

America, 1919-73

The period 1919-73 was one of huge change for the United States. It saw the country rise to become a global superpower, and undergo profound social and cultural transformation. The boom of the 1920s, the Great Depression of the 1930s, and the post-war prosperity of the 1950s and 1960s shaped modern America.

Part One: American People and the 'Boom'

a. The 'Boom'

The Economic Boom

After World War I ended in 1918, the United States experienced an economic boom during the 1920s, often called the 'Roaring Twenties'. This period was marked by rapid economic growth, which led to higher wages for many workers and more consumer goods being available than ever before. The boom was fuelled by several factors, including technological advancements, mass production, and innovative business practices.

Consumer Society and Advertising

With more money in their pockets, Americans began spending more on consumer goods like cars, radios, and household 'gadgets'. Advertising played a key role in this consumer culture, encouraging people to buy the latest products using used radio, newspapers, and billboards to persuade people that owning these new products would improve their lives.

Hire Purchase and Mass Production

The rise of hire purchase (buying on credit) made it easier for people to afford expensive items by paying in instalments. Mass production, especially in the automobile industry, significantly lowered the cost of goods. Henry Ford's use of assembly lines in his factories revolutionized car production, reducing the price and making cars affordable to ordinary Americans.

Inequalities of Wealth and Republican Policies

However, not everyone benefited from the boom. There were significant inequalities of wealth, with the richest Americans becoming even richer while many others, especially Black Americans, Native Americans, farmers and workers in older industries, struggled. The Republican government at the time believed in 'laissez-faire' policies, meaning they did not intervene in the economy. They also lowered taxes on the wealthy and businesses, hoping this would encourage investment and growth.

Stock Market Boom

The 1920s also saw a boom in the stock market, where people could buy shares in companies and potentially make a lot of money if the value of those shares went up. Many Americans, even those with little financial experience, began investing in stocks; they bought 'on margin', paying a deposit of 10% and buying the remaining 90% with borrowed money, hoping to pay it back from the profit they made. This speculative buying created a 'bull' market which drove stock prices higher and higher, creating a bubble that would eventually burst in the Great Crash of 1929.

b. Social and Cultural Developments

Entertainment: Cinema and Jazz

The 1920s were a time of cultural change. Cinema became the most popular form of entertainment, with Hollywood movies attracting millions of viewers. Silent films initially dominated, but by the end of the decade, 'talkies' (films with sound) had revolutionized the industry. Jazz music, with its lively rhythms and improvisation, became hugely popular, particularly in cities like New York and Chicago – this period is often referred to as the 'Jazz Age.'

The Position of Women: Flappers

Women also experienced significant changes during the 1920s. The most visible symbol of these changes was the 'flapper' – young women who wore short skirts, bobbed their hair, and embraced new fashions and attitudes. Flappers challenged traditional gender norms by smoking, drinking, and dancing in public. The 19th Amendment, passed in 1920, gave women the right to vote, marking a major step forward in women's rights. Women, however, still faced wage discrimination and sexist treatment, were still expected to become housewives and mothers, and, for many poorer women in the South and rural areas, life did not change at all.

c. Divided Society

Organized Crime and Prohibition

One of the major issues that divided American society during the 1920s was Prohibition. The 18th Amendment, passed in 1919, made the production, sale, and transport of alcohol illegal. However, this led to a rise in organized crime as criminal gangs, such as those led by Al Capone, made fortunes by illegally producing and selling alcohol. Prohibition proved difficult to enforce and led to widespread corruption among law enforcement officials.

Racial Tension and Immigration

Racial tensions were also high during this period. African Americans faced widespread racism, segregation, discrimination and violence, particularly in the southern states. The Great Migration saw many African Americans move north in search of better opportunities, but they often encountered racism there as well. Immigrants, particularly those from southern and eastern Europe, also faced hostility; many Americans feared that these new arrivals would take jobs away from native-born citizens and undermine American values, and strict laws were passed to enforce immigration 'quotas'.

The Ku Klux Klan and the Red Scare

The Ku Klux Klan (KKK), a white supremacist group, grew in power during the 1920s, promoting hatred against African Americans, immigrants, Catholics, and Jews. At the same time, the Red Scare, a fear of communism following the Russian Revolution, led to widespread suspicion and persecution of left-wing activists. The Sacco and Vanzetti case highlighted these tensions, as two Italian immigrants were controversially convicted of murder and executed amid fears of anarchism and radicalism.

Part Two: Bust – Americans' Experiences of the Depression and New Deal

a. American Society During the Depression

The Great Depression

The economic boom of the 1920s came to a sudden and devastating end with the Wall Street Crash of 1929. The stock market collapse was followed by the Great Depression, a period of severe economic hardship that lasted through the 1930s. Millions of Americans lost their jobs as factories closed and businesses went bankrupt. Unemployment reached 25%, and many families were left homeless and hungry.

Impact on Farmers and Businessmen

7,000 banks went bankrupt as customers found themselves unable to pay the loans they had taken 'on margin' ... with catastrophic effects on their other customers. Businessmen, especially those who had heavily invested in the stock market, also faced ruin as their companies went under. Farmers were particularly hard hit by the Depression. Even before the crash, they had been struggling with low prices for their crops. When the Depression hit – their situation made worse by an environmental disaster in the mid-West called the 'Dust Bowl' – many were unable to pay their mortgages and were forced to leave their land.

Hoover's Responses and Unpopularity

President Herbert Hoover, who was in office when the Depression began, believed that the economy would eventually recover on its own. He believed in 'rugged individualism', and resisted calls for the government to provide direct assistance to those in need, which led to increasing unpopularity. Hoover's efforts to stabilize the economy, such as the creation of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, were seen as too little, too late.

Roosevelt's Election as President

In 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected president in a landslide victory, promising a 'New Deal' for the American people. Roosevelt's optimistic and confident approach, along with his willingness to use government intervention to address the crisis, contrasted sharply with Hoover's perceived inaction.

b. The Effectiveness of the New Deal

The New Deal

Roosevelt's New Deal was a series of programs and policies designed to provide relief to the unemployed, stimulate economic recovery, and reform the financial system to prevent future depressions. Some of the most famous programs included the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), which provided jobs for young men, and the Social Security Act, which created a system of pensions for the elderly.

Successes and Limitations

The New Deal had several successes. It helped to stabilize the economy, reduced unemployment, and provided a safety net for many Americans. However, it did not end the Depression, and some of its programs were criticized by Republicans for being too expensive or for interfering too much in people's lives. The Supreme Court, dominated by conservative judges, struck down several New Deal measures as illegal. Meanwhile, some radical politicians argued that the New Deal did not go far enough in its reforms!

Roosevelt's Contribution as President and Popular Culture

Roosevelt's leadership during the Depression helped to restore confidence in the American government. His 'fireside chats,' radio broadcasts in which he explained his policies to the public, were particularly effective in building trust. Despite the hardships of the Depression, popular culture thrived during this time, and movies, music, and literature provided an escape for many people.

c. The Impact of the Second World War

Economic Recovery and Lend Lease

America's entry into WWII in 1941 helped to end the Depression. The war effort led to a massive increase in industrial production as the country needed weapons, vehicles, and other supplies. The Lend-Lease program, which allowed the U.S. to supply its allies with military equipment, further boosted the economy.

Exports and Social Developments

During the war, such as 'Cash-and-Carry' and 'Lend-Lease' arms programmes to the Allies meant that American factories were producing goods not just for the U.S. military but also for allied nations. This led to a surge in exports and a revitalized economy. Socially, the war brought significant changes. Many African Americans moved to cities to work in war industries and, although they still faced discrimination, the war laid the groundwork for the Civil Rights Movement. Women also played a crucial role in the war effort, taking on jobs traditionally held by men; this experience helped to change attitudes toward women in the workforce.

Part Three: Post-war America

a. Post-war American Society and Economy

Consumerism and the Causes of Prosperity

After World War II, the United States emerged as the world's leading economic power. The post-war period saw a return to consumerism as Americans, with more disposable income and \$200 billion of war bonds in their pockets, began buying homes, cars, and household appliances. The economy boomed, driven by technological innovation, a strong manufacturing sector, and government policies that supported economic growth.

The American Dream and McCarthyism

The idea of the 'American Dream' – the belief that anyone could achieve success through hard work – became a central part of American identity. However, the fear that communism was trying to destroy American democracy, led to a climate of suspicion and paranoia. Senator Joseph McCarthy led a witch-hunt to root out suspected communists from government, entertainment, and other sectors, leading to ruined careers and widespread fear.

Popular Culture: Rock and Roll and Television

The 1950s also saw the rise of new forms of popular culture. Television became the dominant form of entertainment, with shows like 'I Love Lucy' becoming national phenomena. Rock and roll music, with its rebellious spirit, captured the imagination of young people and kick-started rapid changes in the youth scene, which evolved first into the 'Mod' culture of the 1960s, and then into protest or 'hippy' lifestyle.

b. Racial Tension and the Civil Rights Campaigns in the 1950s and 1960s

Segregation Laws and Peaceful Protests

Despite the economic prosperity of the post-war years, African Americans continued to face severe racial discrimination, particularly in the South, where segregation laws, known as 'Jim Crow' laws, enforced the separation of black and white people in public places. The Civil Rights Movement emerged in response to these injustices, with bodies like SCLC, CORE and SNCC organising peaceful protests, sit-ins, boycotts and 'freedom rides' to challenge segregation and end legal discrimination.

Martin Luther King and Malcolm X

Martin Luther King Jr. became the most prominent leader of the Civil Rights Movement, promoting nonviolent resistance. His leadership was instrumental in bringing about significant changes, including the *Civil Rights Act* of 1964, which outlawed discrimination based on race, colour, religion, sex, or national origin. By contrast, Malcolm X and the 'Black Power' movements such as the Deacons of Defense and the Black Panthers were willing to endorse the use of violence in self-defence, and emphasized racial pride and self-determination.

Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968

The *Civil Rights Act* of 1964 was a landmark piece of legislation that made segregation in public places illegal and banned employment discrimination. The *Civil Rights Act* of 1968, also known as the *Fair Housing Act*, provided equal housing opportunities regardless of race, religion, or national origin, marking another significant victory for the Civil Rights Movement. These advances, however, although they outlawed legal discrimination, did little to address Black injustice, inequality, poverty and lack of opportunity, and the late 1960s were marked by racial rioting in many US towns.

c. America and the 'New Frontier' and 'Great Society'

Social Policies of Kennedy and Johnson

In the 1960s, Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson introduced ambitious social programs aimed at reducing poverty and improving education and healthcare. Kennedy's 'New Frontier' sought to advance civil rights, boost the economy, and promote space exploration. After Kennedy's assassination in 1963, Johnson continued these efforts with his 'Great Society' programs, which included Civil Rights legislation, Medicare and Medicaid, and a vast range of initiatives to combat poverty and racial inequality.

Feminist Movements and the Fight for Equal Pay

The 1960s and early 1970s also saw the rise of the feminist movement, which sought to challenge gender inequality. Women fought for equal pay, reproductive rights, and greater opportunities in education and the workplace. Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*, and the *National Organization for Women* (NOW), founded in 1966, played a crucial role in advocating for women's rights.

Roe v Wade and Supreme Court Rulings

In 1973, the Supreme Court's ruling in *Roe v. Wade* legalised abortion nationwide, marking a significant victory for women's rights. The 1972 *Educational Amendments Act*, which prohibited gender-discrimination in education, further advanced the feminist cause. However, there was significant opposition to the proposed *Equal Rights Amendment* (ERA), which aimed to guarantee equal rights for all American citizens regardless of sex; despite passing Congress in 1972, the ERA was not ratified by enough states to become law.