flags [inject] the poison of disloyalty."
- Most of the American public, the majority of which was composed of people of northern European descent, agreed with him. They felt that immigrants, especially those crossing the Atlantic from "red" countries such as Russia, could not become "100% American." They pushed for legislation barring immigrants from the United States. In 1921 the Johnson Act sought to limit immigration from southern and eastern Europe by placing limits on the annual immigration of any given nationality to 3 percent of the number of immigrants from that nation residing in the United States in 1910. By 1924 legislation became even more restrictive. The National Origins Act set the quota at 2 percent of each nationality residing in the United States in 1890. The net result of both of these acts was a huge decline in immigration from southern and eastern Europe. In addition, anti-immigration lobbyists pushed for more restrictive legislation to be added on top of the already rigid barriers to Asian immigrants.
- **The American Civil Liberties Union** Though the majority of Americans supported the Palmer raids and anti-immigration legislation, some citizens protested the illegal methods and prejudices targeted at foreigners and radicals. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which started as a wartime pacifist group, solidified its purpose in January 1920 after the Palmer raids, to represent "the rights of both individuals and minorities [which were being]...violated." ACLU lawyers defended immigrants and other "undesirables" in court to try to ensure that the government upheld individuals' constitutional rights, such as freedom of speech. Former Supreme Court justice Charles Evans Hughes, as well as socialist Upton Sinclair, denounced Palmer's tactics and the government's mob mentality. But their protests were only a small force in the early 1920s, and by 1925 the ACLU's efforts had yielded no court victories.

The Sacco and Vanzetti Trial

- **The Trial of Sacco and Vanzetti** In 1920 various postwar societal tensions—the Red Scare, anti-immigration sentiment, and reaction against labor—collided in one of the most celebrated trial cases in U.S. history, *The People of Massachusetts vs. Sacco and Vanzetti*. In April 1920 a robbery resulted in the death of a paymaster and a guard at a factory in South Braintree, Massachusetts. Three weeks later, Boston police arrested shoemaker Nicola Sacco and fish peddler Bartolomeo Vanzetti, both of whom were Italian immigrants and active anarchists who had protested the Palmer raids during the Red Scare. The prosecution presented witnesses who identified Sacco in court as the killer and Vanzetti as the driver of the getaway car during the crime.
- Although the prosecution's case lacked sound concrete evidence, neither Sacco, who claimed he was changing a passport photo, or Vanzetti, who said he was with a night boarder, could secure a written alibi. In addition, both Sacco and Vanzetti were carrying loaded guns at the time of their arrests. The prosecution claimed that Sacco's gun was the murder weapon. After six and a half hours of deliberation, the jury pronounced them guilty and the Honorable Webster Thayer, a wealthy Bostonian judge who openly supported the prosecution during the trial and privately called the defendants "those anarchist bastards," sentenced Sacco and Vanzetti to death by the electric chair. After six years of protests and failed appeals for retrial, Sacco and Vanzetti were put to death in August 1927.
- **Evidence and Conclusions from the Trial** Historians hotly debated the Sacco-Vanzetti affair during the decades following the men's execution. The strongest evidence supporting the guilty verdict pointed to the link between Sacco's gun and the bullets that killed one of the victims. Also, some people felt that the long wait time between the sentence and the execution allowed the defense ample time to produce proof of the men's innocence.
- However, missing links in the prosecution's case led many to believe that Sacco and Vanzetti were victims of government repression and xenophobia. First, the way police arrested the defendants was by first obtaining a list of Italian radicals who subscribed to an anarchist magazine, not by identifying them at the scene of the crime. Also, most of the witnesses who confidently identified Sacco and Vanzetti in court with details such as "[Vanzetti's] hair was brushed back...two and a half inches long" confessed in their earlier testimony, "I don't think [I have] the right to say he is the man." Thirdly, Judge Webster Thayer refused to retry the case, even after new evidence strongly indicated that a group called the Morelli Gang might instead be responsible for the killings. The judge's anti-immigration sentiment was in line with Attorney General Palmer's belief that foreigners and anarchists "deserve no consideration." Some Americans, like jury foreman Walter Ripley, believed regardless of the men's actual innocence or guilt in the case, "Damn them, they ought to hang anyway" for their political views. On the other side, demonstrators in the United States and worldwide held up the men as martyrs, and protested against government repression. Though very well known, however, the Sacco-Vanzetti trial was just one of many instances across the country in which American intolerance toward diversity became a source of tension.

Radicals and Bombs

- **American Radicalism** Despite anti-communists' fears, most American Communists were peaceful, if strident, and law-abiding. American communism was part of a broad assortment of radicals that included socialists, anarchists, and pacifists, only a few of whom believed in changing society by force. From the start, American Communists were split into two parties: the Communist Party seeking to overthrow capitalism by mass strikes and education, and the Communist Labor Party bent on political action to secure the dictatorship of the proletariat, or absolute rule by the working class. The two halves of the party included 88,000 total members in 1920, but American communists and socialists faced constant disagreements throughout the decade over ideological differences. More prevalent in United States were left-wing radicals, often American-born, upper-middle-class intellectuals, who embraced Russian art and literature and advocated freedom of expression and birth control more than they promoted revolution.
- **Bombings** A small portion of radicals in the United States did seek to destroy the existing political order and promote anarchy. During 1919 and 1920, anarchists delivered a series of bombs to political officials' homes and offices nationwide, raising public hysteria against all communists and radicals. First, 30 brown-paper packages marked as store "samples" carried bombs to prominent citizens, including oil industry giant John D. Rockefeller and anti-immigration senator Thomas Hardwick. All failed to reach their targets. In June 1919, bombs with 20 pounds of dynamite each exploded on the doorsteps of victims in seven American cities. A year later, a massive bomb killed 33 people and injured 200 others on Wall Street, the United States' symbolic center of capitalism.
- One of the 1919 bombs tore away part of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer's house, set in a prestigious Washington, DC neighborhood that was home to many government officials. Pamphlets entitled "Plain Words" strewn on lawns near Palmer's home announced, "There will have to be murder: we will kill...we will destroy to rid the world of your tyrannical institutions...signed, The American Anarchists." Shocked at this message, the gruesome discovery of the bomb deliverer's body parts blown throughout the neighborhood, and his own near escape from death, Palmer declared in return, "We are determined now...that organized crime directed against organized government in this country shall be stopped."

From Racial Intolerance to Violence

- **Racial Riots** As the Ku Klux Klan gathered support during the postwar era, incidents of dramatic racial violence broke out across the nation. In an East St. Louis riot in 1917 over 100 blacks were killed in one day, highlighting the enmity between white trade unionists and African-American labor. Two years later, during the "Red Summer" of 1919, bloodshed from over 20 major racial disturbances killed and injured hundreds of people. When on July 27 black beachgoers attacked whites following their possible drowning of a black swimmer, gang violence erupted on the streets and continued for a week, leaving 38 people dead and 520 people injured. White gangs such as Ragan's Colts attacked blacks in New York City's Washington Park, posting threats of attacks against blacks scheduled for the Fourth of July to "Americanize" the city for whites only.
- **Lynching** The extent to which racial intolerance escalated in the late teens and early twenties was symbolized by lynchings, or unlawful mob killings. In 1920 alone, 53 blacks and 8 whites were lynched. Most often conducted by whites against blacks in southern states, lynchings usually attracted up to thousands of spectators who traveled to the anticipated scene "waiting for the show to start," as one onlooker reported. Individuals, often members of the Ku Klux Klan, sent notices to whites in neighboring towns about the event to draw the largest possible crowds. Once the mob captured a victim, usually male, they tied him to stakes and sometimes performed "surgery below the belt." Then they hanged him or burned him alive, and as a final insult, someone in the mob might shoot the corpse.
- The 1930s jazz singers like Billie "Lady Day" Holiday and Josh White grieved the murders of blacks done by hangings, calling the dangling victims "Strange Fruit." "Southern trees bear a strange fruit," they sang, "blood on the leaves, and blood at the root. Black bodies swingin' in the southern breeze, strange fruit hangin' from the poplar trees." Lynchings were horrific illustrations of racist violence, but those involved "justified" their actions by claiming that black victims deserved to die for whistling at white women, expressing sympathy for a lynched person, or insisting on voting. Underneath this reasoning, whites who supported lynching likely detested and feared African Americans for competing with them for limited jobs and land. These nativist whites had silent partners in people who opposed the KKK but refused to support anti-lynching laws, not wishing to stir up whites' anger or threaten city peace.

Marcus Garvey and Black Pride

- **Black Pride and Separatism** Facing persistent racism in the 1920s, African Americans looked for new leaders with alternative solutions to accepting white supremacy in the United States. One leader to whom they turned was Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican-born black. Later referred to by civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. as “the first man on a mass scale to give millions of Negroes a sense of dignity and destiny,” Garvey embraced American blacks in his vision of “universal, African-centered Negro liberation.” Garvey promoted black pride, teaching that African civilization predated European civilization and that God was black. In 1914 he formed the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which together with his publication *The Negro World* and paramilitary unit the Black Eagle Flying Corps sought to empower blacks worldwide toward economic, religious, psychological, and cultural independence. Garvey also promoted a separatist vision of blacks returning to Africa to regain the continent they had lost to European imperialists. Whites who observed this black visionary inspire loyal crowds became unsettled that “passive” American blacks might someday demand societal equality.
- **Garvey and Other African-American Leaders** While Garvey worked in concert with other leaders in the black community early on, his racial separatism eventually distanced him from them. Garvey initially imitated the employment services and soup-kitchen projects of Booker T. Washington, famous for prioritizing black economic gains as a route to social equality. But Washington believed that whites and blacks could successfully integrate within society, and Garvey was staunchly separatist. Likewise, Garvey first supported activist W. E. B. Du Bois’ push for black political influence. However, partly due to competitive jealousy, the two men ended up publicly feuding. Garvey called Du Bois “white,” aristocratic, and an “enemy to the Negro race,” while Du Bois labeled Garvey as racially divisive among blacks, a “black traitor,” and un-African (because Garvey was from Jamaica). However, Garvey’s message resonated with many blacks, and the UNIA membership surged to between 500,000 and four million Garvey followers.
- **Decline of the UNIA** In the mid 1920s, the UNIA declined due to internal conflicts, financial problems, and government harassment. The Black Star Steamship Line, intended to launch independent black commerce on the Atlantic and transport blacks to Africa, went bankrupt. Fearing the organized efforts of thousands of African Americans, government officials arrested ten UNIA leaders, alleging they were anarchists threatening the federal government. Garvey himself was accused of fraud and misappropriation of funds, and sent to jail in 1923. Because the evidence used to convict Garvey was unsound and questionable, the president pardoned him in 1927 and released him from prison. He was, however, immediately deported and prohibited from returning to the United States. As a result, membership in the UNIA dwindled. Still, Garvey inspired the largest mass movement of black people in the twentieth century, and his ideas influenced many later U.S. civil rights leaders, as well as promoters of African independence.

The Science vs. Religion Debate

- **Science, Fundamentalism, and Modernism** Not all of the tensions of the 1920s centered around issues of racial intolerance. The rise of religious fundamentalism and the emergence of modern theology in America raised questions about the relationship between science and religion and set the stage for a decade-long culture war. Scientists who believed in evolutionary beginnings of humans and the world focused on sources such as Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* for authoritative information. Christian fundamentalists, who believed in a literal interpretation of the Bible, rejected scientists' approach to knowledge and adhered to their belief in the Bible's account that God created the world in six days. They also spoke out against what they believed to be un-biblical practices, such as drinking liquor, getting a divorce, and using cars for reasons other than church on Sunday mornings. Christian modernists, on the other hand, tried to reconcile evolution, a theory gaining wide prestige, with their reference to the Bible as a religious text. Both fundamentalists and modernists grew increasingly intolerant of each other, fundamentalists calling evolution "jackass nonsense" and modernists ridiculing literal interpretations of biblical miracles. Some individuals chose middle ground between the two camps of belief, asserting that they were "thoroughly convinced that God created the heavens and the earth, but [finding] nothing in the Scripture that tells...His method."
- **The Scopes Trial** A group of lawyers with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and locals in Dayton, Tennessee, grabbed the spotlight of the national science and religion debate when they tested a new state law forbidding teachers to teach about evolution in the classroom. In July 1925 the ACLU group approached 24-year-old John T. Scopes, a general science instructor who was continuing to teach evolution, with the proposition that they charge him with breaking the law to provide an anti-evolution "test case." Scopes agreed. The ACLU's initial vision was to test whether the majority population could constitutionally decide what all schoolteachers in Tennessee must teach. The primary witness for the prosecution, former presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan, initially wished to treat the case as a constitutional issue and also question the validity of evolution. But thousands of newspaper reporters flocked to Dayton, and an equally famous lawyer, Clarence Darrow, took up the defense.
- As a result, the "monkey trial," so named for evolutionists' belief that human ancestors were apes, evolved into a trial pitting religion against science. Darrow questioned Bryan, a fundamentalist Christian, for hours about various miracles in the Bible such as a whale swallowing a man whole. Did Bryan believe these stories were literally true? In a scorching July heat, Darrow "caught" Bryan contradicting himself about biblical truths and scientific facts. The court still decided Scopes was guilty for breaking the law, but newspapers focused attention on the spectacle between Darrow and Bryan. Although many Americans agreed with Bryan's general priority of faith in God over factual knowledge, his sputtering in court over biblical interpretations disappointed fundamentalists. ACLU lawyers were likewise frustrated that the case failed to focus on individuals' rights and had become a simplistic two-sided argument between science and religion.