# The Roaring 20's: Crash Course US History #32

Crash Course: U.S. History
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**=====Introduction=====**

Hi, I'm John Green, this is *Crash Course: U.S. History*, and today we're going to learn about one of the best eras ever: the 1920s.

The 20s gave us jazz, movies, radio, making out in cars, illegal liquor. And the 20s also gave us prosperity, although not for everybody. And gangsters! And a consumer culture based on credit, and lots of prejudice against immigrants, and eventually the worst economic crisis the U.S. has ever seen!

Mr. Green! Mr. Green! But what about Gatsby?

Yeah, me-from-the-past, it's true that "Gatsby turned out alright in the end. But what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust trailed in the wake of his dreams, did temporarily close out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men."

(Intro)

**=====The Growth of Big Business=====**

So there's a stereotypical view of the 1920s as the Roaring Twenties, a decade of exciting change and new cultural touchstones, as well as increased personal freedom and dancing. And it really was a time of increased wealth. For some people.

The quote of the decade has to go to our famously taciturn president from Massachusetts, Calvin Coolidge, who said "...the chief business of the American people is business." Jay Z would later update this for the twenty-first century, noting "I'm not a businessman, I'm a business, man."

But anyway, during the 1920s, the government helped business grow like gangbusters largely by not regulating it much at all. This is known as laissez-faire capitalism, or laissez-faire capitalism if you're good at speaking French.

The Republican Party dominated politics in the 1920s, with all the presidents elected in the decade being staunch, conservative Republicans. The federal government hewed to the policies favored by business lobbyists, including lower taxes on personal income and business profits, and efforts to weaken the power of unions. Presidents Harding, Coolidge and Hoover stocked the boards of the Federal Reserve and the Federal Trade Commission with men who shared their pro-business views, shifting the country away from the economic regulation that had been favored by progressives. And that was very good for the American economy, at least in the short-run.

**=====Government Corruption=====**

The 1920s were also marked by quite a bit of government corruption, most of which can be pinned to the administration of Warren G. Harding. Now, Harding himself wasn't terribly corrupt but he picked terrible friends. They included Attorney General Harry Daugherty, who accepted money to not prosecute criminals and Interior Secretary Albert Fall, who took half a million dollars from private business in exchange for leases to government oil reserves at Teapot Dome. Fall later became the first cabinet member ever to be convicted of a felony.

**=====The Growth of Manufacturing and the Economy=====**

But on the other hand, business, man! Productivity rose dramatically, largely because older industries adopted Henry Ford's assembly line techniques and newer industries like aviation, chemicals and electronics grew up to provide Americans with new products and new jobs. During the 1920s, annual production of cars tripled to 4.8 million and automobile companies were gradually consolidated into the big three that we know today: Ford, Chrysler and Harley Davidson. What? General Motors. By 1929, half of all American families owned a car and thus began the American love affair with the automobile, which is also where love affairs were often consummated. Which is why, in the 1920s, cars came to be known as "skoodilypooping chariots". What's that? They were called "brothels on wheels"?

And the economy also grew because American corporations were extending their reach overseas and American foreign investment was greater than that of any other country. The dollar replaced the pound as the most important currency for trade, and by the end of the decade, America was producing 85% of the world's cars and 40% of its overall manufactured goods. Stan, can I get a libertage?

(Libertage)

**=====Increased Leisure and Growth of the Film Industry=====**

And companies churned out all kinds of labor-saving devices like vacuum cleaners, toasters, refrigerators. And not having to spend all day washing your clothes or turning over your own toast like some kind of commoner meant that Americans had more time for leisure. And this was provided by radios and baseball games, boxing matches, vacations, dance crazes - I mean, before Gangnam Style there was the Lindy and the Charleston. But probably the most significant leisure product was movies, and I'm not just saying that because I'm staring into a camera.

The American film industry moved out to Hollywood before World War I because land was cheap and plentiful, all that sunshine meant that you could shoot outside all year round and it was close to everything - desert, mountains, ocean, plastic surgeons! And by 1925, the American film industry had eclipsed all of its competitors and become the greatest in the world, especially if you count by volume and not quality.

**=====Increased Acceptability of Debt=====**

And more and more people had money to go see those movies thanks to consumer debt. The widespread use of credit and layaway buying plans meant that it was acceptable to go into debt to maintain what came to be seen as the American "standard of living" and this was a huge change in attitude. These days we don't even think of credit cards as debt, really, but they are. And that was a relatively new idea, as was another feature of American life in the '20s that is still with us - celebrity.

**=====Creation of Celebrity Culture=====**

Opera singer Enrico Caruso has often been called the first modern celebrity but now he's a lot less famous than Charlie Chaplin or Rudolph Valentino or Babe Ruth. But probably the biggest celebrity of the decade was Charles Lindbergh, whose claim to fame was flying across the Atlantic Ocean by himself without stopping,

although he did use an airplane, which makes it slightly less impressive. Now Lindbergh wasn't a truly contemporary celebrity in the sense of being famous for being famous but he was a business more than a businessman.

**=====The Mystery Document: The Growth of High Culture=====**

High culture also flourished. This was the age of the "Lost Generation" of American writers, many of whom lived and worked in Europe but America had its own version of Paris in New York. The decade of the 1920s saw continued migration of African-American people from the south to cities in the north and Harlem became the capital of black America. And, speaking of migration, let us now migrate to the chair for the Mystery Document.

The rules here are simple. I guess the author of the Mystery Document, I'm either right or I get shocked with the shock pen. Alright, let's see what we got here.

> If we must die, let it not be like hogs hunted and penned in an inglorious spot, while round us bark the mad and hungry dogs, making their mock at our accursed lot...like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack, pressed to the wall, dying but fight back.

Stan, thank you for the poetry, I appreciate that it's not some obscure document from 18th century blah blah blah. It's Claude McKay, Harlem Renaissance poet, the poem is called *If We Must Die*. Ah, it's the only thing in the world I'm actually good at!

Now I know this from the imagery alone, especially the line about mad and hungry dogs that would figuratively and literally make up the mobs of the lynchings but the giveaway here is the ultimate sentiment that we will fight back. This was part of the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance, which rejected stereotypes and prejudice and sought to celebrate African-American experience.

**=====Women in the 1920s=====**

Meanwhile, things were changing for women as well, as they found new ways to express autonomy. Flappers kept their hair and skirts short, smoked and drank illegally in public, and availed themselves of birth control. And marketers encouraged them to buy products like cigarettes, christened "torches of freedom" by Edward Bernays. Liberation had its limits, though. Most women were still expected to marry, have children and find their freedom at home through the use of washing machines.

**=====Thought Bubble: Economic Failings of the 1920s=====**

But the picture of prosperity is, as usual, more complicated than it first appears. The fact that so many Americans were going into debt in order to pursue the American dream meant that if the economy faltered, and it did, there was going to be lots of trouble. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Prosperity in the 1920s wasn't equally distributed through the population. Real industrial wages rose by a quarter between 1922 and 1929 but corporate profits rose at twice that rate. By 1929, 1% of the nation's banks controlled 50% of the nation's financial resources and the wealthiest 5% of Americans' share of national income exceeded that of the bottom 60%. An estimated 40% of Americans lived in poverty.

Now, many Americans celebrated big business and Wall Street was often seen as heroic, possibly because by 1920 about 1.5 million Americans owned some kind of stock. But big business also meant that smaller businesses disappeared. During the 1920s, the number of manufacturing workers declined by 5% - the first time this class of numbers had seen its numbers drop but not the last. Now some of these jobs were made up for by new jobs in retail, finance and education but as early as the 1920s, New England was beginning to see unemployment and deindustrialization as textile companies moved their operations to the south where labor was cheaper. And working class people still made up the majority of Americans and they often couldn't afford these newfangled devices. Like in 1930, 75% of American homes didn't have a washing machine. And only 40% of them had a radio.

Farmers were even worse off. Many had prospered during World War I when the government subsidized farm prices in order to keep farms producing for the war effort but when the subsidies ended, production didn't subside, largely due to mechanization and increased use of fertilizer. Farmers' incomes dropped steadily and many saw banks foreclose upon their property. For the first time in American history, the number of farms declined during the 1920s. For farmers, the Great Depression began early. Thanks Thought Bubble.

**=====Developments in Free Speech=====**

So, in general, the federal government did little to nothing to help farmers or workers. The Supreme Court was the only segment of the government that kept any progressive ideas alive, as they began to craft a system of ideas that we call the "Jurisprudence of Civil Liberties." Now the court still voted to uphold convictions of left wing critics of the government but gradually began to embrace the idea that people had the right to express dissonant views in what Oliver Wendell Holmes called the "marketplace of ideas". In Near v. Minnesota, the Supreme Court struck down censorship of newspapers and by 1927, Justice Brandeis was writing that "freedom to think as you will and to speak as you think are indispensable to the discovery and spread of political truth".

**=====Attitudes and Restrictions Towards Immigrants=====**

But despite increased free speech and "torches of liberty" and flappers and the Harlem Renaissance, the 1920s was in many ways a reactionary period in American history. For instance, the decade saw the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in a new and improved form, and by improved I mean much more terrible. Spurred on by the hyper patriotism that was fostered during World War I, the clan denounced immigrants and Jews and Catholics as less than 100% American. And by the mid-twenties, the clan claimed more than 3 million members, and was the largest private organization right here in my home state of Indiana. And with more immigrants coming from southern and eastern Europe, who were often Catholic and Jewish, white Protestants became more and more concerned about losing their dominant position in the social order. Spoiler alert: it turns out okay for you, white Protestants.

The first immigration restriction bill was passed in 1921, limiting the number of immigrants from Europe to 357 000. In 1924, a new immigration law dropped that number to 150 000 and established

quotas based on national origin. The numbers of immigrants allowed from southern and eastern Europe were drastically reduced and Asians, except for Filipinos, were totally forbidden. The quota for Filipinos was set at 50 per year, although they were still allowed to emigrate to Hawaii because their labor was needed there. There were no restrictions, however, on immigration from the western hemisphere because California's large-scale farms were dependent upon seasonal laborers from Mexico.

These immigration restrictions were also influenced by fear of radical anarchists and pseudo-scientific ideas about race. Whites were seen as scientifically superior to people of color and, as President Coolidge himself declared when he signed the 1924 immigration law, "America must be kept American." Tell me, Calvin Coolidge, about how American you are. Are you Cherokee? Or Cree? Or Lakota?

**=====Science Education and Religion=====**

The 1920s also saw increased tension between science education in the United States and religious beliefs. The best-known example is, of course, the trial of John Scopes in Tennessee in 1925. Scopes was tried for breaking the law against teaching evolution, which he had been encouraged to do by the ACLU as a test case for freedom of speech. Scopes was prosecuted by William Jennings Bryan, whom you will remember as having recently resigned as Secretary of State, and who had become a leader of the fundamentalist movement. And Scopes was defended by Clarence Darrow, that famous defense attorney who contemporary defense attorneys always point to to argue that defense attorneys aren't all scum. Scopes and Darrow actually lost the trial but the case drew national attention and ultimately led to evolution being taught in more American schools. The Scopes trial is often seen as a victory for free thinking and science and modernism and I suppose it was but for me, it's more a symbol of the contradictions of the 1920s.

**=====Conclusion=====**

This is the decade that gave us mass consumer culture and celebrity worship, which are important and very complicated legacies. And it also saw the birth of modern conceptions of civil liberties. It was a period when tolerance became an important value but at the same time it saw a rise in lynchings. Immigrants were necessary for the economic boom of the 1920s but at the same time their numbers were restricted, as they were seen as a threat to traditional American values. And that raises a question that we're still struggling with today - what are those values? I don't mean that rhetorically, let me know in comments. Thanks for watching, I'll see you next week.

**=====Credits=====**

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, our script supervisor is Meredith Danko, the associate producer is Danica Johnson, the show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer, Rosianna Rojas and myself, and our graphics team is Thought Café - I nailed that. Every week there's a new caption for the libertage, you can suggest your own in comments or ask questions about today's video that will be answered by our team of historians. Thank you for watching Crash Course. If you enjoyed today's episode, make sure you've subscribed and, as we say in my hometown, don't forget to be awesome.