



100 years ago, our old friend Albert Einstein gave us some advice: “The definition of insanity is doing the same things over and over again, but expecting different results.”

Is America Ready for The Twenties?

By Dan Sapone

Now that we have turned the calendar into January, America stands on the threshold of a new decade: “The Twenties” — that is, the 2020s. Over my lifetime, we Americans have a habit of naming decades, mostly in retrospect, for the attributes that were remembered by the generations that follow. Let’s quickly review the decades of the previous century:

- **1900 to 1910 – often called by American writers “The Good Years”** — This was a time of peace, optimism, strength, and increased productive immigration — my unskilled, impoverished, and illiterate grandparents came to America during this decade.
- **1910 to 1920 — Often called “The Teens”:** featured **War throughout Europe**, widespread suffering, less immigration to America.
- **The Nineteen Twenties — called “The Jazz Age” or “The Roaring Twenties”:** featuring the odd partnership of Prohibition, alcohol, Jazz, and, well, “roaring.” We’ll comeback to this one.
- **The Nineteen Thirties — called “The Great Depression”** started with the Stock Market crash, and led directly to unemployment, hunger, and the rise of Nazis in Europe.
- **The Nineteen Forties — the first half is called World War II**, featuring isolationism and then war, **the second half of the forties has been called “The Seeds of Prosperity”:** — that featured optimism and growing stability.
- **The Nineteen Fifties** featured **“The Cold War,”** and **“Prosperity for Most of Us”:** it was the stability that I grew up with — stability for most of us.
- **The Nineteen Sixties — came to be called “The Age of Aquarius”:** a combination of dashed optimism, racial/generational tensions, and the Vietnam War. These were my teenage years.
- **The Nineteen Seventies — called “The Me Decade”** featured Watergate, individualism, a monumental oil crisis, Middle East violence, and withdrawal from Vietnam.
- **The Nineteen Eighties — was called the era of “Fact-Free Politics”:** featuring Middle East wars and a historic redefining of “conservatism.”
- **The Nineteen Nineties — WSJ and NYT famously named it “The Best Decade Ever”:** it featured the rise of Internet, a strong economy, multiculturalism, and then ... well, the emergence of the “politics of personal destruction” and lots of small wars.
- **2000 to 2009 - “Rise of Terrorism and Great Recession ”:** 9/11, a mis-directed military response to 9/11, attacks on civil liberties, a recession, fiscal stimulus, and financial regulation.

So, last month we just completed the decade of 2010 to 2019 — What-am-a-gonna-call-it?:

This decade has featured near bankruptcies of whole countries — AND lots of disasters (e.g., disastrous earthquakes; disastrous tsunamis, floods, fires, and hurricanes; and disastrous elections). It also turned out to be the hottest decade on record — by far — leaving the largest number of burned square miles in history all around the world. Recently, writers in the New York Times have called this decade just ended “The End of Normal,” “The Decade of Disillusionment,” “and “Trying to Remember What It Was Like to Be .”

It’s early, but I think of this decade just ending as simply the decade between *all of that stuff* we have just listed; and the inevitably monumental **Twenty Twenties** that lie ahead of us. So, I will call it “**The Tweens**”; but we’ll have to wait and see if that sticks. Nevertheless, the question hanging over is today is:

— **“Are we ready for the coming Twenty Twenties?” Perhaps we should think about it.**

So, let’s take a closer look at the last time we had a “Twenties” and see if there is anything about the 1920s that can hint at we might expect from the “Twenty-Twenties” to come.

The 1920s was named the “Roaring 20s” or “Jazz Age.” This decade began, inauspiciously, on Jan 16, 1920 with the onset of Prohibition. It is hard to fathom that the alcohol-soaked events of “The Jazz Age” could possibly have begun with a national decision to outlaw alcohol; but as Will Rogers famously said, “Prohibition is better than no alcohol at all.” An aside: my grandfather was a sharecropper in the Santa Clara Valley. He grew grapes and citrus during prohibition and, I was told, people came from miles round to buy his expensive oranges and he gave his homemade wine away for free.

The 1920s was considered “Roaring” because the younger generation rebelled against traditional taboos while their elders engaged in (what turned out to be) reckless stock-market speculation. The 1920s was also a decade of bitter cultural conflicts: religious fundamentalism, an anti-science movement swept the nation, and nativists battled against immigrants.

Does any of that sound familiar?

The 1920s also turned out to be a dramatic upsurge in technology (the emergence of flight, increased automobile use, dramatic spread of electricity). Sexual mores, gender roles, hair styles, and fashion all changed profoundly in the 1920s. The result was bitter clashes over such issues as foreign immigration, evolution, the Ku Klux Klan, alcohol abuse, women’s roles, and race.

Does any of that sound familiar?

Is there anything in those descriptions of the 1920s that one might suspect is waiting for us in the coming Twenties?

Let’s remember that the “Roaring Twenties” Didn’t End Well. The stock market crash of October 1929 brought a dramatic end to the prosperity of the 1920s — unemployment soared, Industrial production was cut in half, international trade fell off a cliff, and investment fell 98%.

The causes of the Great Depression included: the stock market's dependence on borrowed money; weak purchasing power among the working class, and 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 Twenty-Twenties to come?

A Few Observations

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

Technology is expected to provide dramatic expansions of things like:

- Autonomous & electric vehicles, artificial intelligence, drones, 3d printing, renewable energy.

The 2020s carry some predictions in society and politics:

- Remember that dictators in the 1920s targeted newspapers and journalists. Do you see any indications that “dictators” are attacking the news media today as we begin the coming Twenties? Media issues like Internet privacy, net neutrality, and the power of social media, seem to threaten to the survival of “Old Media?”
- Are we seeing the start of “First World” struggles like widening economic disparity, decreasing employment opportunities, decline in the numbers of well-paying jobs — The Amazon Effect?
- Are there violent international conflicts looming in the coming Twenties?
- Some predict changes in music (more streaming, more undefined styles, can Country Music endure? What about Hip Hop? Will anyone remember “Rock and Roll?”)
- What about predictions in Fashion (OK, right, how should I know?)

What’s the answer to our question – Are We Ready for the Twenties?

Those of us who live here in the 21st century think of ourselves as VERY DIFFERENT from those who lived a century before, in the 1920s. Yet, we can see that many of the conditions and behaviors 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? Or can we who claim to be “VERY DIFFERENT” people cause a different outcome?

Two questions emerge: Was there anything people could have done in 1919 to create a different outcome in the “Roaring” Twenties that were ahead of them? And for us, you and me — Is there something WE could do today to have an effect on the coming “Twenties?”

Some have joined groups marching in the streets carrying signs protesting a variety of things. Will that help?

Or should we take the opposite approach, as some are recommending, and avoid the news altogether and focus our attention on our own immediate *local* life, right here and right now? — Of course, if we did hide from the news, we wouldn’t hear about the good things — people like 16-year-old Greta Thunberg, Cookie Monster’s appearance at Wrigley Field after 48 years, Michele Obama’s best-selling book “Becoming” (58 weeks on the NYT Top Ten list), UCLA gymnast Katelyn Ohashi scoring a perfect “10” on her floor routine, the increasing use and declining cost of solar and wind power, the European Union (and some states) banning single-use plastic bags, forks, and straws; the generous work of Chef Jose Andres’ World Central Kitchen, and lots of others doing big good things that we might become part of.

So, perhaps we shouldn’t hide our heads in the sand — we might miss the good stuff.

Is there a way to “become the change we seek,” as an old friend has recommended?

As Einstein suggested, shouldn’t we start doing something different if we expect a different outcome *this time*? I bet we can do it. If so, I suspect we better get started. [9:00]

