

Make America Great Again: Return to the 1920s

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The slogan of candidate Donald Trump's campaign for the Presidency in 2016 was "*Make America Great Again*." Now that Trump is President, the slogan continues to be the catchphrase of his administration, but it's often reduced to an acronym, **MAGA** (**M**ake **A**merica **G**reat **A**gain).

Many people believe that the slogan refers to America in the 1950s, when America was the reigning superpower of the world, with an unrivaled industrial economy; when the middle class was burgeoning as Americans fled the inner cities and took refuge in the new suburbs made possible by better roads; when housing, education, and medical care were all relatively affordable; and when men were men and women were women (and most women knew their place, since this was before the revolution of feminism and the women's equal rights movement).

But no. Despite being the decade in which Donald Trump spent the formative years of his childhood, the 1950s are *not* the decade to which **MAGA** refers. Why not? Well, for one thing, Donald Trump has no fond memories about the middle class. The very idea of a large and vibrant middle class is testament to the fact that when we all do better, we all do better. Win-win. For Trump, life is dog-eat-dog, zero-sum, with winners and losers. The winners are successful in business and wealthy, while the losers are everyone else. Trump doesn't give a whit about the middle class.

Then too, America in the 1950s seemed to be white (at least the winners were), but underneath the complacent conformity of that decade, social revolt was bubbling away, getting ready to erupt in the 1960s. The Civil Rights movement made significant strides throughout the 1950s, with black leaders learning their craft of organizing, resistance, and civil disobedience. The landmark 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* struck down the policy of segregated public schools.

The 1950s were also the era of The Cold War with the Soviet Union, and that's about as far from Trump as could be, given his love of Vladimir Putin.

No, the 1950s is definitely not the decade to which Trump longs to return America. That decade is (drumroll, please) the **1920s**.

The 1920s in America — the “Roaring Twenties” — was a decade of severe contradictions. World War I had ended (not really, but that’s what the victors assumed), followed by the Lost Generation in Europe. Americans, not having suffered the devastation of Europe, weren’t “lost.” Instead, they were ambitious and wildly hedonistic, except for the working poor, who comprised a majority of the population, and who had neither time nor resources for leisure. Prohibition rode in on a Puritan wave and banned production, importation, transportation, and sale of liquor, but it didn’t stop Americans from drinking (think moonshine and bathtub gin) or partying (think speakeasies).

Unfettered capitalism ran wild, industry expanded by leaps and bounds, and the stock market soared. America’s overall wealth doubled, and many Americans enjoyed greater prosperity in the emerging consumer economy, but not everyone — African-Americans, women, coal miners, and farmers had a particularly hard time. Income inequality spiked, and the divide between the Haves and the Have-Nots became a huge chasm. Great fortunes were made by some, but no social safety nets existed for those who struggled to get by. Government was pro-business, but took a hands-off attitude toward the economic welfare of the larger population.

In this era before the global economy, protectionism was still the rule. High tariffs were maintained to appease vulnerable industries, but also to generate revenue for the government. Tariffs on agricultural products were increased, but farmers still suffered continual cycles of debt due to low commodity prices and higher production costs. 600,000 farmers went bankrupt over the decade.

Organized labor struggled in the 1920s. General prosperity and negative sentiment among employers, government, and the courts villified unions. It would take the Great Depression of the 1930s to bring the labor movement back to life.

In 1920s America, race and religion were gaping wounds. Prejudice against Blacks, Catholics, Jews, and immigrants was firmly entrenched throughout the land. Jim Crow laws and policies were securely established in the South. The Ku Klux Klan was resurgent over the decade, spreading far beyond the former Confederacy. America might as well have erected a sign proclaiming “For Whites Only,” and, in fact, it did just that, in businesses, restaurants, and theaters across the country.

The 1920s were also a decade in America of rising nativist sentiment against immigration. The great wave of “Ellis Island” immigrants from 1890 to 1920 was mainly composed of Southern and Eastern Europeans. These people were darker-skinned and often Catholic or Jewish, unlike the British and German

immigrants of the 19th century, who were predominantly white and Protestant. The backlash against “foreigners” resulted in legislation, specifically the 1921 Emergency Quota Act and the 1924 Immigration Act, that imposed restrictive quotas on numbers of immigrants based on their countries of origin.

One common belief is that America was isolationist in the 1920s, but that’s only partially true. The military was significantly reduced. From the post-mobilization peak of more than 2,000,000 at the end of the First World War in 2018, America demobilized, cutting its manpower forces by 90%. A treaty was signed in 1922 by the major Allied powers of World War One limiting the numbers and tonnages of each navy’s warships. Still, American military excursions continued in the Caribbean and Central America throughout the 1920s. International alliances were maintained, but mainly to insure repayment to America of war loans made to Europe.

All in all, I think it’s quite obvious that the 1920s is the decade to which Trump longs to return. That the 1920s ended in the sudden but slow-motion crack-up of financial meltdown followed by a general economic collapse that morphed into The Great Depression of the 1930s is, needless to say, worrisome at best and downright chilling at worst. The financial chicanery of Wall Street’s Masters of the Universe is even deeper and much more advanced now than it was 90 years ago, or even as recently as the 2008 fiasco. The economy that served the well-to-do in the 1920s still serves the well-to-do now.

The Trumpist and Republican rollbacks currently underway with such zeal to dismantle all governmental safety nets designed to protect the public and the environment are accompanied by deregulation of business and privatization of nearly everything for profit. This is part of the fantasy-based belief of most Republicans (but too many Democrats as well) in an infinite-growth economy, which amounts to full-blown flight from reality and headlong descent into madness. The fact that 40% of the population supports what’s happening is proof positive that there’s a sucker born every minute, that a fool and his money are soon parted, and that fearful rage is antithetical to sanity.

A certain aura of inevitability surrounds all this, not because no other choices are possible, but because human nature is so deeply embedded, habitual, and resistant to change. As many people have said (enough times that the punch line is no longer clever or funny): *History may not repeat, but it does rhyme.*

We seem to have forgotten the hard lessons of the 1920s and appear to be setting up a similar outcome. Perhaps we will wise up. I’d like to hope so, but only time will tell.