

BRIEFING

# America in 1917

America was the world’s most prosperous nation in 1917. Standards of living were rising. America’s industries were expanding. Large and efficient farms in the Mid-West gr w vast quantities of cheap cereals that were exported to Europe. Americans had every reason to believe in a bright future for their nation.

## America’s attitude to the First World War

In 1914, war had broken out between the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary and, by 1915, Turkey) and the Allies (Britain, Russia, France and later Italy). The Democrat President of America, Woodrow Wilson, was anxious to keep America out of this conflict. Millions of immigrants, many originally from Europe, now lived in America. They had no wish to become involved in such a war. Most Americans hoped to remain apart from political and economic conflicts outside their own borders. This attitude became known as ‘isolationism’.

America’s isolationist attitude gradually began to change for a number of reasons.

## The Lusitania incident

By 1915, Germany suspected that American ships were carrying ammunition to the Allies. As the Allies were blockading German ports, Germany felt justified in imposing her own ‘war zone’ around the British Isles. In February, she declared that her submarines would sink any enemy ship on sight, including any ships suspected of supplying war materials. On 7 May, the British Cunard liner, *Lusitania*, travelling from New York, was sunk by a German U-boat. Within twenty minutes, 1,198 civilians were dead. Among them were 128 Americans.

President Wilson immediately sent a strong protest to Berlin. Germany alleged that the *Lusitania* had been carrying ammunition but promised not to attack passenger shipping again without warning. America, therefore, stayed out of the war for the time being.

## SOURCE A



A view of New York City’s skyline from Brooklyn bridge in the 1920s.



After the sinking of the *Lusitania*, relations between Germany and America gradually grew worse. Early in 1917, Kaiser Wilhelm ordered that the policy of unrestricted submarine attacks against shipping should begin again ‘with the utmost energy’. On 12 and 19 March, four unarmed US ships were sunk by German U-boats, and American public opinion turned even more sharply against Germany.

**The Zimmermann Telegram**

In January 1917, the German foreign minister, Alfred Zimmermann, sent a telegram to the German ambassador in Mexico. The telegram was intercepted by British intelligence and passed on to Wilson. It revealed that Germany had been trying to gain Mexican support in the event of war. In return for this, Mexico would be given the opportunity to invade America and seize Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. Americans were outraged. It was then discovered that German immigrants had been carrying out acts of sabotage in American factories and anti-German feeling grew even stronger.

**America enters the war**

On 6 April 1917, the American Congress declared war on Germany. President Wilson said ‘The world must be made safe for democracy.’ His aim was not only to stop Germany’s aggression, but also to destroy the autocratic system of government in Germany.

**America’s role in the war**

America had not been entirely neutral between 1914 and 1917, for she continued to trade with the Allies. As a result, American industry and agriculture had prospered. American banks had lent the Allies money to buy American products at high rates of interest. By 1917, her troops were desperately needed. The Russian army was collapsing and French and British morale was low. In March 1918, the Germans launched the ‘Ludendorf Offensive’ on the Western Front. At first this was successful but, by November 1918, there were almost 1 million US troops on the front line. The German generals sued for peace. An agreement, the Armistice, was made to end the war and, on 11 November 1918, both sides stopped fighting.

**SOURCE B**



Recruiting posters urging young Americans to join the armed forces.



BRIEFING

AMERICA'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE FIRST WORLD WAR

|   |              |
|---|--------------|
| Number of men conscripted into the forces | 5,000,000    |
| Number of troops wounded                  | 125,000      |
| Number of troops killed in action         | 53,000       |
| Cost of munitions provided by the USA     | \$22 million |
| Loans to the Allies                       | \$10 million |

How did America's involvement affect ordinary American civilians?

The Federal government grew more powerful during the war as it was given greater control over industry and agriculture. Espionage Acts, limiting the freedom of speech, were passed. This made it more difficult for people to speak out against the government.

President Wilson and the Versailles Peace Conference

President Wilson went to the Versailles Peace Conference in December 1918, determined to find a 'just peace'. He issued his Fourteen Points, in January 1918, summing up his aims. The key point was a proposal to set up an international body, the League of Nations, to settle disputes between nations and prevent wars in

future. At the Peace Conference, however, the other major nations – France, Britain and Italy – were mainly concerned with making Germany pay for the damage caused by the war. The Versailles Treaty that was finally imposed upon the Germans contained only a few of Wilson's Fourteen Points. The League of Nations was, however, included in the Treaty.

America returns to isolationism

When the Treaty was presented to the US Congress, to Wilson's intense disappointment it was rejected. The Republicans were concerned that America should keep complete control of her foreign policy and not become involved in the affairs of other nations. The most powerful nation in the world refused to take part in the League or enforce the peace treaty which their own President had helped to create. America had returned to isolationism.

Discussion points

- > What were the main reasons for America entering the First World War?
- > What is meant by isolationism?

SOURCE C



Ex-President Wilson (left) and his Republican successor, Warren Harding, riding to the Capitol from the White House. The occasion was Harding's inauguration as President in 1921.



INVESTIGATION

# The American success story

In the 1920s, the American economy was the most prosperous in the world. Electricity had arrived, and was gradually installed in homes, shops, offices, bars, motels and factories. New inventions, such as the refrigerator, radio, vacuum cleaner and, above all, the motor car, meant that the American economy prospered.

## In what ways did America boom?

### Henry Ford and mass production

The biggest industrial success of the boom years was the motor car. By 1925, millions of cars were being driven on America's roads, and their price was falling. How was all of this achieved?

### The 'Tin Lizzie'

Henry Ford, the son of poor European immigrants, announced that he would 'build a car for the great multitudes'. In 1908, he made his first Model T Ford or the 'Tin Lizzie'. It was ugly, slow, uncomfortable, difficult to drive, and it rattled. But the Model T was tough, reliable, and it could travel anywhere. Most important of all – it was cheap, and became even cheaper. Between 1909 and 1928, 15 million Model T Fords were sold.

### The role of the assembly line and division of labour

Henry Ford was able to produce his cars so cheaply because of the new industrial methods used in his factories. The key to success was division of labour. Each worker did just one task. For example, one worker would work a handle to stamp out hundreds of pieces of metal. The next man would drill the holes, the third man would bolt the pieces together. A moving assembly line was needed to make this process work.

### SOURCE A

*Henry Ford describes the assembly line:*

Work is planned on the drawing board and the operations sub-divided so that each man and each machine only do one thing. The thing is to take the work to the man, not the man to the work.

Henry Ford, 1925

Henry Ford was using this assembly-line method to mass-produce the Model T by 1913. Before this, it had taken 12 hours and 28 minutes to manufacture one car. By splitting the job into 45 separate processes, manufacturing time was now cut to 1 hour and 33 minutes. By the mid-1920s, 7,500 cars were being produced a day – one car every 10 seconds. By 1929, 9 out of 10 US families owned a car made by either Ford, Chrysler or General Motors.

### SOURCE B



Henry Ford and his son Edsel in 1924, with the ten-millionth Ford car to come off the production line.



IN WHAT WAYS DID AMERICA BOOM?

THE EFFECTS OF THE MOTOR CAR

Positive effects

- > The popularity of the motor car was a huge boost to other industries that produced the materials needed in its manufacture.
- > New jobs were created to service the motor industry in building roads, constructing parking lots, manufacturing road signs and traffic lights.  
Cars needed to be repaired and serviced and supplied with fuel. Gas stations, motels and restaurants sprang up all over America.
- > The motor car was ideal for short-distance, convenience travel. Suburbs quickly expanded.
- > Millions of families could now travel longer distances and take holidays.

Negative effects

- > The car was a hazard to the environment: it caused traffic jams and air pollution.
- > The car caused road casualties and deaths.
- > Car assembly lines resulted in tedious and monotonous jobs with little job satisfaction.
- > Some of the older generation felt that young couples were using the car for improper behaviour.
- > Gangsters were able to use the motor car for their criminal activities.

PRICE OF A MODEL T FORD

|      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1909 | \$950 |
| 1913 | \$600 |
| 1917 | \$360 |
| 1928 | \$290 |

THE VALUE OF CAR SALES IN THE USA

|      |                |
|------|----------------|
| 1920 | US \$1,800,000 |
| 1922 | US \$2,300,000 |
| 1925 | US \$3,800,000 |
| 1929 | US \$4,700,000 |

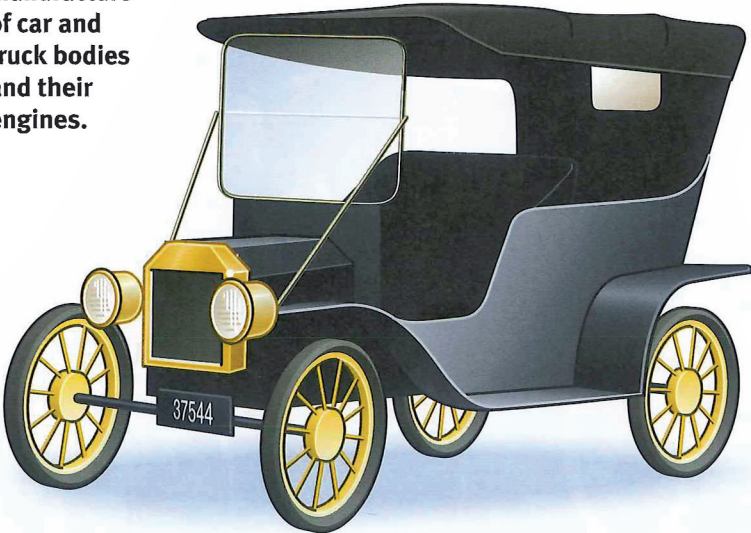
CARS ON THE ROADS IN THE USA

|      |            |
|------|------------|
| 1910 | 468,000    |
| 1920 | 9,239,000  |
| 1930 | 26,750,000 |

DEMANDS CREATED BY THE MOTOR CAR

20% of US steel was used in the manufacture of car and truck bodies and their engines.

75% of US glass was used in the manufacture of car windows.



65% of US leather was used in the manufacture of car seats.

80% of US rubber was used in the manufacture of tyres and inner tubes.

A large quantity of gasoline was used for fuel.

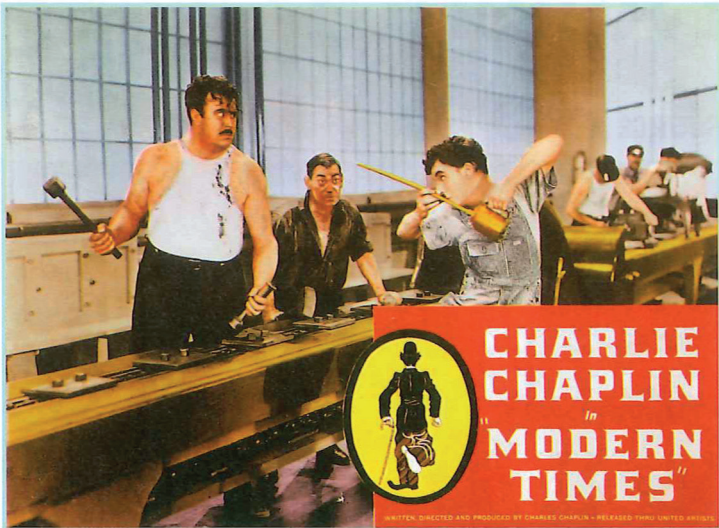
The spread of automation

Mass-production methods soon spread to industries producing household electrical goods. Factories that had been making arms during the First World War were now geared up to produce the new labour-saving devices. By the end of the 1920s, radios, vacuum cleaners, refrigerators, irons and washing machines were all being produced in vast quantities. Because people were able to get access to credit and hire purchase more easily, sales of these items soon ran into millions.



The American success story

SOURCE C



A scene from the popular film, *Modern Times*, of 1936 showing Charlie Chaplin making fun of the tedious, boring work on an assembly line.

SOURCE D

A recent historical study shows the extent of mass consumption in the American home.

The revolution was most apparent in the home. The percentage of households with inside flush lavatories rose from 20 to 51% between 1920 and 1930. Homes with radios rose from 0 to 40%; homes with vacuum cleaners from 9 to 30%; homes with washing machines from 8 to 24%.

Sean Cashman, *America in the 1920s and 1930s*, 1989

THE CONSUMPTION OF ELECTRIC POWER



By 1920, 33% of homes were supplied with electricity. By 1929, the proportion of homes with electricity had risen to nearly 70%.

The radio revolution

A new industry that completely captured the imagination of the American people in the 1920s was the radio or wireless. This device was developed before the First World War, but commercial production did not begin until 1919. This created thousands of new jobs.

The first broadcasting station, KDKA, opened in Pittsburgh in November 1920. It was privately owned, and received its income from advertisements on air. By 1940, there were over 700 radio stations all over America.

People listened to the new jazz music, sportscasts, news reports, political conventions, and sponsors' messages and advertisements. By 1929, 9 million American homes had a radio receiver.

HOW DID THE RADIO INDUSTRY AFFECT SOCIETY?

- > The radio industry provided many new jobs.
- > A new advertising medium was created.
- > The radio helped to spread the popularity of the new dance and jazz music of the Roaring Twenties.
- > The radio became influential in the spread of political ideas. President Roosevelt was the first politician to really understand the power of the new medium. He was to make very effective use of the wireless for his 'fireside chats' to the American people.

>> Activity

- 1 In what ways did American industry expand in the 1920s?
- 2 What were the most important reasons for the success of the motor industry?
- 3 How did the motor car provide a boost to other industries?
- 4 Explain how mass production helped in the new industries making electrical goods.
- 5 Why did the radio industry grow so rapidly? What influence did the radio have on American society?



INVESTIGATION

# Poverty in America

In a 1928 Republican election leaflet, Herbert Hoover promised 'A car in every garage, a chicken in every pot'. But this did not come true for every American.

## Who did not benefit from the industrial boom?

America in the 1920s was, for some, a land of great opportunity and wealth. People talked of 'America the Golden' and the 'Land of Unlimited Possibilities'. But millions of Americans did not live in this comfortable world.

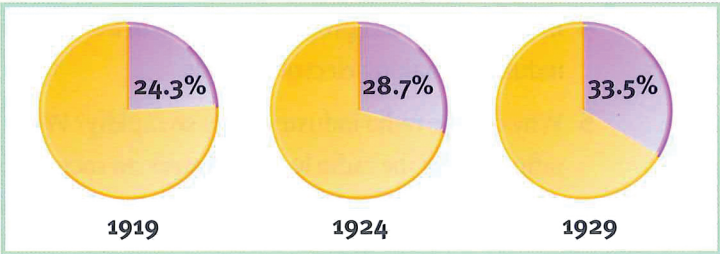
Because life during the economic boom was so exciting for some people, it is easy to imagine that all Americans shared in the wealth that was created. However, America was a divided society. There were a few very rich people at the top of society and many better-off Americans in the middle, but a large number living in poverty at the 'bottom of the heap'.

### Who shared in the profits from industry?

The new industries made great profits, but there is little evidence that this wealth was shared out equally. The Brookings Survey of 1929 found that 18 million people lived in real poverty, and that 78 per cent of the profits from industry went to just 0.3 per cent of the population. By 1929, the average hourly rate of most production workers had risen by only 8 per cent since 1921.

Wages were higher for many skilled workers in the new industries. These were the Americans who could afford the motor cars and the new luxury gadgets. From 1921 to 1929, they saw their wages rise by as much as 35–40 per cent.

### SHARE OF INCOME RECEIVED BY THE RICHEST 5% OF THE AMERICAN POPULATION



### SOURCE A



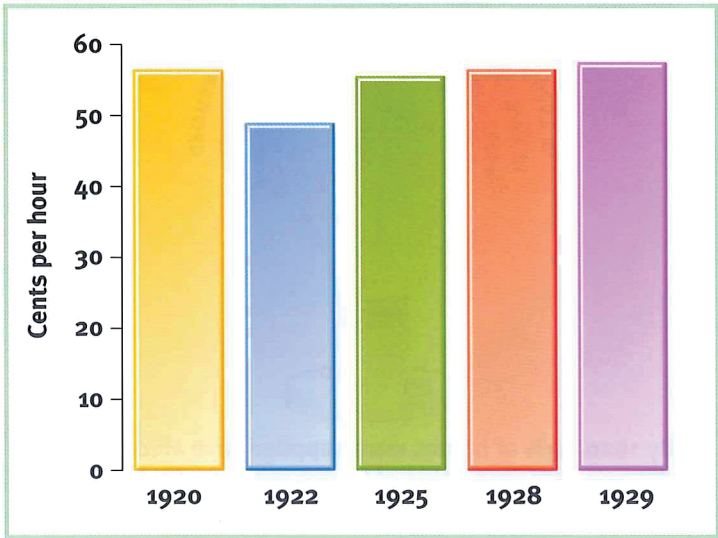
This cartoon from 1928 shows the despair of the unemployed at Christmas.

### Industries in decline

Workers actually lost their jobs in some areas of industry. In the textile and clothing industry, for example, new synthetic fibres like rayon were introduced and became very popular. They were produced in up-to-date, efficient factories that needed fewer workers. The old textile industries, like cotton, declined.

Coalmining and shipbuilding were not touched by the new technical revolution that boosted the manufacture of electrical goods and the motor car. Areas in America where these older industries had grown up – like New England and the South – saw very little industrial development.

### AVERAGE HOURLY WAGES FOR FACTORY WORKERS





Trade Unions

As the big corporations became more efficient, they often cut down on their workforce. Management gained more power over employees because jobs were difficult to get. Large, efficient corporations were also able to take over many smaller companies who were competing against them. By the mid-1920s, the large corporations in the new industries, like the Ford Motor Company, were rich and powerful. Often, these big corporations were able to agree amongst themselves to fix prices at a certain level in a particular industry .

Very few workers belonged to a trade union. The big corporations, like Ford and General Motors, neither liked nor trusted unions. They thought that, if workers felt that they were badly paid, then it was up to them to improve their pay through individual negotiation. On the whole, the American public seemed to agree. Trade unions seemed ‘un-American’ to many people. Only the American Federation of Labour (AFL) had any power, and this union only represented the 10 per cent of the workforce who were skilled workers.

SOURCE B

*This modern historian suggests that just a few corporations held huge power.*

In the decade following the war, 1,200 mergers swallowed up more than 6,000 previously independent companies and, by 1929, some 200 corporations controlled almost half of American industry.

T. H. Watkins, *The Great Depression*, 1993

Underprivileged groups in society

Blacks

The poorest families of all were blacks who lived in the Southern states like Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi. Most were descendants of former slaves, or ex-slaves themselves. They lived in rural slums and worked long hours on the cotton and tobacco plantations where the pay was very low. Some made a living as sharecroppers. Most whites saw them as inferior and they suffered severe discrimination in every area of daily life.

Many blacks migrated from these parts to northern cities like New York and Chicago. They lived in poverty in run-down districts, or ghettos, of the northern cities, like the Bronx or Harlem in New York.

SOURCE C



*An overcrowded Negro shack in Virginia – blacks were the poorest of all the underprivileged groups in American society.*

Immigrants

By the early 1920s, millions of immigrants from all over the world were living in America. Many were poorly educated, worked for very low wages and suffered from increasing prejudice. In particular, immigrants like the Puerto Ricans, Italians and Irish lived deprived lives in the ghettos of the major cities.

Many white, ‘native born’ Americans became more and more resentful of these new arrivals.



WHO DID NOT BENEFIT FROM THE INDUSTRIAL BOOM?

LAWS PASSED BY CONGRESS  
RESTRICTING IMMIGRATION

- 1917:** A literacy test had to be taken by all prospective immigrants before they could enter America.
- 1921:** A 'quota' system was set up. This limited the number of immigrants allowed to enter America each year to a certain figure, according to their country of origin.
- 1924:** This figure was reduced still further. For the first time the numbers of Europeans entering America were limited.
- 1927:** The quota of immigrants from Europe was reduced to 150,000 a year.
- 1933:** Only about 23,000 immigrants were entering America each year.

IMMIGRANTS ENTERING THE USA EACH YEAR

|      |         |
|------|---------|
| 1918 | 110,610 |
| 1920 | 430,000 |
| 1921 | 805,228 |
| 1924 | 706,896 |
| 1927 | 335,175 |
| 1930 | 241,700 |
| 1933 | 23,068  |



The government hoped that, if they did not interfere with the free market and competition, low prices, fair wages and high profits would follow. This policy was called 'laissez-faire', which means 'let things alone'.

The government did not, therefore, introduce a system of welfare or social security for the poor.

The 'laissez-faire' policy of the Republican government

The Republican presidents of the 1920s, Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover, believed in low taxes, high trade tariffs, and in helping big business as much as possible.

SOURCE D



Immigrants arriving in America around 1910.

>> Activity

- 1 Explain why some industries did not benefit from the boom.
- 2 Using all the information in this unit, explain what evidence you can find to support the following statements:
  - a Many black people and immigrants had difficult lives.
  - b Trade unions had limited power.
- 3 Why was there no system of welfare payments for the poor?



BRIEFING

# The plight of the American farmers

## Agriculture during the First World War

During the war, demand from Europe for foodstuffs had soared. Encouraged by this, many farmers had borrowed heavily from the banks to buy new land and machinery. At first, this seemed very sensible. Europeans needed to buy American food, and they had the money to do so. When the war ended, however, European farmers began to re-build their own agricultural industry. American produce was no longer needed.

## Farmers' problems after the First World War

During the 1920s, there was a huge surplus of food in the USA. Prices fell, and thousands of farmers desperately tried to solve their problems by borrowing more money from banks. From 1921 to 1929, they borrowed around \$2,000 million. Rents and mortgages increased by over 30 per cent, so more and more farmers went out of business. By 1924, 600,000 were bankrupt and over 1 million farm workers had left the land.

## FALLING PRICES IN THE 1920S

|        | 1920                    | 1932                    |
|--------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Wheat  | \$1.82 (45p) a bushel   | 38 cents (10p) a bushel |
| Maize  | 61 cents (15p) a bushel | 32 cents (8p) a bushel  |
| Cotton | 16 cents (4p) a pound   | 6 cents (1.5p) a pound  |

1 bushel = a dry measure of 8 gallons = approx 36 litres  
1 pound = 0.454 kg

By the end of the 1920s, millions of farmers and farm workers were without work. Many expressed their anger and desperation by protests – particularly in the Mid-West. They demanded government action to raise farm prices.

A poverty-stricken farming community in West Virginia, typical of those affected by falling prices.

