Chapter 22

[[THE BIG IDEA: What conflicts in culture and politics arose in the 1920s, and how did economic developments in that decade help cause the Great Depression?]]

Americans emerged from World War I deeply divided. In 1919 African American veterans, returning from Europe in uniform, met with white hostility and violence in the South. Workers led labor protests, as business leaders began rolling back labor unions’ recent gains. Efforts to enforce “100% Americanism” during wartime fed continued hysteria over the possible influence of “Reds”--communists—as Americans witnessed the emergence of the new Soviet Union.

A series of Republican presidents in the 1920s rejected the activist outlook of the Progressive Era. U.S. policymakers remained heavily involved in overseas deals—including military occupations in the Caribbean and Central America--that benefited American business. Many ordinary citizens turned away from politics, and if they had money for it, focused on consumer pleasures. Famously, the “Roaring Twenties” became the decade of radio shows and Hollywood movies, flappers and jazz, and especially the rise of the automobile.

The 1920s was also, however, the decade of a resurgent, nationwide Ku Klux Klan. Some rural and small-town Americans feared not only African Americans but also immigrants, Catholics, and Jews. Many also resented the fact that city residents flaunted the national Prohibition law and dismissed religion as old-fashioned. A sharp political divide separated rural white Protestants from city dwellers and critics of American society—including modernist writers of the Lost Generation, and Harlem Renaissance artists who celebrated the rise of the “New Negro.”

As historians we have the privilege of hindsight. No one in the 1920s knew that severe economic hardships were looming. But in retrospect we can see that heavy use of credit drove consumer purchases in perilous directions, while the global economy had major structural flaws stemming from World War I, the gold standard, and the harsh reparations imposed at Versailles. In 1929 it all went bust, as the United States suffered its share of a global Great Depression.