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# TWO POSTWAR DECADES, THE 1920'S AND THE 1950'S: SOME COMPARISONS AND CONTRASTS

BY JOHN D. HICKS

FRED Morrow Fling, eminent among Nebraska historians several decades ago, used to dwell fondly upon the uniqueness of history; the same record, he insisted with some vehemence, was never played over twice. And of course he was right. Efforts to discover historical parallels are as old as the memory of mankind, but, whatever the unwary may think, the parallels are never exact. And yet there are periods in history so strongly reminiscent of other periods that even the most orthodox of historians cannot fail to recognize their similarity. As the present decade nears its close, those of us who lived through the 1920's suffer again and again from the illusion that we

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have lived through all this before. On second thought we know we have not, but, with all due respect for the uniqueness of each decade, can we not use the earlier period to shed light on the later? And perhaps, also, the later on the earlier?

Teachers of history are fond of beginning examination questions with the words "compare and contrast." I now propose to take a dose of the medicine I have so often prescribed, and to set myself the problem of comparing and contrasting the 1920's and the 1950's in American history. That this is much too much of a task for the time at my disposal I am well aware; my students often voiced that same complaint. But with shameless unconcern as to the broadness of my canvas and the thinness of my paint job, I shall take a quick look at the similarities and differences of the decades in all three of the principal historical categories, political, economic, and social.

Newton's third law, that for every action there is an equal and contrary reaction, has a certain validity in American politics. In the first decade and a half of the nineteenth century the American people were progressive-minded, ready for change, eager to reward forward-looking politicians with office. But with the First World War the pendulum began to swing in the opposite direction, and when the war ended it was the conservative-minded, opponents-of-change, back-to-normalcy crowd that took over. Theodore Roosevelt bore much responsibility for this, although not one man alone should be blamed for sentiments that a whole people shared. But Roosevelt's Bull Moose movement of 1912 was the undoing of the Progressive element within the Republican party. Undoubtedly Roosevelt believed that his prestige would be sufficient to lead the Progressives to victory that year, but it was not. When they lost, they not only lost an election; they also lost whatever standing they had once possessed in the Republican party. The conservatives took over, and such renegade Bull Moosers as chose to follow Roosevelt back into the G.O.P. were relegated to the status of "Sons of the Wild Jackass,"

to use Senator Moses's inelegant expression. And so, when the Republican party won office with the election of 1920, it was ruled by the most abjectly conservative group that it had known since the days of William McKinley, if not, indeed, since those of James G. Blaine, Roscoe Conkling, and General Grant.

Tired to death of the "cult of personality" that had elevated to the Presidency such men of distinction as Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and Woodrow Wilson, the utter reactionaries who dominated Republican thought in 1920 foisted off on the long-suffering public a figure-head President, Warren Gamaliel Harding, whose lack of distinction was his most recognizable trait. Tired of war, tired of reform, tired of a sick President, tired of the battle over the Treaty and the League, the American people elected Harding, as one writer aptly phrased it, "by disgust." They did not particularly want him, but the only way they could vote against things as they were was to vote for him. So they elected Harding by a more overwhelming popular majority than any other President had received for a hundred years. Thus the country was treated to the spectacle of a man utterly unfit for leadership in a position where leadership was imperative. For the wrong-headed policies and the orgy of corruption that followed, the people who voted for Harding had only themselves to thank.

The fact is that the United States cannot afford a weak President, but this is a lesson the American people find it hard to learn. If American history has anything to teach, it is most explicit on this point. Given a succession of weak Presidents in the 1850's—Fillmore, Pierce, Buchanan—the nation wound up with a Civil War on its hands. Given a Harding and a Coolidge in the 1920's, it wound up so far along the road to the "great depression" that Herbert Hoover, a man of very considerable ability, was powerless to arrest the drift. Had the Republicans in 1920 chosen any one of the three leading candidates for their nomination, Wood or Lowden or Johnson, the lack of

statesmanship and foresight in the face of coming events could hardly have been so devastating. Currently we are witnessing in the Democratic party a contest for the 1960 nomination not unlike the one that the Republicans faced in 1920. Can it be possible that once again the abler men will cancel themselves out, and the least able candidate win?

The exchange of Harding for Coolidge brought down the corruptionists, but it still left the Presidency in mediocre hands. Of Coolidge Senator Hiram Johnson of California once wrote with some perspicacity, "He has one great virtue. Apparently he knows his limitations, and therefore he will not talk at all. If he talked at all, the poverty of his intellect would at once be obvious, so he sits tight, and follows implicitly what is told him, and trusts to the press of the land." Coolidge's elevation to the Presidency also left that office in conservative hands. There are no exact definitions of what is "conservative," or "progressive," or "liberal" in American politics, but I have found that a good rule-of-thumb definition of conservative is whatever the business interests of the country desire. The conservative point of view is the one expressed by the United States Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers. Any departure from this norm may be marked off as radical, or subversive, or communistic. The terms "progressive" and "liberal" are in the eyes of the true conservative mere namby-pamby expressions for something far worse.

The conservatives liked Coolidge. He not only favored their point of view, but he took every opportunity to put businessmen in high political office. His closest adviser, Senator Butler of Massachusetts, was a businessman. His most trusted lieutenant, or commander might be a better term, was Andrew Mellon, the Aluminum King, whom Harding had made Secretary of the Treasury. Coolidge loaded up the regulatory boards, created in an earlier age to protect the public against the predatory activities of big business, with big businessmen and their friends. "Big business," Hiram Johnson wrote to his sons, "is in the

saddle as it has not been before during my life. The great exploiting interests are united with an enthusiasm and determination I have never seen exceeded. They are perfectly satisfied with the present administration and Coolidge's success in the [1924] primaries has made them truculent and arrogant." Coolidge did not particularly like Herbert Hoover, but he kept him on as Secretary of Commerce, and in every way tended to applaud the idea that what the country really needed was more businessmen in politics. It was logical that Herbert Hoover, pre-eminently the businessman in politics, should succeed Calvin Coolidge, pre-eminently the businessman's politician.

Neither Coolidge nor Hoover was quite the politician's politician. Commenting on "the outgoing and the incoming presidents" in 1929, Johnson wrote that "Two more dour, forbidding, and disagreeable faces it would be hard to conceive. Every lineament was sour and disgruntled, and no human expression once illumined these stony faces." Now the politician's politician knows how to smile, and cultivates earnestly the art of making friends and influencing people. Johnson's antagonism to Hoover was too acute not to suffer a heavy discount, but the problems of a businessman in politics are many and great. In business he determines policy and orders it executed. If things go wrong he may hire and fire at will. But in politics he has no such freedom. Most of the men upon whom he must depend are wished on him by circumstance, and as for elective officials, particularly Senators and Representatives, he may not hire nor fire a single one of them. Still the improvement in the Presidency with the accession of Hoover was notable. He fought the depression that his predecessors had helped to create, with such skill as his traditional economic views would permit. And it was Herbert Hoover, rather than Franklin D. Roosevelt, who first attempted to mobilize the power of government to defeat a depression. Theodore Roosevelt was ready to pursue such a course in 1907, but the depression he feared did not materialize. Earlier Presidents had sought mainly to keep the government solvent,

and had left it to business to restore prosperity. Hoover threw the full weight of government into the balance.

Turning to the 1950's for comparisons and contrasts, we can perhaps win general agreement on a few matters, despite the warm prejudices of the present. Certainly the average level of Presidential ability in our decade exceeds greatly the level reached by the Harding-Coolidge team. Certainly our last two Presidents have had an understanding of foreign affairs that neither Harding nor Coolidge possessed. As for Hoover, certainly neither Truman nor Eisenhower excelled him in ability, although both had the experience of the 1920's and the 1930's as an educational influence, and knew better than Hoover could possibly have known in the 1920's the problems that the nation faced in a post-war era. Truman was a politician to his fingertips, but many cuts above the level of Harding and Coolidge. He had an exceptional knowledge of American history; he worked with all his might to keep abreast of his job; above all, he had the rare quality of decisiveness, and he accepted without hesitation the heavy responsibilities of his office. "The buck stops here," he cheerfully admitted.

Eisenhower, the general, suffered from many of the same handicaps in the Presidency that made the job difficult for Hoover, the businessman. The high-ranking military officer, like the top executive, is accustomed to a chain of command. He can in large part determine who are his immediate subordinates, and he can order them around. His word is seldom challenged, and his orders never. In politics it is all so very different and so bewildering. Eisenhower has found that it takes a lot more than a change of title from "General" to "Mister" to eliminate the habits of a lifetime. And among the firmest of those habits are such good military practices as the delegation of authority to trusted subordinates, dependence upon their judgment in the making of major decisions, and loyal support of them as individuals, even when occasionally they blunder seriously.

Eisenhower's willingness to listen to the voice of big business is also reminiscent of the 1920's. Both Harding and Coolidge knew their master's voice, while Hoover was a businessman in his own right. Eisenhower from the very beginning of his administration chose to surround himself mainly with big business executives. They dominate his cabinet, he seeks them out as bridge-, golf-, and table-companions; their opinions tend to become his opinions. Indeed, as in the 1920's, they have pretty well taken over the controls in the Republican party.

But there is one conspicuous difference between the political behavior of the American people in the 1920's and in the 1950's. In the earlier decade they committed both the executive and the legislative branches of the national government to the care of the Republicans, whereas they have chosen quite consistently of late to balance off Republican control of the Presidency with Democratic control of Congress. They thus tend to imitate, after a fashion, the democratic nations of continental Europe, whose preference for coalitions and unwillingness to trust a single party, or interest, has long been in evidence. There, with the frightening record of Fascists, Falangists, Nazis, and Communists in mind, the voters are openly afraid of one-party majorities lest the one dominant party use its power to put all its competitors out of business. Probably few Americans fear any such specter, but some of them certainly do have their doubts about "single-interest," that is, big business, control of the whole government, and a few may remember how the party that claimed full responsibility for the prosperity of the 1920's delivered after 1929 an incredible legacy of depression. Under the circumstances the voters cannot be blamed very much if they hedge their bets a little.

Looking backward, we can see that the politicians of the 1920's made many bitter blunders; given the wisdom of hindsight, we can catalog the worst of them with ease. At the head of the list stands the ridiculous pretense of isolationism. Long before the 1920's Theodore Roosevelt

had pointed out that the United States had no choice but to play a large part in world affairs; it might play its part well, or play it badly, but play the part it must. The attempt to take the United States out of world affairs was impossible of achievement, and resulted only in the United States playing its part in world affairs badly. With American leadership the League of Nations might have succeeded; without American leadership the League was sure to fail. With American support the World Court might have provided a way short of war for the settlement of international disputes; without American support the Court had scarcely a chance. The attempt to collect back the money we had lent our European associates in the war was similarly disastrous; not only did we fail in the long run to get the money, but by our adamant insistence on repayment we encouraged the Allies to demand the impossible from Germany by way of reparations, and so helped materially to undermine both the German and the general European economies.

We made a great thing of peace by mutual disarmament instead of by international controls, and took immense pride in the achievements of the Washington Conference. But the net result of that greatly overpublicized event was to diminish both British and American sea power in the Far East, while leaving Japan free to pursue without restraint the course that led to Pearl Harbor. Moreover, except for battleships there was no real agreement on disarmament, and other powers than the United States built extensively; but the American government, convinced that it would never have to fight again, and eager to save money and pay off the national debt, refused to build the American navy even up to treaty possibilities, put the army on a dole, and closed its eyes to the growing importance of air power. When Billy Mitchell struck out madly against the unwisdom of this course, he was promptly court-martialed. Blind to the facts of international life, the United States even put its trust in empty words. No more futile gesture was ever thought up, and no greater hoax was ever perpetrated, than the Kellogg-Briand Peace Pact, by which all the great na-

tions of the world solemnly renounced war as an instrument of national policy, with a pen in one hand and a sword in the other.

In the field of international trade we were but babes in the woods. Our high protective tariff kept out foreign goods, as was intended, and made doubly certain that the war debts we sought to collect would never be paid. All foreign trade is essentially barter, and unless a nation buys it cannot ordinarily sell; further, if there are debts to be collected, the creditor nation must ordinarily import more than it exports. We met this situation, quite extraordinarily, by encouraging American investors to lend freely to those who wished to buy from us. With the blessing of the Departments of State and Commerce, Americans with money to invest plunged heavily in foreign securities, both public and private. The result was that the United States continued to sell abroad by the simple expedient of furnishing both the goods and the money with which to pay for the goods. We went even further, and furnished Germany, on credit, much of the money she paid the Allies on reparations, money which the Allies in turn paid back to the United States on their war debts as long as they kept up the payments. When American investors at last took fright, and would no longer provide the cash, Allied war debts payments stopped, and so also, for that matter, did a large percentage of foreign buying. If anyone, looking backward, can see the wisdom in all this, he must have a very fine imagination, indeed.

Our domestic policies added up little better. Immigration restriction proved to be a two-edged sword. We made enemies in Europe by our determined discriminations, among other things giving Mussolini an excuse to seek in imperial expansion a relief from the population pressure that the exclusion of Italian migration to the United States promoted; and by our unilateral repeal of the gentlemen's agreement we made enemies in Asia of Japanese moderates, men who might otherwise have held back the Japanese war party. Our government also, by conscious intent, pursued

an easy money, easy credit policy that to its astonishment and suprise led straight to the stockmarket collapse of 1929, and the economic depression that followed. On the negative side, we refused to face up to the farm problem, and left agriculture to work out its own salvation if it could, or failing that, just to grin and bear it. And as for labor, by the liberal use of injunctions, we kept the workingman, along with the Negro, in his place.

Turning to the 1950's, the indictment can hardly be so serious. Indeed, there is much evidence to show that the nation's recent policy-makers have sought earnestly not to repeat the mistakes of the 1920's. Isolationism is dead; both the Truman and the Eisenhower administrations have accepted without hesitation the foreign responsibilities of the United States, and have made every effort to discharge them well. This revolutionary attitude is strictly bipartisan; on all the fundamentals Truman and Eisenhower, Acheson and Dulles, have thought and acted alike. It has taken time for us to learn, however, that world leadership, in the face of a growing Communist menace, is wholly incompatible with disarmament. Theodore Roosevelt used to be fond of the adage, "Speak softly, but carry a big stick." Of late we have sometimes shown a tendency to speak softly while throwing the stick away. This mistake was what got us into the Korean War. It was neither Acheson's soft comment that the United States would not feel obligated to protect Korea, nor McArthur's still softer statement that only a lunatic would undertake to fight on the mainland of Asia, that induced the Communists to attack South Korea. Mere words, we should surely know, mean little to the Soviet leaders. What persuaded them to strike was the wretched condition of the American army, particularly in Japan, a condition made inevitable by the current passion for military retrenchment. Had we kept up our guard, the Korean War need not have happened.

Despite this painful lesson, we were again well on the way toward similar reductions in fighting power when the Soviets startled the world by beginning to throw their

Sputniks around. At the moment they are no doubt well ahead of us in missile development, and diplomatically they are leading from strength, not weakness, as Khrushchev's current invasion of the United States abundantly attests. But at least we are now alert to the danger. We are spending four-sevenths of our annual budget on defense measures, despite the certainty that this means inflation. For inflation cannot be cured by mere budget-balancing, important as that may be. So long as we are forced to spend about $40 billion each year on military hardware that we can neither sell abroad nor consume at home, we shall have inflation, make no mistake about it, unless perchance we choose to reinstate wartime price controls. But the blame for this predicament rests with the Soviets, not with wild-eyed spenders of either political party. This is a part of the price we must pay, not only for world leadership, but for survival.

We seem also to have learned something about the facts of international trade. Time after time Congress has renewed the Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act, and the old-fashioned tariff protectionists, if not completely defeated, are at least held at bay. We have not tried, as we did in the 1920's, to collect back the expenditures we made to keep our Allies fighting in a common cause. On the contrary, we have sent billions in economic and defense aid to friendly nations, believing that by thus shoring up their shattered economies we could at one and the same time (1) protect them from conquest by communism, (2) gain additional assistance for the defense of the free world, and (3) prepare the way for a "trade not aid" relationship. That we are making progress even toward this latter end seems evident from the now nearly equal balance that has developed between our imports and our exports. Furthermore, we have shown commendable caution about encouraging private investors to take unreasonable overseas risks; we have revised our immigration policy in such a way as to give less offense than formerly; and we have won a certain amount of good-will by taking in substantial quotas of refugees, particularly from Hungary. International good man-

ners, we have come to believe, may pay pretty good dividends.

Undoubtedly the problem next in importance to averting another war is averting another depression. No one in his right mind wants a repetition of what happened in 1929, and economists agree that during the "roaring twenties" the government overlooked many opportunities to restrain the boom and prevent the collapse. As for the present, the Securities and Exchange Commission has tightened up on stock-market gambling with a 90 per cent margin requirement now as against a 10 per cent requirement then. The Federal Reserve Board has learned to manipulate credit by the raising and lowering of rediscount rates, and by ordering heavy purchases or sales of government securities (no longer in short supply as in the 1920's). The nation has had two rather frightening recessions during the present decade, one in 1953-54, and another in 1957-58. For the first a drastic, if somewhat fortuitous, tax cut helped cure the slump, but for the second it took a wave of post-Sputnik defense spending, stepped-up social security payments, together with huge highway and housing programs to righten the economic ship of state—and incidentally a $13 billion federal deficit. Now that we are booming again, we cannot help viewing with alarm the reappearance of certain symptoms that preceded the disaster of 1929, such, for example, as an overzooming and sometimes erratic stock market, chronic unemployment in the midst of prosperity, and the too-insistent reiteration in high places that all is well. If a really significant downward spiral should develop, could the government act with sufficient speed and in sufficient volume to set matters right? We can only hope that the emergency does not appear.

As for agriculture and labor, the differences between conditions in the 1920's and the present decade could hardly be more conspicuous. During the depressed thirties and the war-torn forties both interests acquired new weapons of self-defense. Business may still be in the driver's seat, and no doubt its protagonists regret deeply the concessions to

the farmers and the labor unions that circumstances forced upon them. But certainly agriculture now enjoys price supports, whether frozen or unfrozen, that in the earlier age would have raised cries of socialism, communism, and insanity. Nor is the way out of our present dilemma clear to anyone. Surely the nation cannot go on indefinitely subsidizing the production of agricultural commodities that it cannot use and cannot sell, but neither can it permit the return of agriculture to the doldrums of the 1920's. Here is an opportunity for statesmanship of the greatest magnitude, an opportunity that up to now no statesman has stepped forward to embrace. Labor, too, has quite overcome the impotence that characterized its status in the 1920's. Old age and unemployment benefits have come to stay; furthermore, big labor has now grown so great that it often seems to compete, or collaborate, with big business on almost equal terms. Indeed, Congress in the Taft-Hartley Act and in legislation just passed has begun to recognize the same obligation to regulate big labor that it long ago asserted with reference to big business.

"The business of America is business," Calvin Coolidge once pontificated, and he was more than half right, both for the 1920's and for the 1950's. Each decade witnessed a business boom of almost unprecedented proportions. The term "business" is a generous catch-all, but in the 1920's it embraced, besides the ordinary manifestations of finance, manufacture, transportation, promotion, and sale, a series of notable innovations. Of these the automobile industry will have to serve as an example, although the construction, real estate, and public utility activities, and perhaps many others, deserve almost equal attention. These were the days of Henry Ford, of William C. Durant, and of Walter P. Chrysler, pioneers all. Ford's business methods interested the public hardly less than the ugly little black cars he built. By mass production he was able to lower the price of his product steadily. "Get the costs down by better management," he argued, "Get the prices down to the buying power." Quite reasonably he preferred a large volume of sales at a small profit to a small volume

at a large profit. He also paid his men well, a practice he began long before the 1920's with a five dollar or six dollar daily wage when that was decidedly above the going rate. High wages, he argued lucidly, meant better workers and more customers. But he would have nothing to do with the unions; within his business domain his word was law. Durant, whose genius made General Motors a success, and Chrysler, who left General Motors to strike out on his own, furnished Ford the competition he needed. But the "big three" made it tough for the smaller fry; by 1929 Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler produced 83 per cent of the cars manufactured in the United States, with an annual production of passenger cars that exceeded four million vehicles. Trucks and buses ran the totals still higher, and made the manufacture of automobiles the first industry in the land.

Father Bruckberger, the French Dominican priest whose *Image of America* was a recent Book-of-the-Month Club selection, sees in the business methods that Ford introduced a far more important revolution than ever flowed from the events of October, 1917, in Russia. The new Ford concept of prosperity for the workers relegated Ricardo's theory of a "minimum-subsistence wage" to the scrap-heap, and made "every worker a potential customer." Ford's experience seemed to show that corporations must indeed place "public service and the welfare of the workers . . . ahead of profits and dividends," and to a remarkable degree that rule of reason won acceptance. Even so, there were pitfalls in the exuberant prosperity that followed. According to Frank Vanderlip, a somewhat unorthodox banker, capital still "kept too much and labor did not have enough to buy its share of things." Technological advances left many workers without jobs, the overexpansion of credit made installment buying much too easy, and advertisers quite overshot the mark. The radio and the movies destroyed such immunity as non-readers had possessed before; there was no escape from the insistent demand to buy now, and if necessary pay later. Haunting slogans such as "Ask the man who owns one," "Time to retire,"

"Eventually, why not now," "Reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet," became from endless repetition as familiar as Mother Goose rhymes. But the prosperity that seemed for a season so bountiful wore itself out in 1929. Business leadership still had a lot to learn.

Another quick look at the 1950's shows that the automobile industry, at least, has come of age, if not of overage. No longer is there that childlike interest in lowering prices. During the present decade the Ford principle of more and more value for less and less money somehow got lost in the shuffle; whatever competition exists today is confined mainly to fantails, two-tone pastel colors, and handy gadgets, but not prices, which with rare exceptions go steadily up and up—on three separate ladders, maybe, but all at about the same speed. Possibly we could use a little more of that early price-cutting now as a guarantee against depression; nothing else would so certainly keep the American public in a buying mood. Also, if automobile manufacturers were as wide awake as they were when they were many times more numerous, Americans might not be falling all over themselves to buy smaller and more maneuverable foreign cars. One wonders if the automobile industry with its devotion to planned obsolescence, and perhaps many other American industries also, aren't suffering from hardening of the arteries. If youthful exuberance helped bring on the panic of 1929, unimaginative old age may have had something to do with whatever it was that hit us in 1953 and again in 1957, and still keeps unemployment at a dangerously high figure.

The private understandings, uttered or unexpressed, that prevent price competition in automobiles have become an all too familiar pattern throughout American industry today. The price of steel, for example, is certainly noncompetitive; if big steel raises its prices, little steel promptly follows suit. If the demand falls off at the high price asked, there is no lowering of prices to increase demand; instead, just a cut in production tailored to fit the lower demand. The assumption, quite contrary to the

Henry Ford point of view, is that there are better profits in high prices and a limited demand than in the low prices that result from competition. This is one of the penalties we pay when big business gets so big that a few producers can control so large a proportion of the market; oligopoly, the economists call it.

What makes the situation even more frightening is the way in which big labor and big business seem of late to have joined forces in a combined raid on the consumer's buying power. From time to time management, particularly when inventories are high, puts up an amiable fight against union demands for higher wages. But in the end a compromise agreement is always reached, and wages go up. Then, by way of compensation, management raises prices, usually far more than enough to cover the cost of the wage boost. The persistence of this pernicious cycle in so many basic industries has added immeasurably to our problem of inflation; furthermore, neither business nor labor seems to have recognized that the limitations they impose on production are dangerously damaging to the national economy. Not only are the Soviets overtaking us at a rapid pace, but we are tending also to price ourselves out of our foreign markets. In the end, if this situation persists, many observers believe that the national government will have to take a hand. It has the example of a wartime Office of Price Administration to which to turn if necessary, and certainly its heavy contributions to "free enterprise" by way of defense expenditures tend to warrant some kind of self-protection.

Turning now to the hopelessly broad canvas of social history, we shall have to content ourselves with only a few bold strokes. Americans of the 1920's had a number of set ideas that have not entirely stood the test of time. They were sure, for example, that the population rate was slowing down. The United States had come of age; there was nothing abnormal about the fact that immigration had fallen off and the birth rate had begun to decline; these conditions were only marks of national maturity. It was as

natural that the population curve should level off as that in postadolescence a young man should cease to grow taller. Census takers, without exactly saying so, also took a certain comfort in the fact that the Negro population was not increasing as rapidly as the white. If that situation persisted, and migration from the South continued to spread the Negroes more evenly throughout the nation, would not the great American dilemma eventually wear itself out? The problem of the immigrant was also on the way to a solution, for with new immigration virtually cut off, the American educational system would soon turn the children and the grandchildren of the immigrants into true disciples of the American way of life; perhaps even into Mayflower descendants. Urban growth was something to conjure with, for the cities were gaining on the country with remarkable speed. But after all the cities could provide jobs, and the country could not. Was this not a perfectly reasonable and proper readjustment—the city as a kind of safety valve for rural discontent, instead of the other way around as in the old days of the growing American frontier?

This mood of complacency did not mean, however, that everyone was content to leave well enough alone. There were those who believed with great intensity that it was necessary to hasten along the millenium that was just around the corner. A strong legacy of Puritanism in the American character produced such striking efforts to deal with nonconformity as Prohibition, the Ku Klux Klan, and what one might call professional patrioteering. The 1920's will be long remembered as the dry decade during which the state undertook the difficult task of wiping out the manufacture and sale of intoxicating beverages. If people couldn't get it, they wouldn't have it, and if they didn't have it, according to views preached by prohibitionists for a hundred years, poverty, and crime, and sin would almost disappear. And so the power of government was mobilized to make the minority who drank and misbehaved over into decent, God-fearing, law-abiding, upstanding Americans. Some extremists were ready even to by-pass the law and accomplish the ends they sought by more direct means.

Harking back to reconstruction times for their organization, American nativists revived the Ku Klux Klan, dressed themselves up in sheets and nightcaps, and took out valiantly against Negroes who refused to stay in their places, immigrants who retained any slightest flavor of their Old World language and customs, Catholics who did not know that God was a Protestant, and Jews who weren't even Christians, did too well in business, and made off with too many high school prizes.

With the cult of nationalism flourishing like a green bay tree, professional patrioteers also had themselves a time. "Our country, right or wrong," was nailed to the mast-head in every issue of the *Chicago Tribune,* but a surfeit of patriotic orders tended to insist that our country couldn't ever have been wrong, at least not until recent times, and then only when the wrong party won at the polls. One interesting group undertook the censorship of American history textbooks which failed to recount in sufficiently glowing terms the exploits of our national heroes, and in particular the righteousness of the American cause in the War for Independence and the War of 1812. Nor could one speak respectfully of America's enemies, particularly if they happened to be British. Van Tyne of Michigan was roundly denounced for having said in an account of the Battle of Bunker Hill that the British troops, after two unsuccessful assaults on the American position, bravely reformed their lines and tried again. Didn't everyone know that bravery was an American monopoly, while the British at best could be nothing better than cowardly wretches?

But here again Newton's third law went to work. Prohibition was certainly an experiment "noble in motive," if for no other reason, than because one of our two living ex-Presidents said so. But if God couldn't protect apples in the Garden of Eden, why should Americans have thought that by law they could prevent their thirsty fellow-citizens from taking a drink? Prohibition broke down because of the impossibility of enforcement. Prohibition officers were not all venal, and expenditures to make people observe the

law went as far as public opinion would permit. But the net result was that those who wanted a drink got what they wanted somehow, among them many individuals who had had no interest in liquor until it became forbidden fruit. Disobedience of the law on so grand a scale led to some really spectacular excesses. If the bootleggers could get away with what they were doing, why not other illegal rackets also? Racketeering as a word entered the American language, and as a practice became truly frightening. The Ku Klux Klan lived on ingloriously for a few years, and then folded in shame as its excesses made it ridiculous, even to its own membership. The patrioteers likewise kept up a lively claque for a while, helped save the nation in 1928 from electing as President a 50 per cent American of Irish Catholic ancestry, but began to fade out after the Panic of 1929 gave people something more serious to think about. Such cynics as H. L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis held up the American way of life to appropriate ridicule; the "lost generation," small in number but mighty in protest, abandoned Greenwich Village for the more tolerant atmosphere of Paris; and rebellious youth mouthed radical ideas, wore outlandish clothes, and made sex a principal subject of conversation.

And what of the 1950's? Well, there are certain similarities. We have had our share of intolerance during the last decade, our fill of long-drawn-out oath controversies, and of loyalty and security checks. McCarthyism was a long time in becoming McCarthywasm. We have also had an abundance of juvenile delinquents, narcotics peddlers, and blackboard jungles. We have even gone so far as to copy the worst styles of the 1920's in feminine attire. But there are certain marked differences. We have had no real equivalent in the 1950's of the Prohibition fiasco, or at least until recently of the raw racketeering that disgraced the 1920's. Also, judging from what the demographers call the population explosion, young adults of the present decade must have done something more about sex than merely to talk. All predictions that the population curve would level off failed to materialize; in spite of the virtual cessa-

tion of immigration the figures began to climb in the 1940's, and the end is not yet. Urbanization has likewise exceeded all expectations; Americans are now primarily city dwellers; urban-born historians discourse learnedly on the agrarian myth, and will no doubt soon discover that the nation never really had any farmers anyway. The Negro problem is still with us, but it has entered a new and in many ways a far more difficult phase. The Negro is no longer so easily pushed around, and his insistence on equality before the law has netted him many victories. Civil rights and desegregation are topics of conversation throughout the land, and in some areas tensions are great. In the deep South, white citizen's councils call the signals, and a revived Ku Klux Klan does the dirty work.

I shall risk two further generalizations, each worthy of a book by way of proof or disproof. Americans of the 1950's are a long lap ahead of those who lived in the 1920's in the realm of science. Among other things we shall soon know how to blow up the world, and if we don't take care we may sometime do it by mistake. But in the realm of literature and criticism, the writers of the 1920's were far ahead of those who write today. Some of the men who achieved this kind of distinction in the 1920's are still with us, and they still lead the field, but the 1950's have produced on their own no counterparts of H. L. Mencken, George Jean Nathan, Sinclair Lewis, Theodore Dreiser, Eugene O'Neill, Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner. Just why this should be so, I do not know. If budding genius was slain on the battlefields of World War II, why were the scientists spared and the writers taken? But, who knows, this time perhaps literary genius is only a little longer in the bud, and may yet appear. Or perhaps we don't recognize genius when we see it.

By way of conclusion, I suppose what this all adds up to is merely the old question: "Can we learn anything from history," or must we accept the old saw, "We learn from history that we cannot learn from history." Of one thing

we may be certain. We cannot learn much from history that we do not know; as Carl Becker once put it, "What we didn't know hurt us a lot." Our leaders are all too frequently ignorant of history, and the people generally, knowing even less, can rarely tell when they are being misled. But, granting that we could profit much more than we do from a knowledge of our past, it seems to me that there is some evidence that we have profited a little. We have, for one thing, found out that there is no easy and simple road to peace; it will take all the statesmanship we can command to keep this divided world from choosing the path of destruction once again. For another, some of us are beginning to sense that to avert another all-out depression we cannot depend on measures that we think would have sufficed to keep us out of the last one. We have new perils to face, new problems to ponder.

How can history, which is only the record of human experience—the written record at that—tell us how to deal with conditions that never existed before? It is quite apparent that history furnishes us very few positive answers. What in history, for example, gives a sure answer as to the wisdom of the further testing of hydrogen bombs, or the wisdom of multiplying earth satellites, or of sending rockets to the moon. Perhaps if we compare the dilemmas of our nation and the world with our own personal dilemmas we can find some reason for hope. As individuals we must confront new problems every day, or at least every month or year, problems for which we cannot find direct answers anywhere in our experience. But out of what wisdom we have accumulated through experience, as supplemented by our reason, we must make decisions. And so mankind, depending upon the experience of the human race, must reason its way forward into the unknown. We cannot look up in our history books the answers on what to do next, as we might look up definitions in a dictionary, for history never quite repeats itself, and there are always differences to be considered. But if we know whence we have come, and how, we are in as good a position as we can be to determine whither we should go, and how. If what we

don't know about our past can do us much harm, it seems reasonable to suppose that what we do know about it should help us a little.