
**DBQ 16: A NATIONAL CLASH OF CULTURES
IN THE 1920s**

Historical Context

The census of 1920 revealed some worrisome data. It showed that, for the first time in history, a majority of Americans lived in urban areas. This news was disturbing to many who still lived in rural settings, on farms, or in small towns. They became even more anxious as the decade saw an increase in the farm-to-factory migration that had begun in the early days of the industrial revolution. Rural Americans were concerned. They could understand the lure of the big city, with its bright lights, excitement, and comforts, but this only added to their distrust of cities and of city ways. The growth and prosperity of the cities, contrasted to the decline and despair of America's rural countryside, seemed to announce the passing of an era. Country folk feared that their future was being lost to the culture of the cities. Traditional rural values were being subverted by new, modern city values. America was being assaulted by jazz, materialism, immorality, and fast, brash city ways. Automobiles, radios, movies, advertising, consumer credit, and other new realities of modern life were spreading these dangerous ideas and destroying traditional American values. Traditional, small-town America was under attack by the sinful ways of modernity.

Rural America, feeling under siege, fought back in what became a culture war. The "battles" were fought in the newspapers, schools, churches, movies, music, radio shows, and political campaigns of the decade. And though the forces of urban growth proved largely unstoppable, and the ultimate triumph of modern values was predictable, even today, eighty years later, remnants of this clash of cultures, urban versus rural, modern versus traditional, continue to mark our lives and times.

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Instructions: Answer each of the following questions for each of the documents:

1. What is the document? Who is saying this and in what context?
2. What is the main point of the document?
3. How is the document related to the DBQ?

Question: Describe the urban-rural culture wars of the 1920s and the issues over which they were fought.

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Document 1

The Ku Klux Klan was first born in the South during the years following the Civil War. At that time, the Klan fought against efforts to give newly-freed slaves full citizen status. Sixty years later, during the 1920s, the Klan rose again, attaining its largest membership ever—approaching five million. The Klan of the 1920s continued the racist anti-African American practices of the earlier Klan. It also expanded its hatred and opposition to Catholics, Jews, immigrants, and others who it believed were enemies of traditional Americanism. The following is an excerpt from an article by a Klan leader. (From H. W. Evans, "The Klan's Fight for Americanism," *North American Review*, March-April-May, 1926.)

We are a movement of the plain people. . . . We are demanding . . . a return of power into the hands of the everyday . . . average citizen of the old stock. Our members and leaders are all of this class. . . . This is undoubtedly a weakness. It lays us open to the charge of being "hicks" and "rubes" and "drivers of second hand Fords."

Presently we began to find that we were dealing with strange ideas . . . [a] moral breakdown that has been going on for two decades. One by one all our traditional moral standards went by the boards, or were so disregarded that they ceased to be binding. The sacredness of our Sabbath, of our homes, of chastity, and finally even of our right to teach our own children in our own schools fundamental facts and truths were torn away from us.

We found our great cities and the control of much of our industry and commerce taken over by strangers, who stacked the cards of success and prosperity against us.

So the Nordic American today is a stranger in large parts of the land his fathers gave him.

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Document 2

One of the most engaging histories of the 1920s is *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s* by Frederick Lewis Allen. The following excerpt from this book (p. 168) describes the 1925 case of John Scopes, a young biology teacher in Dayton, Tennessee, who was charged with violating the state law prohibiting the teaching of evolution. (Reprinted by permission of the publisher from *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s*, by Frederick L. Allen, © 1931 by Harper & Row.)

There was something to be said for the right of the people to decide what should be taught in their tax-supported schools, even if what they decided upon was ridiculous. . . . In the eyes of the public, the trial was a battle between Fundamentalism on the one hand and twentieth century skepticism (assisted by Modernism) on the other. . . .

It was a strange trial. Into the quiet town of Dayton flocked gaunt Tennessee farmers and their families in mule-drawn wagons and ramshackle Fords; quiet, godly people in overalls and gingham and black, ready to defend their faith against the "foreigners," yet curious to know what this new-fangled evolutionary theory might be.

Document 3

Here is an excerpt from a letter written to the national Crime and Law Enforcement Commission in 1929 by an officer of the New England Club of Seattle, Washington. (This letter comes from the National Archives and is found in "The 1920's: A Supplemental Teaching Unit" published by the National Archives and Social Issues Resources Series, Inc. [SIRS])

. . . much the greater part of the vicious forms of crime are committed by recent immigrants who have not yet learned the necessity for conforming to the statutes and restrictions of our government, and especially those who are subject to certain alien political church influences.

. . . the increase of crime is . . . from . . . the great increase of criminal opportunity afforded by the invention of the auto. . . . And in close connection . . . lie all of the evils of the liquor traffic and drinking. For the liquor evils, sporting business and professional men, fashionable society and a certain type of newspapers are almost wholly responsible.

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Document 4

This excerpt comes from an article in a small town newspaper, the *Elizabethton, Tennessee Star*, April 18, 1925. (Found in the SIRS, National Archives 1920s unit.)

Edward J. Tobin, superintendent of Cook county schools and in that capacity supervisor over the schooling of 100,000 children, believes that "a young couple, a bottle of moonshine and an automobile are the most dangerous quartet that can be concocted for the destruction of human society."

Document 5

This document comes from a letter written by "a mother" to George Wickersham in 1929. Wickersham, a prominent lawyer and former U.S. Attorney General, served as chairman of a committee appointed by President Hoover to investigate prohibition. (This letter, dated July 22, 1929, comes from the National Archives and is found in the SIRS 1920s unit.)

Please hear the plea of a heartbroken mother and send some reliable person to investigate the condition of an Italian joint, where children are sold rum for ten cents a drink. . . . I am alone trying to rear [my son] an honorable American but how can I when this foreigner . . . is allowed to ruin my boy.

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DBQ 16: A NATIONAL CLASH OF CULTURES IN THE 1920s, CONTINUED

Document 6

This cartoon was published in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 23, 1924.

IF GRANDPAP COULD ONLY RETURN WITH SOME OF HIS DISCIPLINE

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