The **Great Depression**

The period between the stock-market crash of October 1929 and the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941 was dominated by one of the worst economic crises in American history. One observer called the 1930s "years of standstill," when "everybody and everything marked time." The confidence of Americans in progress and prosperity, so marked during the 1920s, suddenly vanished. But hard times were not new, and many Americans had suffered even during the prosperous 1920s, especially workers in textile and mining industries. Unemployment had risen from 1.5 million in 1926 to nearly 2.7 million in 1929. During the 1920s millions of Americans were forced off farms by deflated crop prices, soil depletion, and farm mechanization. Yet the **Great Depression** of the 1930s hit with unprecedented force. Millions of Americans who had recently joined the middle class because of easy credit, installment buying, and low-cost stocks lost everything. For working-class Americans and the poor, the situation was worse: jobs were nowhere to be found; many sharecroppers were thrown off their farms; malnutrition and despair were constants. Worse still was the condition of the elderly, children, and families. Seniors who lost years of savings in the banking collapse were too old to find work and were forced to rely on hard-pressed families and charity to survive. Education was slashed, and millions of children lost their schools. They too had to work at whatever they could find, contributing their meager earnings to their families. The normal stresses of family life were compounded by unemployment and malnutrition. Many families were forced to "double up," sharing small apartments and homes between two families. Many American families were confronted for the first time with unemployment, uncertainty, and the loss of sustenance. It was a situation alien to a society and economy geared to abundance, unlimited growth, and opportunity.

**Economic Crisis**

After the stock-market crash the American economy went into a tailspin. National income was cut by one half between 1929 and 1932, and one-fourth of the workforce was unemployed. U.S. Steel cut its full-time payroll from 225,000 in 1929 to zero on 1 April 1933. Agriculture was also hit hard. Farm income went down by 20 percent in 1930 and plunged by 30 percent in 1931. Farm families who could not meet mortgage payments saw their homes and farms auctioned off in foreclosure proceedings. Urban families suffered as well. Ninety-five people were reported starved in New York City in 1931, with countless others made seriously ill because of malnutrition. The situation prompted citizens of the Cameroon to collect $3.77 and send it to New York to aid "the starving." The economy plummeted even lower in 1933. In that year unemployment peaked at between 12 million and 15 million workers, and it hovered around 8 million workers for the rest of the decade. Out of work year after year, many grew increasingly demoralized: "There is something about the anniversary of your layoff," lamented an unemployed laborer, "which makes you feel more helpless."

**Assistance**

President Herbert Hoover's Republican principles of self-reliance limited his response to the Depression. He opposed direct relief to the unemployed, believing it would "destroy character." Hoover instead favored grants to corporations, believing that putting industry back into gear would indirectly help the unemployed. He also favored loans to states and charities, believing they should be responsible for relief—aid that, from his perspective, had to be repaid. Most Americans shared his philosophy. Like Hoover, they believed the Depression was part of a natural business cycle and would cure itself. They believed that government should have a limited role in social and economic affairs. They believed that misfortune could be best handled by charity, repentance, and hard work. Yet the Depression grew worse and spread more widely through society. In the winter of 1931 farmers in eastern Arkansas were near starvation, and Red Cross assistance had failed. Local governments, traditionally responsible for economic relief, like those in Arkansas, were bankrupted by the staggering numbers of people applying for assistance, and turned to state governments, which also lacked the necessary resources.

**Exhausted Charities**

By 1933 nearly one thousand local governments had defaulted on debt payments. Private charities failed to pick up the slack, with many of them financially overextended or liquidated by their wealthy patrons. By 1932 nearly four hundred private charities had disappeared in New York City, one third the 1929 total. The winter of 1932-1933 was a low point: by
that time private charity and local welfare agencies had exhausted their resources. Desperation became acute. Thousands of food stores in the United States were looted, the reports of which were generally suppressed by the press, afraid of creating widespread panic. Yet panic was building. By 1933 banks around the United States were collapsing as depositors withdrew their savings and hoarded their resources. Farmers in the Midwest destroyed their crops in a desperate attempt to inflate agricultural prices. Industrial laborers and police fought pitched battles at factories. Tenants in major cities conducted rent strikes and forcibly resisted eviction. A host of experts paraded to Capitol Hill to warn that the nation was in danger of revolution. Normally conservative businessmen began to rethink their philosophy of "natural" economics, limited government, and private assistance. Even Hoover inaugurated a program of loans to industry and states. The Depression did more than cause widespread misery. It forced Americans to rethink the fundamental organization of power and wealth in society. Americans developed new concepts of social justice and fairness.

A New President

The election of Franklin D. Roosevelt to the presidency in 1932 reflected the new thinking of many Americans. Roosevelt offered a planned economy, an activist government, and federal assistance to the disadvantaged. Hoover wanted to keep government as much as possible out of the lives of private citizens. Yet the Depression exposed the degree to which wealthy and powerful private citizens used government to their benefit. At the local and state levels, lucrative provisioning contracts and generous bonds to businessmen continued to be paid, even as city councils and school boards canceled public relief programs and closed schools. When local governments defaulted on their debts to the rich in order to keep schools and welfare services open, wealthy citizens organized tax strikes and liquidated private charities. At the federal level congressional investigations in 1933 and 1934 revealed sensational securities fraud, profitable ties between business and government (especially in the airmail business), and the tax loopholes provided for the wealthy. The public was outraged, and Roosevelt took advantage of this anger to reverse the relationship of government to the powerful, placing government at the service of common people.

A New Deal

Roosevelt's New Deal intervened at an unprecedented level in the lives of average Americans. Direct emergency relief, although meager, kept many from starving; public works projects provided temporary jobs for millions; federal insurance protected the life savings of American workers; housing and farm loans protected millions from foreclosure; Social Security provided retirement and unemployment protection; Roosevelt's support for organized labor insured millions of workers of high wages and safer working conditions. Such policies laid the foundation of the welfare state and were overwhelmingly supported by the public. But they did not cure the Depression, and the New Deal's critics saw them as a harbinger of federal despotism in the private lives of Americans. Many businessmen and politicians of Hoover's stripe were bitterly opposed to such programs. Other businessmen and politicians pointed out that the New Deal was fundamentally conservative and supported the New Deal as a reform necessary to prevent revolution. Most Americans had already adopted the communitarian, interdependent perspective of the New Deal. The Great Depression forced friends, family, and ultimately government to help one another. It made hash of the "ruggedindividualism" often rhetorically evoked by conservatives and reflected a deeper historical fact: the Great Depression disrupted the norms of American life; the New Deal redefined those norms.

The Family

The Great Depression hit families who had felt insulated from economic crises. Families who based their security on savings accounts and home ownership were suddenly penniless and unable to pay off their mortgages. Some nine million families lost their savings in the Depression, and by 1934 two-fifths of all homeowners in twenty cities had defaulted on their loans. The Depression created two kinds of poor Americans. The traditional poor, whose poverty began before the Depression, included tenant farmers, the elderly, single-parent families, and the disabled. The "new" poor included thousands of formerly middle- and working-class families suddenly impoverished by the loss of jobs, homes, and savings. Unemployment or low-paying part-time work caused financial uncertainty and lower standards of living for many families. The self-esteem of men eroded as they were unable to fulfill their roles as breadwinners for the families. Needy relatives stretched thin the resources of extended families. Marriage and birth rates declined, as many couples decided to wait until they could afford marriage and children. Single people in their late teens and early twenties, as well as young married couples, were forced to live with parents, creating tight quarters, frustration, and tension. Rates of divorce declined, in part because divorce became too expensive, but husbands deserted their wives in record numbers. Undernourished children contracted nutritional-deficiency diseases such as rickets and pellagra. The destructive impact of the Depression on families is undeniable, but it also brought families closer together, forcing family members to rely on each other. As writer Louis Adamic observed, "On the one hand, thousands of families were broken up, some permanently, some temporarily, or were seriously disorganized. On the other hand, thousands of families became more closely integrated than they had been before the Depression."

The Plight of the "New Immigrants"

Already economically disadvantaged, immigrants were especially vulnerable to the economic hardships of the Depression. In the 1920s members of the "new immigrant" groups—such as the Poles, Italians, and Jews who came to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—still depended on local ethnic institutions such as charities, loan associations, and banks for survival. During the Depression these agencies lack sufficient resources to meet the increased demands of the needy in their communities, and they folded quickly in the nationwide banking crisis of the early 1930s. Many ethnic Americans lost not only their savings but also the sense of trust and stability within their communities.

Blacks

Blacks also lost traditional means of support in the 1930s. Already poorly paid and badly treated, thousands of southern tenant farmers and sharecroppers were forced off the land as banks foreclosed on the owners of a third of all cotton fields. Always the first to be fired, blacks were especially discriminated against during the Depression. In one Chicago manufacturing plant African American employment went from a high in the 1920s of 18 percent to 10 percent by 1940. Unemployed white workers were willing to take unpleasant jobs they might previously have disdained, and employers were far more likely to hire even inexperienced whites rather than experienced blacks. As a black meatpacking-house worker complained, "They were hiring young, white boys, sixteen and eighteen years old, raw kids, didn't know a thing," instead of black workers who knew how to do the job. Thus, unemployment rates for blacks in the Depression were far higher than the national average. Roughly 25 percent of the national workforce was unemployed in 1932, but the national unemployment average for blacks stood at 48 percent, and in Pittsburgh 70 percent of blacks were unemployed.

Mexican Americans

When the Depression hit, most Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans were already living at or below the poverty line, and during the 1930s their underemployment and unemployment increased. At a time when noncitizens were frequently blamed for taking jobs away from American citizens and burdening relief services, Mexican Americans often lost their jobs because federal and local officials mistook them for foreigners. Mexican immigrants were seen as a public burden: their children required special language instruction in public schools, or increased education costs in districts that chose to establish separate "Mexican schools." Mexicans and Mexican Americans were also seen as a public-health problem; they were more likely to contract infectious diseases because they lived in overcrowded housing, and they were alleged to practice poor hygiene. Finally, they were thought to have difficulty assimilating into American society because they were clannish and clung tenaciously to their own culture. As a result of these arguments, the U.S. Department of Labor initiated a program of forced deportation and voluntary repatriation. Between 1929 and 1934 some four hundred thousand Mexican immigrants and U.S. citizens born to Mexican parents were deported or repatriated to Mexico.

Woman as Homemaker

In 1933 Eleanor Roosevelt called on American women to pull the country through the crisis of the Great Depression. In her book *It's Up to the Women* she wrote, "The women know that life must go on and that the needs of life must be met and it is their courage and determination which, time and again, have pulled us through worse crises than the present one." The collective contributions of women were critical during the 1930s. With Americans turning inward and relying on their families for survival, woman's role at the center of the family gained in significance. Overall, the Depression served to reinforce traditional gender roles. During the Depression the vast majority of American women were neither rich nor poor but somewhere in between. Most women were married, and their husbands remained employed, but they probably took pay cuts to keep their jobs. If a middle-class man lost his job, his family typically had enough resources to make do without turning to relief or losing their property. While life was not easy for these women, it was not all bleak either. The ingenious survival strategies of middle-class married women helped their families to make do. They saved money by buying day-old bread, relining coats with old blankets, cutting adult clothing down to children's sizes, and saving anything that might be useful someday (such as string and broken crockery) or could be sold as scrap (such as old rags). As Eleanor Roosevelt commented, women were responsible for "endless little economies" as a hedge against "some catastrophe such as accident or illness which may completely swamp the family budget." Even the middle class lived in fear of poverty, with no social safety net to protect against unforeseen disaster.
Gender Roles

Men's lives were more disrupted by the Depression than women's. As men tried desperately to remain breadwinners for their families, their self-esteem suffered when they lost their jobs. Discouraged after daily searches for hard-to-find jobs, they frequently had time on their hands. Sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd described the difference in gender roles in a 1937 study: "The men, cut adrift from their usual routine, lost much of their sense of time and dawdled helplessly and dully about the streets; while in the homes, the women's world remained largely intact and the round of cooking, housecleaning, and mending became if anything more absorbing."

Resentment

While some unemployed men willingly pitched in with housework, many men found being asked to do "women's chores" a deeper insult to their already fragile masculinity. Male anger and resentment was typical, especially when it was the women who had a job. As the Lynds put it: "Time hung on his hands. In the morning before she left for work his wife told him to make the beds. The children, seeing him in this new role, sometimes laughed at him. I came upon a man who, making the beds one day, was so enraged by his son's laughter that he had nearly killed the child." In general these role reversals were not desired by either men or women, and most couples tried to maintain traditional, patriarchal gender roles through the dislocations of the Depression. Yet simple survival required change. The collapse of the traditional male sphere of business increased the importance of the traditional female sphere of the home. Despite often fierce resistance, the Depression radically altered traditional ideas of male privilege, economic conservativism, and social conformity.

"The People, Yes!"

The 1930s has been dubbed the "Red Decade," the decade of the people, when culture embraced the common folk. It was a decade when communists and intellectuals kept happy company. As critic Malcolm Cowley commented, membership in the Communist Party held intellectual status in the 1930s: "There was an enormous prestige at that time for people who belonged to the party. They were listened to as if they had received advice straight from God." Participation and belonging, both intellectually and politically, were central to the culture of the 1930s. Nowhere was there a greater sense of intellectual belonging than in the rich intellectual circle of New York City. In leftist journals such as the Nation, Partisan Review, New Masses, and The New Republic, and in Greenwich Village coffeehouses, New York intellectuals debated a broad range of topics from wages to Stalin to psychoanalysis, art, aesthetics, and religion.

Escape

Such intellectual engagement coexisted with a contrasting experience in the culture of the 1930s: escape fantasies, which helped people lift, at least temporarily, the burden of the Depression. Hollywood provided images of escape for the masses, via films about high society, ease, and luxury, featuring glamorous film stars. The escape fantasy also manifested itself in an increase in popular participation in sports and games, specifically gambling. Bingo nights, chain-letter schemes, and the Irish sweepstakes attracted tremendous interest, and the board game Monopoly was an enormous success. Each enabled players to "make it" in ways that current economic conditions forbade. Escape fantasies of the 1930s involved taking chances, competing, and, above all, winning.