

# part six

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*PROSPERITY,  
DEPRESSION,  
AND WAR,  
1920–1945*

## Chapter 21

*Cultural Tensions  
in the New Era:  
The 1920s*

**T**he 1920s, customarily viewed as a period of conservative reaction after the war, were in reality dynamic, tension-filled years. It was a time when the forces of tradition and modernism collided violently, and diverse groups of Americans asserted their identities and frequently came into conflict with one another. The Republicans, who were in power throughout the 1920s, called it the "New Era."

Various trends that began during World War I extended into the 1920s. In politics, bureaucratic government continued to grow; in society at large, movements such as Prohibition and women's suffrage reflected the tensions and conflicts that had emerged during the war. Even the ratification in 1919 and 1920 of constitutional amendments that made alcoholic beverages illegal and gave women the vote did not put an end to social conflict over these issues.

Other forces unleashed or intensified by the war also played themselves out during the 1920s. Antiforeign and antiradical sentiment took on increased momentum in this period, as seen in the activities of a revived Ku Klux Klan and the passage of two successive immigration restriction acts. On the other hand, the decade also saw the emergence of a "new Negro," emboldened by the experiences of military service abroad and new economic opportunities at home during the war. The

artistic and literary Harlem Renaissance was one outgrowth of this new black assertiveness. Garveyism—a social and political movement that attempted to instill a sense of racial pride in blacks—was another.

Religion, too, was marked by conflict in the 1920s. The celebrated trial of Tennessee biology teacher John Scopes in 1925 emphasized the deep divisions between Christian Fundamentalists and religious “modernists.” At the same time, the political rise of Al Smith, the first Roman Catholic to run as a majority-party candidate for the presidency, aggravated Protestant-Catholic tensions. The candidacy of Smith, from New York City’s Lower East Side, also contributed to the rift between rural and urban Americans, brought on in part by the economic distress of the nation’s farm population.

In view of the deep flaws and tensions that characterized American life in the 1920s, the “New Era” of progress and prosperity proclaimed by the nation’s Republican leadership seems to have been built on illusion. Even without the economic cataclysm of the Great Crash in October 1929, American society was headed for disruptive—even explosive—times.

The documents in this chapter illustrate the sources and nature of the cultural tensions of the 1920s. Collectively, they raise significant questions about the degree to which the United States had become a unified, integrated society, as well as about the social price of “progress” and “modernization.”

## Chronology

1919  
1920  
1923  
1924  
1925  
1928  
1929

- 1919 Ratification of Eighteenth Amendment establishing Prohibition
- 1920 Ratification of Nineteenth Amendment providing for women’s suffrage  
“Red Scare” raids on radical organizations  
Republican Warren G. Harding elected President over Democrat James Cox
- 1923 Teapot Dome scandal exposed  
Death of Harding; Calvin Coolidge becomes President
- 1924 National Origins Act restricts immigration
- 1925 Tennessee court convicts John T. Scopes of violating laws prohibiting the teaching of evolution
- 1928 Republican Herbert Hoover elected President over Democrat Alfred E. Smith
- 1929 Stock-market crash

## Documents

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- 21.2 The Revived Ku K  
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- 21.3 The Results of Im
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### 21.1 The Troubled Problems An

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#### Consider:

1. The probable causes for
2. How the farmer’s indebt  
cartoon;
3. What the cartoon sugges  
farmers in the 1920s.

SOURCE: Macy Campbell, *Rural Li*  
4, 7.

## Documents

- 21.1 The Troubled Countryside: Problems Amidst Plenty (graph, visual source)
- 21.2 The Revived Ku Klux Klan, Hiram W. Evans (primary source)
- 21.3 The Results of Immigration Restriction (table)
- 21.4 Marcus Garvey and Black Nationalism (visual sources)
- 21.5 The Controversy Over Evolution, Ronald L. Numbers (secondary source)
- 21.6 Religion and Politics: A Catholic Runs for President, Alfred E. Smith (primary source)
- 21.7 The Impact of Prohibition, David Kyvig (secondary source)

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### 21.1 The Troubled Countryside: Problems Amidst Plenty

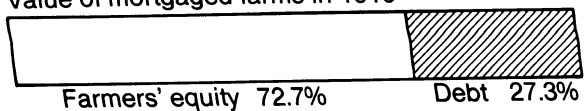
The 1920s witnessed the reemergence in rural America of a strong antagonism toward cities and toward modern developments in general. This revival of rural-urban conflict was primarily social and political in nature, but—as had been the case in the late nineteenth century—the resentment of the farmers was intensified by their economic distress in a prosperous time. The graph and cartoon reproduced here provide two perspectives on the plight of farmers during the decade. The graph depicts the changing value of farmers' holdings, as well as the degree of farmers' indebtedness. Both the graph and the cartoon are taken from a 1927 study of farm problems, *Rural Life at the Crossroads*, by Macy Campbell, a professor of rural education at Iowa State Teachers College. The cartoon, by J. N. Darling ("Ding"), originally appeared in the *Des Moines Register*.

#### Consider:

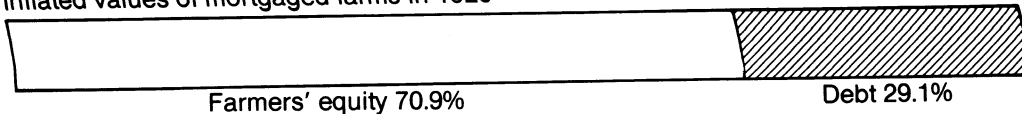
1. The probable causes for the situation reflected in the graph;
2. How the farmer's indebtedness shown in the graph is illustrated in the cartoon;
3. What the cartoon suggests about government response to the needs of farmers in the 1920s.

### MORTGAGED FARMS IN THE UNITED STATES IN 1910, 1920, AND 1925

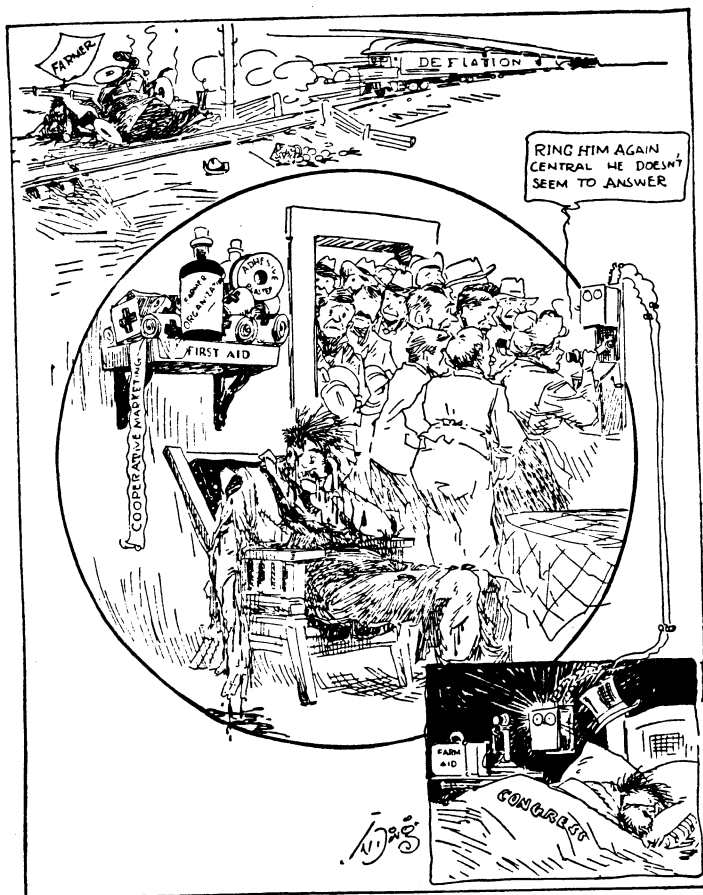
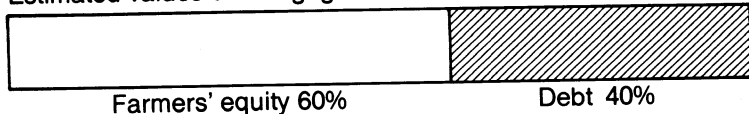
Value of mortgaged farms in 1910



Inflated values of mortgaged farms in 1920



Estimated values of mortgaged farms in 1925



WHY NOT TRY SOME OF THE HOME REMEDIES?

Ding, in the *Des Moines Register*

## 21.2 The Revival

Hiram W. Evans

The most striking example of the revivalism of the 1920s was the "new" Klan was patterned after the terrorized blacks in the 1800s. The violence less than its predecessor extended well beyond the South. The Klan exercised control in the Midwestern states and the South. This excerpt, taken from a book by Hiram W. Evans, summarizes the revival and mentions some of the reasons for it.

*Consider:*

1. The reasons for the revival.
2. Whether the revival was a reaction to the white.
3. The kinds of white.

... The Nordic ... land his fathers gave ... the plain people does not restore America after defeat. America must be reborn or we shall be corrupted. The first danger is already given shelter. The first danger is "mere force of breeding" will have become a ... some means is found we are already doomed. An equal danger war and from a reorganized One more point at he has revived and in Catholic Church. It is as their leader, are more This is not because we but because our energy

SOURCE: Hiram Wesley Evans, 223 (March 1926): 39, 43-47.

## 21.2 The Revived Ku Klux Klan

Hiram W. Evans

The most striking example of the pervasive intolerance and resurgent nativism of the 1920s was the revived Ku Klux Klan. Founded in 1915, the "new" Klan was patterned on the white supremacist organization that had terrorized blacks in the South during Reconstruction. It used terrorism and violence less than its predecessor, but the new Klan's list of grievances extended well beyond opposition to blacks. At its height in the mid-1920s, the Klan exercised considerable political influence in several Southern and Midwestern states and its membership was estimated at five million. This excerpt, taken from a 1926 article by Klan "Imperial Wizard" Hiram Wesley Evans, summarizes the Klan's complaints about modern American society and mentions some of its proposals for dealing with those problems.

### *Consider:*

1. *The reasons for the Klan's hostility toward "aliens" and Catholics;*
2. *Whether the revived Klan could be described as "anti-black";*
3. *The kinds of whites to whom the Klan was most likely to appeal.*

. . . The Nordic American today is a stranger in large parts of the land his fathers gave him. . . .

. . . the plain people realize . . . that merely stopping the alien flood does not restore Americanism, nor even secure us against final utter defeat. America must also defend herself against the enemy within, or we shall be corrupted and conquered by those to whom we have already given shelter.

The first danger is that we shall be overwhelmed . . . by the aliens' "mere force of breeding." With the present birthrate, the Nordic stock will have become a hopeless minority within fifty years . . . Unless some means is found of making the Nordic feel safe in having children, we are already doomed.

An equal danger is from disunity, so strikingly shown during the war and from a reorganization of thought and purpose. . . .

One more point about the present attitude of the old stock American: he has revived and increased his long-standing distrust of the Roman Catholic Church. It is for this that the native Americans, and the Klan as their leader, are most often denounced as intolerant and prejudiced. This is not because we oppose the Catholic more than we do the alien, but because our enemies recognize that patriotism and race loyalty

cannot safely be denounced, while our own tradition of religious freedom gives them an opening here, if they can sufficiently confuse the issue. . . .

The real indictment against the Roman Church is that it is, fundamentally and irredeemably, in its leadership, in politics, in thought, and largely in membership, actually and actively alien, un-American and usually anti-American. . . .

We Americans see many evidences of Catholic alienism. We believe that its official position and its dogma, its theocratic autocracy and its claim to full authority in temporal as well as spiritual matters, all make it impossible for it as a church, or for its members if they obey it, to cooperate in a free democracy in which Church and State have been separated. . . .

Another difficulty is that the Catholic Church here constantly represents, speaks for and cares for the interests of a large body of alien peoples. Most immigration of recent years, so unassimilable and fundamentally un-American, has been Catholic. The Catholics of American stock have been submerged and almost lost; the aliens and their interests dictate all policies of the Roman Church which are not dictated by Rome itself.

Also, the Roman Church seems to take pains to prevent the assimilation of these people. Its parochial schools, its foreign born priests, the obstacles it places in the way of marriage with Protestants unless the children are bound in advance to Romanism, its persistent use of the foreign languages in church and school, its habit of grouping aliens together and thus creating insoluble alien masses—all these things strongly impede Americanization. . . .

Finally, there is the undeniable fact that the Roman Church takes an active part in American politics. . . .

. . . The white race must be supreme, not only in America but in the world. This is equally undebatable, except on the ground that the races might live together, each with full regard for the rights and interests of others, and that those rights and interests would never conflict. . . . The world has been so made that each race must fight for its life, must conquer, accept slavery or die. The Klansman believes that the whites will not become slaves, and he does not intend to die before his time.

Moreover, the future of progress and civilization depends on the continual supremacy of the white race. The forward movement of the world for centuries has come entirely from it. Other races each had its chance and either failed or stuck fast, while white civilization shows no sign of having reached its limit. . . .

The Negro, the Klan considers a special duty and problem of the white American. He is among us through no wish of his; we owe it to him and to ourselves to give him full protection and opportunity. But his limitations are evident; we will not permit him to gain sufficient power to control our civilization. Neither will we delude him with promises of social equality which we know can never be realized. The

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### 21.3 The Results of

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#### Consider:

1. What the data reveal about grants during the 1920s
2. How these changes were in 1910, as the base year for
3. The impact on immigration end of World War I and

#### IMMIGRATION T

Year	All countries	Great Britain	Ireland
1930	241,700	31,015	23,445
1929	279,678	21,327	19,921
1928	307,255	19,958	25,268
1927	335,175	23,669	28,545
1926	304,488	25,528	24,897
1925	294,314	27,172	26,650
1924	706,896	59,490	17,111
1923	522,919	45,759	15,740
1922	309,556	25,153	10,579
1921	805,228	51,142	28,435
1920	430,001	38,471	9,591

SOURCE: Historical Statistics of the U  
D.C.: Government Printing Office, 19

Klan looks forward to the day when the Negro problem will have been solved on some much saner basis than miscegenation and when every State will enforce laws making any sex relations between a white and a colored person a crime. . . .

### 21.3 The Results of Immigration Restriction

A number of forces converged after World War I and intensified pressures for immigration restriction. In 1921, Congress enacted a new immigration law that introduced quotas on national origin. This law was amended by the National Origins Act of 1924, which limited immigration from outside the Western Hemisphere to just over 150,000 and continued to set quotas for immigration by national origin. Under the new law, the annual quota of each nation was based on the percentage of people of that nationality living in the United States in 1890. (The 1921 law had used 1910 as the base year for computing quotas.) The table that follows presents data on immigration to the United States from various nations during the 1920s.

#### Consider:

1. What the data reveal about changes in the ethnic composition of immigrants during the 1920s (see Doc. 18.1);
2. How these changes were related to the selection of 1890, rather than 1910, as the base year for national-origin quotas;
3. The impact on immigration of other events in the period, such as the end of World War I and the Great Depression.

IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES, 1920-1930

Year	All countries	Great Britain	Ireland	Germany	Poland	U.S.S.R. and Baltic States	Italy	Asia	Americas
1930	241,700	31,015	23,445	26,569	9,231	2,772	22,327	4,535	88,104
1929	279,678	21,327	19,921	46,751	9,002	2,450	18,008	3,758	116,177
1928	307,255	19,958	25,268	45,778	8,755	2,652	17,728	3,380	144,281
1927	335,175	23,669	28,545	48,513	9,211	2,933	17,297	3,669	161,872
1926	304,488	25,528	24,897	50,421	7,126	3,323	8,253	3,413	144,393
1925	294,314	27,172	26,650	46,068	5,341	3,121	6,203	3,578	141,496
1924	706,896	59,490	17,111	75,091	28,806	20,918	56,246	22,065	318,855
1923	522,919	45,759	15,740	48,277	26,538	21,151	46,674	13,705	199,972
1922	309,556	25,153	10,579	17,931	28,635	19,910	40,319	14,263	77,448
1921	805,228	51,142	28,435	6,803	95,089	10,193	222,260	25,034	124,118
1920	430,001	38,471	9,591	1,001	4,813	1,751	95,145	17,505	162,666

SOURCE: Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975), I, 105, 107.

## 21.5 The Controversy Over Evolution

Ronald L. Numbers

One of the most colorful and dramatic clashes of the 1920s was the "monkey trial" held in Dayton, Tennessee, in 1925. In this case, high school science teacher John Scopes was charged with violating Tennessee's Butler Law, which prohibited teaching evolution in public schools. The Butler Law reflected the Christian Fundamentalist view that the idea of evolution was antithetical to Christianity. The selection that follows, from a 1982 article by historian of science Ronald Numbers, examines the motives and tactics of the Fundamentalists, as represented by William Jennings Bryan. Numbers points out that the attack on evolution was not necessarily based on hostility to modern science.

### Consider:

1. Why Fundamentalists such as Bryan were concerned about evolutionist teachings;
2. How the antievolution crusade compared with the prohibition movement in motives and tactics (see Doc. 19.5);
3. Who "won" the Scopes case.

Early in 1922 William Jennings Bryan . . . heard of an effort in Kentucky to ban the teaching of evolution in public schools. "The movement will sweep the country," he predicted hopefully, "and we will drive Darwinism from our schools". . . His prophecy proved overly optimistic, but before the end of the decade more than 20 state legislatures did debate antievolution laws, and at least five—Oklahoma, Florida, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Arkansas—passed restrictive legislation. . . .

The development of Bryan's own attitudes toward evolution closely paralleled that of the fundamentalist movement. Since early in the century he had occasionally alluded to the silliness of believing in monkey ancestors and to the ethical dangers of thinking that might makes right, but until the outbreak of World War I he saw little reason to quarrel with those who disagreed. The war, however, exposed the darkest side of human nature and shattered his illusions about the future of Christian society. Obviously something had gone awry, and Bryan soon traced the source of the trouble to the paralyzing influence of Darwinism on the conscience. By substituting the law of the jungle

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SOURCE: Ronald L. Numbers, "Creationism in 20th-Century America," *Science* 218 (5 November 1982): 538-41. Copyright 1982 by the AAAS.

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for the teaching of Christ, it threatened the principles he valued most: democracy and Christianity. . . .

. . . he also became aware, to his great distress, of unsettling effects the theory of evolution was having on America's own young people. From frequent visits to college campuses and from talks with parents, pastors, and Sunday School teachers, he learned about an epidemic of unbelief that was sweeping the country. Upon investigating the cause, reported his wife, "he became convinced that the teaching of Evolution as a fact instead of a theory caused the students to lose faith in the Bible, first, in the story of creation, and later in other doctrines, which underlie the Christian religion." . . .

Armed with this information about the cause of the world's and the nation's moral decay, Bryan launched a nationwide crusade against the offending doctrine. Throughout his political career Bryan had placed his faith in the common people, and he resented the attempt of a few thousand scientists "to establish an oligarchy over the forty million American Christians" and to dictate what should be taught in the schools. . . . Confident that nine-tenths of the Christian citizens agreed with him . . . he decided to appeal directly to them, as he had done successfully in fighting the liquor interests. "Commit your case to the people," he advised creationists. "Forget, if need be, the high-brows both in the political and college world, and carry this cause to the people. They are the final and efficiently corrective power."

Leadership of the antievolution movement came not from the organized churches of America but from individuals like Bryan and interdenominational organizations such as the World's Christian Fundamentals Association, a predominantly premillennialist body founded in 1919. . . . The early 20th century witnessed the unprecedented expansion of public education (enrollment in public high schools nearly doubled between 1920 and 1930), and fundamentalists . . . wanted to make sure that students attending these institutions would not lose their faith. Thus they resolved to drive every evolutionist from the public school payroll. . . .

In 1922 [Minneapolis Baptist pastor] William Bell Riley outlined the reasons why fundamentalists opposed the teaching of evolution: "The first and most important reason for its elimination," he explained, "is in the unquestioned fact that evolution is not a science; it is a hypothesis only, a speculation." . . .

In the spring of 1925 John Thomas Scopes, a high school teacher in the small town of Dayton, Tennessee, confessed to having violated the state's recently passed law banning the teaching of human evolution in public schools. His subsequent trial focused international attention on the antievolution crusade and brought William Jennings Bryan to Dayton to assist the prosecution. In anticipation of arguments on the scientific merits of evolution, Bryan sought out the best scientific minds

in the creationist camp to serve as expert witnesses. The response to his inquiries could only have disappointed the aging crusader. . . .

. . . Eventually [Defense Attorney Clarence] Darrow forced Bryan to concede that the world was indeed far more than 6000 years old and that the 6 days of creation had probably been longer than 24 hours each. . . .

Although the court in Dayton found Scopes guilty as charged, creationists had little cause for rejoicing. The press had not treated them kindly, and the taxing ordeal no doubt contributed to Bryan's death a few days after the trial ended. Nevertheless, the antievolutionists continued their crusade, winning victories in Mississippi in 1926 and in Arkansas 2 years later. By the end of the decade, however, their legislative campaign had lost its steam. The presidential election of 1928, pitting a Protestant against a Catholic, offered fundamentalists a new diversion, and the onset of the depression in 1929 further diverted their energies.

But contrary to appearances, the creationists were simply changing tactics, not giving up. Instead of lobbying state legislatures, they shifted their attack to local communities, where they engaged in "the emasculation of textbooks, the 'purging' of libraries, and above all the continued hounding of teachers." Their new approach attracted less attention but paid off handsomely, as school boards, textbook publishers, and teachers in both urban and rural areas, North and South, bowed to their pressure. Darwinism virtually disappeared from high school texts, and as late as 1941 one-third of American teachers feared being identified as evolutionists.

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## 21.6 Religion and Politics: A Catholic Runs for President

Alfred E. Smith

The election campaign of 1928 saw another clash over religious principles, with implications as far-reaching as the Scopes Trial. Democrat Al Smith, the son of Irish immigrants, was the first Roman Catholic to be nominated for the presidency. Smith's Catholicism raised for many voters, especially Protestants, the question of separation of church and state. The year before his nomination, Smith tried to confront public fears about his religion directly in an open letter in *The Atlantic Monthly*. In his letter he replied to charges that loyalty to the Catholic church and loyalty to the Constitution were incompatible. The results of the 1928 election indicated that Smith was not successful in dispelling public doubts about having a Catholic in the White House.

### Consider:

1. Whether Smith adequately addressed the issue of religious freedom.
2. Why, in spite of Smith's arguments, many Catholics refused to support him.
3. Whether a candidate should be required to disavow religious beliefs.

CHARLES C. MARSHALL  
DEAR SIR:

In your open letter to American Catholics to question the loyalty of more than twenty million of you for defining the expression of the satisfaction to give 'a disclaimer of reservation I can and held neither by me nor know. . . .

I should be a poor religious discussion in you to accept this answer office but as an American meeting a challenge to

Taking your letter English, you imply that the Catholic faith and practice that has actually happened me to know that no conflict, I, of all men, been a silent man, but battles would in their any. . . .

. . . you quote from dogmatic intolerance, sacred duty.' And you taught to be politically, people. If you had read *cyclopaedia*, you would know that for Catholics alone complete acceptance of its chapter dealing with t

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SOURCE: Alfred E. Smith, "Catholicism and the American People" (May 1927): 721-26, 728. Reprinted in *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 1927, pp. 721-26, 728.

**Consider:**

1. Whether Smith adequately answers Marshall's charges;
2. Why, in spite of Smith's assurances, thousands of non-Catholic Democrats refused to support his candidacy;
3. Whether a candidate's religion ought to be a factor in the voter's choice.

CHARLES C. MARSHALL, ESQ.

DEAR SIR:

In your open letter to me in the April *Atlantic Monthly* you 'impute' to American Catholics views which, if held by them, would leave open to question the loyalty and devotion to this country and its Constitution of more than twenty million American Catholic citizens. I am grateful to you for defining this issue in the open and for your courteous expression of the satisfaction it will bring to my fellow citizens for me to give 'a disclaimer of the convictions' thus imputed. Without mental reservation I can and do make that disclaimer. These convictions are held neither by me nor by any other American Catholic, as far as I know. . . .

I should be a poor American and a poor Catholic alike if I injected religious discussion into a political campaign. Therefore I would ask you to accept this answer from me not as a candidate for any public office but as an American citizen, honored with high elective office, meeting a challenge to his patriotism and his intellectual integrity. . . .

Taking your letter as a whole and reducing it to commonplace English, you imply that there is conflict between religious loyalty to the Catholic faith and patriotic loyalty to the United States. Everything that has actually happened to me during my long public career leads me to know that no such thing as that is true. . . . If there were conflict, I, of all men, could not have escaped it, because I have not been a silent man, but a battler for social and political reform. These battles would in their very nature disclose this conflict if there were any. . . .

. . . you quote from the *Catholic Encyclopedia* that my Church 'regards dogmatic intolerance, not alone as her incontestable right, but as her sacred duty.' And you say that these words show that Catholics are taught to be politically, socially, and intellectually intolerant of all other people. If you had read the whole of that article in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, you would know that the real meaning of these words is that for Catholics alone the Church recognizes no deviation from complete acceptance of its dogma. . . . The very same article in another chapter dealing with toleration toward non-Catholics contains these

words: 'The intolerant man is avoided as much as possible by every high-minded person. . . . The man who is tolerant in every emergency is alone lovable.' . . .

Similar criticism can be made of many of your quotations. But, beyond this, by what right do you ask me to assume responsibility for every statement that may be made in any encyclical letter? . . . these encyclicals are not articles of our faith. . . . You have no more right to ask me to defend as part of my faith every statement coming from a prelate than I should have to ask you to accept as an article of your religious faith every statement of an Episcopal bishop, or of your political faith every statement of a President of the United States. . . .

Your first proposition is that Catholics believe that other religions should, in the United States, be tolerated only as a matter of favor and that there should be an established church. You may find some dream of an ideal of a Catholic State, having no relation whatever to actuality, somewhere described. But, voicing the best Catholic thought on this subject, Dr. John A. Ryan, Professor of Moral Theology at the Catholic University of America, writes . . . ;

' . . . "When several religions have firmly established themselves and taken root in the same territory, nothing else remains for the State than to exercise tolerance towards them all, or, as conditions exist today, to make complete religious liberty for individual and religious bodies a principle of government."

That is good Americanism and good Catholicism. . . .

. . . I stand squarely in support of the provisions of the Constitution which guarantee religious freedom and equality.

I come now to the speculation with which theorists have played for generations as to the respective functions of Church and State. You claim that the Roman Catholic Church holds that, if conflict arises, the Church must prevail over the State. You write as though there were some Catholic authority or tribunal to decide with respect to such conflict. Of course there is no such thing. . . .

What is this conflict about which you talk? It may exist in some lands which do not guarantee religious freedom. But in the wildest dreams of your imagination you cannot conjure up a possible conflict between religious principle and political duty in the United States, except on the unthinkable hypothesis that some law were to be passed which violated the common morality of all God-fearing men. And if you can conjure up such a conflict, how would a Protestant resolve it? Obviously by the dictates of his conscience. That is exactly what a Catholic would do. . . .

. . . Archbishop Ireland thus puts the Church's attitude toward the State:—

'To the Catholic obedience to law is a religious obligation, binding in God's name the conscience of the citizen. . . . Both Americanism and Catholicism bow to the sway of personal conscience.' . . .

I summarize my own view of the worship of God according to the Catholic Church. I recognize the right of the State to interfere with the operation of the Church or the enforcement of its laws, or the enforcement of its laws of conscience for all men, but I do not place all beliefs before the law in my favor. I believe in the right of the State to the strict enforcement of its laws, but I shall make no law respecting the free exercise thereof. I believe that no man has any power to make a law other than to establish his own church. I believe that the corner stones of a State are the right of a parent to choose what school or in a religious belief, and I believe in the principle of non-interference in the affairs of other nations. I believe that any such interference by a State in the common brotherhood of God.

## 21.7 The Impact

David Kyvig

Ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment and the national consensus for Prohibition were marked by a continuous change in public opinion. This was most evident in the rise and fall of the sale and distribution of alcohol in large cities. While the "noble experiment" of Prohibition, as historian David Kyvig has called it, was peaking, the National Prohibition Act was overshadowed by the amendment's eventual repeal in 1933.

### Consider:

1. Whether Prohibition represented a violation of the rights of a minority (see the text).
2. Why the pervasive image of Prohibition was so powerful.
3. Whether the media acted as a catalyst in the violations of Prohibition.

I summarize my creed as an American Catholic. I believe in the worship of God according to the faith and practice of the Roman Catholic Church. I recognize no power in the institutions of my Church to interfere with the operations of the Constitution of the United States or the enforcement of the law of the land. I believe in absolute freedom of conscience for all men and in equality of all churches, all sects, and all beliefs before the law as a matter of right and not as a matter of favor. I believe in the absolute separation of Church and State and in the strict enforcement of the provisions of the Constitution that Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. I believe that no tribunal of any church has any power to make any decree of any force in the law of the land, other than to establish the status of its own communicants within its own church. I believe in the support of the public school as one of the corner stones of American liberty. I believe in the right of every parent to choose whether his child shall be educated in the public school or in a religious school supported by those of his own faith. I believe in the principle of noninterference by this country in the internal affairs of other nations and that we should stand steadfastly against any such interference by whomsoever it may be urged. And I believe in the common brotherhood of man under the common fatherhood of God.

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## 21.7 The Impact of Prohibition

David Kyvig

Ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1919 appeared to reflect a national consensus for Prohibition. The decade that followed, however, was marked by a continuous challenge to the new law. Disrespect for this law was most evident in the rise of organized crime, which took over the supply and distribution of alcoholic beverages in many of the nation's largest cities. While the "noble experiment" of Prohibition significantly reduced drinking, as historian David Kyvig notes in this selection from his book *Repealing National Prohibition*, the pervasive image of lawlessness tended to overshadow the amendment's constructive effects and contributed to its eventual repeal in 1933.

### *Consider:*

1. *Whether Prohibition represented an unacceptable infringement on the rights of a minority (see Doc. 6.6);*
2. *Why the pervasive image of lawlessness undermined public support for Prohibition;*
3. *Whether the media acted responsibly in devoting so much coverage to violations of Prohibition.*

Most Americans obeyed the national prohibition law. Many, at least a third to two-fifths of the adult population if Gallup poll surveys in the 1930s are any indication, had not used alcohol previously and simply continued to abstain. Others ceased to drink beer, wine, or spirits when to do so became illegal. The precise degree of compliance with the law is difficult to determine because violation levels cannot be accurately measured. . . .

Any evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, national prohibition rapidly acquired an image, not as a law which significantly reduced the use of alcoholic beverages, but rather as a law that was widely flouted. . . . In part this commonly held impression stemmed from the substantial amount of drinking which actually did continue. Even given a 60 percent drop in total national alcohol consumption, a considerable amount of imbibing still took place. Yet the image also derived in part from the unusually visible character of those prohibition violations which did occur.

Drinking by its very nature attracted more notice than many other forms of law-breaking. It was, in the first place, generally a social, or group, activity. Moreover, most drinking took place . . . in urban areas where practically any activity was more likely to be witnessed. Bootleggers had to advertise their availability, albeit carefully, in order to attract customers. The fact that the upper classes were doing much of the imbibing further heightened its visibility. . . .

The behavior of those who sought to profit by meeting the demand for alcoholic beverages created an indelible image of rampant lawlessness. National prohibition provided a potentially very profitable opportunity for persons willing to take certain risks. "Prohibition is a business," maintained the best known and most successful bootlegger of all, Al Capone of Chicago. "All I do is supply a public demand." Obtaining a supply of a commodity, transporting it to a marketplace, and selling it for an appropriate price were commonplace commercial activities; carrying out these functions in the face of government opposition and without the protections of facilities, goods, and transactions normally provided by government made bootlegging an unusual business. . . . participants in the prohibition-era liquor business had to develop their own techniques for dealing with competition and the pressures of the marketplace. The bootlegging wars and gangland killings, so vividly reported in the nation's press, represented, on one level, a response to a business problem. . . .

The nation's press drew a vivid picture of a disregarded law. Newspapers constantly carried reports of police raids on stills and speakeasies.

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SOURCE: David E. Kyvig, *Repealing National Prohibition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 23-27, 31-32, 35.

Such stories, along with those from New York, Chicago, and other cities, but their impact on drinking nationwide was enormous.

Congress steered the issue enough to accomplish what was placed under civil control. The last transferred to national steps may have been effort had acquired a reputation prohibition could prevent.

While in reality the control of alcohol in the United States fell far short of expectations. It never achieved such a goal was widely supposed victim of the act rather than contributor. It simply did not fulfill its heavier burden. The local bootlegging industry generated a wide range of unacceptable frequent violations created an impression by using traditional methods in order to accomplish their goals. The industry emerged over the years and moved some

## CHAPTER QUESTIONS

1. What were the major characteristics of the American prohibition era?
2. Did traditionalist "Prohibitionist" forces and reformers play a significant role in the movement?
3. To what extent did the prohibition era reflect the conflicts of the decade?

Such stories, along with reports of the many gangland killings in New York, Chicago, and elsewhere, of course represented legitimate news, but their impact far outweighed the statistical evidence of reduced drinking nationwide. . . .

Congress steadily increased enforcement appropriations but never enough to accomplish the goal. In 1927 prohibition agents were finally placed under civil service, and in 1930 the Prohibition Bureau was at last transferred to the Justice Department. As useful as these congressional steps may have been, they came long after the enforcement effort had acquired a dismal reputation and doubts as to whether prohibition could possibly be effective had become deeply ingrained. . . .

While in reality national prohibition sharply reduced the consumption of alcohol in the United States, the law fell considerably short of expectations. It neither eliminated drinking nor produced a sense that such a goal was within reach. So long as the purchaser of liquor, the supposed victim of a prohibition violation, participated in the illegal act rather than complained about it, the normal law enforcement process simply did not function. As a result, policing agencies bore a much heavier burden. The various images of lawbreaking, from contacts with the local bootlegger to Hollywood films to overloaded court dockets, generated a widespread belief that violations were taking place with unacceptable frequency. Furthermore, attempts at enforcing the law created an impression that government, unable to cope with lawbreakers by using traditional policing methods, was assuming new powers in order to accomplish its task. The picture of national prohibition which emerged over the course of the 1920s disenchanting many Americans and moved some to an active effort to bring an end to the dry law.

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## CHAPTER QUESTIONS

1. *What were the major sources of the social and cultural tensions that characterized American society in the 1920s?*
2. *Did traditionalists generally seem to prevail in their opposition to "modernist" forces and developments in the 1920s? Explain.*
3. *To what extent did American politics reflect the social and cultural conflicts of the decade?*