

# In the Aftermath of War: Cultural Clashes in the 1920s

A Unit of Study for Grades 9-12

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## TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS

### I. UNIT OVERVIEW

Images of a carefree, slightly giddy “Jazz Age” leap to mind at the thought of America in the 1920s: flappers, raccoon coats, Model T’s, and no more war. In fact, the United States emerged from World War I with deep seismic faults in its society, with clashes that would reverberate through the decade and beyond. A study of the contrast between modern urban and traditional rural society can help students grasp the era’s great complexity and give them insights into different cultural attitudes that still exist in our society. Using a variety of documents, plus cooperative and individual instructional activities that emphasize critical thinking, students will examine the attitudes and strategies of people struggling with competing worldviews. Art, literature, and film are also used to illustrate key points.

### II. UNIT CONTEXT

These lessons deal with the United States between World War I and World War II. They should follow the study of World War I and precede coverage of the Great Depression. An in-depth look at the Red Scare, which is only touched on here, would be a good transition from the war to this unit. Similarly, an examination of the northward migration of blacks through the 1920s, including the Harlem Renaissance, would make a good transition to study of the Great Depression.

### III. UNIT OBJECTIVES

- ◆ To identify social and economic changes that had been occurring in the United States since the late 19th century.
- ◆ To identify reactions to the social and economic changes that had been occurring.
- ◆ To recognize that the emergence of new beliefs and attitudes produce tensions and conflicts in society.

### IV. INTRODUCTION TO CULTURAL CLASHES IN THE 1920s

The 1920s opened with a “red scare” that began in 1919, which led to the arrest of thousands of radicals, the lynching of a few, and the deportation of several hundred others. This campaign by Woodrow Wilson’s Justice Department and local police helped to sustain a rising spirit of anti-radicalism and nativism inspired by the crush of “the new immigrants” from southern and eastern Europe, who began crowding into American ports once again after the interruption caused by World War I. At the same time, the trend toward increasing urbanization of the native-born American population resumed, spurred by the widespread ownership of automobiles for the first time. Individuals from declining rural America migrated into cities, and cities spread out into the surrounding rural hinterlands. The old problem of the clash between the special needs of town and country reappeared. Yet this split between rural and urban life should not be exaggerated because small towns had their radicals and immigrants, and a majority of people in cities were from the country or had close ties to it.

The clash between the traditional and the modern was not just a new version of an old conflict but one that seemed to many country people or city-dwellers to be apocalyptic: Freudianism, Bolshevism, evolutionism, and innumerable other new ideas and movements seemed to be in league to destroy traditional life or values.

The pace of change was extraordinary: the nation’s gross national product grew by 40 percent between 1920 and 1930; over ten million households began listening to radios for the first time; movie theaters sold 100 million tickets *each week* by 1929; the rate of graduation from high school zoomed: those attending college reached one million by 1930. As for family farming, it declined dramatically because agribusiness made it impossible for small independents to compete. By 1930, only 21 percent of the population made its living from the land.

Meanwhile, the country tried to live without liquor from 1919 to 1933, which only seemed to increase drinking, make criminals of many citizens, and make the cities hostage to new crime syndicates that controlled the supply of illegal liquor. Prohibition was in part an aspect of the clash between “dry” moral fundamentalists in the country and “wet” moderns in the city. The decade neared its end with dramatic events: a Catholic nominee for the presidency was rejected in an anti-Catholic landslide in 1928; unregulated speculation in the stock market led to a crash in 1929; and the country plunged into a depression in which people went hungry in the cities while farmers plowed under their crops.

## V. CORRELATION TO NATIONAL HISTORY STANDARDS

*In the Aftermath of War: Cultural Clashes of the Twenties* provides teaching materials to support the *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996), Era 7, "The Emergence of Modern American (1890-1930). Lessons within this unit assist students in attaining **Standard 3A** and **3C** by examining the social tensions and their consequences in the postwar era and explaining how new cultural movements reflected and changed American society.

The unit likewise integrates a number of Historical Thinking Standards including: draw upon visual and literary sources (**Standard 2, Historical Comprehension**); compare and contrast differing sets of ideas, values, personalities, behaviors, and institutions (**Standard 3, Historical Analysis and Interpretation**); interrogate historical data by uncovering the social, political, and economic context in which it was created (**Standard 4, Historical Research**); and identify issues and problems in the past (**Standard 5, Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision Making**).

## VI. LESSON PLANS

1. Urban Modernism in the Twenties
2. Rural Traditionalism in the Twenties
3. Three Case Studies