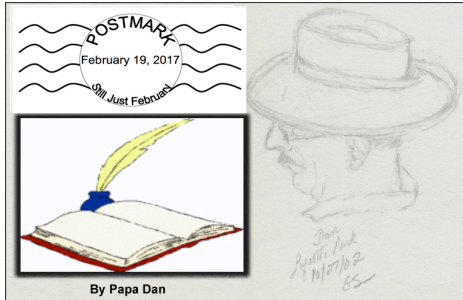


# Is America Ready for The Twenties?

By Dan Sapone



**“The definition of insanity is doing the same things over and over again, but expecting different results.”**

— Albert Einstein

Now that we’ve passed the “New Year” milestone of 2019, America stands on the threshold of a new decade: “The Twenties.” While names for decades become popularized mostly in retrospect, our penchant for naming decades makes it an inevitable topic of conversation. As we have discussed before (<https://convivio-online.net/decades-we-have-known/>), Americans have a habit of naming decades for the cultural, economic, political, and ... other attributes that were distinctive enough to be remembered by succeeding generations. A quick review:

- **“The Good Years” — 1900 to 1910:** peace, optimism, strength, increased useful immigration
- **“War in Europe” and “The Teens” — 1910 to 1920:** upheaval, war, suffering, less immigration
- **“Jazz Age” (or “The Roaring Twenties”) — 1920 to 1930:** Jazz, Prohibition, alcohol, “roaring”
- **“Great Depression” — 1930 to 1940:** Market crash, unemployment, hunger, Nazis in Europe
- **“World War, The Seeds of Prosperity” — 1940 to 1950:** Isolationism, war, optimism, stability
- **“Cold War, Prosperity ... for Most of Us” — 1950 to 1960:** Stability for most, seeds of turmoil
- **“Age of Aquarius” — 1960 to 1970:** dashed optimism, racial/generational tensions, new wars
- **“The Me Decade” — 1970 to 1980:** Watergate, individualism, oil crisis, Middle East violence
- **“Fact-Free Politics” — 1980 to 1990:** Middle East wars, Glasnost, redefining of “conservatism”
- **“The Best Decade Ever” (as reported by WSJ and NYT) — 1990 to 2000:** Internet, strong economy, multiculturalism, “politics of personal destruction,” Soviet collapse, many small wars
- **“Rise of Terrorism and Great Recession” — 2000 to 2010:** 9/11, attack on civil liberties, mis-directed military response, recession, fiscal stimulus, necessary financial regulation
- **“What-am-a-gonna-call-it?” — 2010 to 2020:** This decade has featured sovereign-debt struggles (in Eastern Europe and third-world countries) and a plethora of natural disasters (e.g., earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, hurricanes, elections). Decades usually acquire nicknames after they are over, once enduring outcomes become clear; but this one has one feature that, I think, is worth naming → that it is simply the decade between *all of that* (that is, the progression of tumultuous decades listed above) and the inevitably monumental Twenties to come. So, I will call it **“The Tweens”**; but we’ll have to wait and see if that sticks. I claim that the most important feature of this decade is the question that must be answered in the next several months:  
— “Are we ready for The Twenties?”

In previous century, “The Twenties” was a monumental turning point in history and culture; and it is apparent that the coming “Twenties” may be just as much a turning point as the last **“Roaring”** one. So, let’s take a look at the features of the last time we had a “Twenties” and see if there are any features of that one that we might reasonably expect from the decade to come.

## The “Roaring Twenties” of the Last Century

This decade began, inauspiciously, on January 16, 1920 with the onset of Prohibition. It is hard to fathom that the alcohol-marinated events of “The Jazz Age” could possibly have begun with a national decision to prohibit alcohol consumption; but as Will Rogers famously said, “Prohibition is better than no alcohol at all.”

The 1920s was the first decade to have a nickname: it was the “Roaring 20s” or “Jazz Age.” It was a decade of prosperity and dissipation, and of jazz bands, gangsters, bootleggers, raccoon coats, bathtub gin, flappers, flagpole sitters, and marathon dancers. It was considered “Roaring” when the younger generation rebelled against traditional taboos while their elders engaged in (what turned out to be) reckless speculation. The 1920s was also a decade of bitter cultural conflicts, pitting religious liberals against fundamentalists, nativists against immigrants, and rural provincials against city-dwellers. It also turned out to be a dramatic upsurge in technology (flight, increased automobile use, dramatic spread of electricity).

For many Americans, the growth of cities, the rise of a consumer culture, the upsurge of mass entertainment, and the so-called “revolution in morals and manners” represented liberation from the restrictions of the country’s Victorian past. Sexual mores, gender roles, hair styles, and fashion all changed profoundly during the 1920s. The result was a thinly veiled “cultural civil war,” in which a pluralistic society clashed bitterly over such issues as foreign immigration, evolution, the Ku Klux Klan, prohibition, women’s roles, and race.

Does any of that sound familiar? Is there anything in that description of the 1920s that one might suspect is waiting for us in the coming Twenties?

## The “Roaring Twenties” Didn’t End Well

The stock market crash of October 1929 brought a dramatic end to the economic prosperity of the 1920s. For the ten years that followed, the United States was mired in a deep economic depression. By 1933, unemployment had soared to 25 percent, up from 3.2 percent in 1929. Industrial production declined by 50 percent, international trade plunged 30 percent, and investment fell 98 percent. Are any of those outcomes likely in the coming Twenties?

The causes of the Great Depression included: insufficient purchasing power among the working class to sustain high levels of production; falling crop and commodity prices prior to the Depression; the stock market’s dependence on borrowed money; and wrongheaded government policies including high tariffs that reduced international trade and contracted the money supply.

Does any of *THAT* sound familiar?

So, if the forces that led to the 1920s and the 1930s seem to be brewing in similar ways today, what outcomes might we expect to see in the Twenties to come? Is a “Great Depression” looming as the logical follow-up to the coming Twenties? What might follow *that* outcome?

The Great Depression that followed the 1920s produced a major political realignment, creating a coalition of big-city ethnics, African Americans, organized labor, and Southern Democrats committed, to varying degrees, to interventionist government. The two most important features of the 1940s were the direct result of that 1920s-1930s two-step: World War and “The Seeds of Prosperity.”

After the war, those forces strengthened the federal presence in American life, spawning such innovations as national old-age pensions, unemployment compensation, aid to dependent children, public housing, increased funding for education and federally-subsidized school lunches, insured bank depositions, the minimum wage, and stock market regulation. It fundamentally altered labor relations, producing a revived labor movement and a national labor policy protective of collective bargaining. It transformed the farm economy by introducing federal price supports. Above all, it led Americans to view the federal government as an agency of action and reform and the ultimate protector of public well-being.

The Great Depression challenged certain basic precepts of American culture, especially the faith in individual self-help, business, the inevitability of progress, and the value of limited government. The Depression generated a new interest in “the people,” in regional cultures, and in folk traditions. So, there is a logical sequence at work here that is at once troubling and encouraging. If “The Twenties” and “The Thirties” can lead us to “The Fifties,” as it did in the last century, that begs the question – do we have to endure the depression of the Thirties and the World War of the early Forties to get to the turnaround of the late Forties and the Fifties?

### **What IS Expected of the 2020s?**

Worldwide population: is expected to explode to more than 8.5 billion in the mid-2020s.

Technology is expected to provide some dramatic outcomes. Things like:

- 3d printing
- Autonomous and electric vehicles
- Drones
- Artificial intelligence
- Renewable energy, and the potential environmentalism that could come with it

Society and politics:

- Growth of populism (frustration, opposition to institutions) in North and South America?
- All 20th-century dictators targeted newspapers and journalists (Italy in the 1920s, Germany in the '30s, East Germany in the '50s, Czechoslovakia in the '60s, Latin American dictators in the '70s, China in the '80s and '90s). Should we expect more of that from the coming Twenties?
- Polarization (protectionism, nationalism on the right; Socialism, environmentalism on the left)
- Identity politics and political correctness (rising on the right, declining on the left)
- Media issues (Internet privacy, net neutrality, power of social media, “Old Media” survival?)
- International conflicts (Cold war involving Russia, China, and the US; Italy /France tension)
- Hot warfare (Middle East, Third World Countries, superpowers involvement?)
- Poverty (and declining standards of living, especially in the Third World)
- “First World” struggles (widening economic disparity, decreasing employment opportunities, decline in the numbers of well-paying jobs — The Amazon Effect)
- Fashion (how should I know?)
- Music (more streaming, undefined styles, does Country endure? Hip Hop? What was “Rock?”)

### **Once Again – Are We Ready for the Twenties?**

Those of us who live in the 21st century think of ourselves as VERY DIFFERENT from those who lived a century before. Yet, we can see that many of the conditions and forces taking shape today mirror the forces that led to the 1920s and 1930s. Will those forces inevitably lead to the repeat of those outcomes in the coming “Twenties? Was there anything people could have done in 1919 to create a different outcome in the “Roaring” Twenties that were ahead of them? Is there something WE could do today to have an effect on the coming “Twenties?”

## Just for fun, here are some quotes about the 1920s, for comparison

### Politics/Government

c. 1920 The country needs “less government in business, more business in government.”  
— Republican Presidential Candidate Warren G. Harding

1921 “I knew that this job would be too much for me.”  
— An exhausted Pres. Harding, shortly after taking office.

1923 “Men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and every place subject to its jurisdiction.” — Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), introduced in 1923; Not passed.

People who lived in the 1920s and '30s and '40s were not so different from us. In some ways, they were probably better citizens than we are. They had longer attention spans, for example. Educated people tended to read a bit more than we do. — Timothy D. Snyder

### Immigration/Expansion

What, after all, is the narrative of 'the American Dream?' It was a discourse formulated between the 1880s and the 1920s in the United States during the great waves of migration and expansion and reforms of the Progressive Era. — Naomi Wolf

I draw a distinction between traditional Islam and Islamism. Islamism emerged in its modern form in the 1920s and is driven by a belief that Muslims can be strong and rich again if they follow the Islamic law severely and in its entirety. — Daniel Pipes

### Economics

When runaway inflation and bank failures struck in Germany in the 1920s, the middle class was destroyed, which led directly to the rise of the Nazis. — Nick Clooney

From the 1920s into the 1940s, Britain's standard of living was supported by oil from Iran. British cars, trucks, and buses ran on cheap Iranian oil. Factories throughout Britain were fueled by oil from Iran. The Royal Navy, which projected British power all over the world, powered its ships with Iranian oil. — Stephen Kinzer

In the 1920s you could buy stocks on margin. You could put 10 percent down and borrow the rest against your stocks. — Ron Chernow

### Popular Culture

Up until the 1920s, everyone thought the universe was essentially static and unchanging in time. Stephen Hawking

The United States created the best popular songs that were ever written, and from the 1920s to the 1940s, it was a renaissance period. It stopped in 1950. Tony Bennett

Songwriter and philosopher Jacques Brel summed up ‘The Twenties’ this way:

“We must dance because the Twenties roar,  
The Twenties roar because there’s bathtub gin,  
Vo-de-oh-do and the road to sin,  
The road to whoopee and a whole lot more.  
Charles A Lindberg, tons of confetti,  
Dempsey, Tunney, Sacco and Vanzetti  
Black, Black Monday and the market drops  
But we keep on dancing, dancing, we can’t stop.”