

parties or even formed or participated in governments, in the USA the decade was a Republican one. The Republican Party was, of course, the party of Lincoln, which had emancipated the slaves and won the Civil War. Blacks, who poured into Northern cities during the First World War and after, still voted Republican in overwhelming numbers. It had also been the party of Theodore Roosevelt and progressive capital. But it was, at the same time, the party of social conservatism and free market economics. In the 1920s its mastery was overwhelming. Between 1920 and 1932, Republicans controlled the White House and the Senate for the whole time and the House except for the years 1930–2.<sup>32</sup> Warren Harding in 1920 got 60.2 per cent, the largest popular majority yet recorded (16,152,000 to 9,147,000), carrying every state outside the South. The Republicans took the House by 303 to 131 and won ten Senate seats to give them a majority of twenty-two.<sup>33</sup> In 1924 Calvin Coolidge won by 15,725,000 votes to a mere 8,386,000 for his Democrat rival, John W. Davis. In 1928 Herbert Hoover won by 21,391,000 votes to 15,016,000 for Al Smith, a landslide electoral college victory of 444 to 87; he carried all but two Northern states and five in the 'Solid South'. The Socialists polled less than 300,000, the Communists under 50,000.<sup>34</sup>

These repeated successes indicated what Coolidge called 'a state of contentment seldom before seen', a marriage between a democratic people and its government, and the economic system the governing party upheld and epitomized, which is very rare in history and worth examining. In order to do so effectively it is necessary to probe beneath the conventional historiography of the period, especially as it revolves round its two key figures, Harding and Coolidge.

Harding won the election on his fifty-fifth birthday, which, characteristically, he celebrated by playing a round of golf. He did not believe that politics were very important or that people should get excited about them or allow them to penetrate too far into their everyday lives. In short he was the exact opposite of Lenin, Mussolini and Hitler, and the professional Social Democratic politicians of Europe. He came from Ohio, the Republican political heartland, which had produced six out of ten presidents since 1865. He had emerged from poverty to create a successful small-town paper, the *Marion Star*, and had then become director of a bank, a phone company, a lumber firm and a building society. He was decent, small-town America in person: a handsome man, always genial and friendly, but dignified. He was not above answering the White House front door in person, and he always took a horse-ride on Sunday. He told a cheering crowd in Boston in May 1920: 'America's present need is not heroics but healing, not nostrums but normalcy; not

revolution but restoration . . . not surgery but serenity.<sup>35</sup> America as Arcadia was a reality to him; somehow, he wished to preserve it. To get elected, he stuck old President McKinley's flagpole in front of his house and ran a 'front porch' campaign. Many famous people made the pilgrimage to Marion to listen to his campaign talk, Al Jolson, Ethel Barrymore, Lillian Gish, Pearl White among them, but 600,000 ordinary folk too, thousands of them black – hence the Democrat rumour that Harding had negro blood. Everybody liked Harding. The worst thing about him was his sharp-faced wife, Flossie, known as 'the Duchess', of whom Harding said (not in her hearing), 'Mrs Harding wants to be the drum-major in every band that passes'.<sup>36</sup>

Harding believed that America's matchless society was the creation of voluntarism and that only government could spoil it. If he could plant a Rotary Club in every city and hamlet, he said, he would 'rest assured that our ideals of freedom would be safe and civilization would progress'. That was a general view. 'There is only one first-class civilization in the world', wrote the *Ladies' Home Journal*. 'It is right here in the United States.' That was also the view of most American intellectuals, to judge not by their subsequent rationalizations in the Thirties but by what they actually wrote at the time. The same month Harding signed the 1921 Immigration Act, Scott Fitzgerald was writing to Edmund Wilson from London:

God damn the continent of Europe. It is of merely antiquarian interest. Rome is only a few years behind Tyre and Babylon. The negroid streak creeps northward to defile the Nordic race. Already the Italians have the souls of blackamoors. Raise the bar of immigration and permit only Scandinavians, Teutons, Anglo-Saxons and Celts to enter. France made me sick. Its silly pose as the thing the world has to save . . . I believe at last in the white man's burden. We are as far above the modern Frenchman as he is above the Negro. Even in art! Italy has no one . . . They're thru and done. You may have spoken in jest about New York as the capital of culture but in 25 years it will be just as London is now. Culture follows money . . . We will be the Romans in the next generations as the English are now.<sup>37</sup>

Harding believed this cultural supremacy would arise inevitably provided government allowed the wheels of free enterprise to turn. Far from selecting cronies from 'the buck-eye state' (as later alleged), he formed a cabinet of strong men: Charles Evans Hughes as Secretary of State, Andrew Mellon at the Treasury, Hoover at Commerce. He hurried with his cabinet list straight to the Senate, and his choice for the Department of the Interior, Albert Fall, Senator for New Mexico, sported a handle-bar moustache and wore a flowing black cape and broad-brimmed stetson – normalcy itself! – was so popular he was confirmed by immediate acclamation, the

only time in American history a cabinet member has been accorded such a vote of confidence.<sup>38</sup> The cabinet list was a cross-section of successful America: a car manufacturer, two bankers, a hotel director, a farm-journal editor, an international lawyer, a rancher, an engineer and only two professional politicians.

Harding inherited an absentee presidency and one of the sharpest recessions in American history. By July 1921 it was all over and the economy was booming again. Harding had done nothing except cut government expenditure, the last time a major industrial power treated a recession by classic *laissez-faire* methods, allowing wages to fall to their natural level. Benjamin Anderson of Chase Manhattan was later to call it 'our last natural recovery to full employment'.<sup>39</sup> But the cuts were important. Indeed, Harding can be described as the only president in American history who actually brought about massive cuts in government spending, producing nearly a 40 per cent saving over Wilsonian peacetime expenditure.<sup>40</sup> Nor was this a wild assault. It was part of a considered plan which included the creation of the Bureau of the Budget, under the Budget and Accounting Act of 1921, to bring authorizations under systematic central scrutiny and control. Its first director, Charles Dawes, said in 1922 that, before Harding, 'everyone did as they damn pleased'; cabinet members were 'commanchees', Congress 'a nest of cowards'. Then Harding 'waved the axe and said that anybody who didn't co-operate his head would come off'; the result was 'velvet for the taxpayer'.<sup>41</sup>

Harding's regime was agreeably liberal. Against the advice of his cabinet and his wife he insisted on releasing the Socialist leader Eugene Debs, whom Wilson had imprisoned, on Christmas Eve 1921: 'I want him to eat his Christmas dinner with his wife.' He freed twenty-three other political prisoners the same day, commuted death-sentences on the 'Wobblies' (Industrial Workers of the World) and before the end of his presidency had virtually cleared the gaols of political offenders.<sup>42</sup> He took the press into his confidence, calling reporters by their Christian names. When he moved, he liked to surround himself with a vast travelling 'family', many invited on the spur of the moment, occupying ten whole cars on his presidential train. He chewed tobacco, one of his chewing companions being Thomas Edison, who remarked, 'Harding is all right. Any man who chews tobacco is all right.' He drank hard liquor too, asking people up to his bedroom for a snort, and it was known he served whiskey in the White House. Twice a week he invited his intimates over for 'food and action' ('action' meant poker). Commerce Secretary Hoover, a stuffed shirt, was the only one who declined to play: 'It irks me to see it in the White House.'<sup>43</sup>

Hoover's instinct was correct: a president cannot be too careful, as

had been demonstrated in virtually every presidency since. There is no evidence that Harding was ever anything other than a generous and unsuspecting man. The only specific charge of dishonesty brought against him was that the sale of the *Marion Star* was a fix; this was decisively refuted in court, the two men who bought the paper receiving \$100,000 in damages. But Harding made two errors of judgement: appointing the florid Senator Fall, who turned out to be a scoundrel, and believing that his Ohio campaign-manager Harry Daugherty, whom he made Attorney-General, would screen and protect him from the influence-peddlers who swarmed up from his home state. 'I know who the crooks are and I want to stand between Harding and them,' Daugherty said. This proved an empty boast.<sup>44</sup>

The result was a series of blows which came in quick succession from early 1923. In February Harding discovered that Charles Forbes, Director of the Veterans Bureau, had been selling off government medical supplies at rock-low prices: he summoned him to the White House, shook him 'as a dog would a rat' and shouted 'You double-crossing bastard'. Forbes fled to Europe and resigned, 15 February.<sup>45</sup> On 4 March Albert Fall resigned. It was subsequently established that he had received a total of \$400,000 in return for granting favourable leases of government oilfields at Elk Hills in California and Salt Creek (Teapot Dome), Wyoming. Fall was eventually gaoled for a year in 1929, though his leases later turned out well for America, since they involved building vital pipelines and installations at Pearl Harbor.<sup>46</sup> But that was not apparent at the time and Fall's departure was a disaster for Harding, more particularly since Charles Cramer, counsel for the Veterans Bureau, committed suicide a few days later.

Finally on 29 May Harding forced himself to see a crony of Daugherty's, Jess Smith, who together with other Ohians had been selling government favours from what became known as 'the little green house [no. 1625] on K Street'. The 'Ohio Gang', as the group was soon called, had nothing to do with Harding and it was never legally established that even Daugherty shared their loot (he was acquitted when tried in 1926-7, though he refused to take the stand). But after Harding confronted Smith with his crimes on 29 May, the wretched man shot himself the following day and this second suicide had a deplorable effect on the President's morale. According to William Allen White (not a wholly reliable witness), Harding told him, 'I can take care of my enemies all right. But my damn friends, my God-damn friends, White, they're the ones that keep me walking the floors nights.' Given time, Harding would certainly have managed to stabilize the situation and refute the rumours of guilt by association – as have several presidents since – for his own hands

were completely clean, so far as the latest historical research has been able to establish. But the following month he left for a trip to Alaska and the West Coast and he died, of a cerebral haemorrhage, at the Palace Hotel, San Francisco, in early August. His wife followed him in November 1924 having first destroyed (so it was then believed) all Harding's papers, and this was taken as conclusive evidence of guilty secrets.<sup>47</sup>

The false historiography which presented Harding and his administration as the most corrupt in American history began almost immediately with the publication in 1924 in the *New Republic* of a series of articles by its violently anti-business editor, Bruce Bliven. This created the basic mythology of the 'Ohio Gang', run by Daugherty, who had deliberately recruited Harding as a front man as long ago as 1912 as part of a long-term conspiracy to hand over the entire nation to Andrew Mellon and Big Business. Thereafter Harding was fair game for sensationalists. In 1927 Nan Britton, daughter of a Marion doctor, published *The President's Daughter*, claiming she had had a baby girl by Harding in 1919. In 1928 William Allen White repeated the conspiracy theory in *Masks in a Pageant* and again ten years later in his life of Coolidge, *A Puritan in Babylon*. In 1930 a former FBI agent, Gaston Means, produced the best-selling *The Strange Death of President Harding*, portraying wholly imaginary drunken orgies with chorus girls at the K Street house, with Harding prominent in the 'action'. Equally damaging was the 1933 memoir *Crowded Hours*, by Theodore Roosevelt's daughter, Alice Roosevelt Longworth, which presented Harding's White House study as a speakeasy: 'the air heavy with tobacco smoke, trays with bottles containing every imaginable brand of whisky stood about, cards and poker chips ready at hand – a general atmosphere of waistcoat unbuttoned, feet on the desk and the spittoon alongside . . . . Harding was not a bad man. He was just a slob.'<sup>48</sup> To cap it all came an apparently scholarly work by a *New York Sun* writer, Samuel Hopkins Adams, called *Incredible Era: the Life and Times of Warren Gamaliel Harding* (1939), which welded together all the inventions and myths into a solid orthodoxy. By this time the notion of Harding as the criminal king of the Golden Calf era had become the received version of events not only in popular books like Frederick Lewis Allen's *Only Yesterday . . .* (1931) but in standard academic history. When in 1964 the Harding Papers (which had not been burnt) were opened to scholars, no truth at all was found in any of the myths, though it emerged that Harding, a pathetically shy man with women, had had a sad and touching friendship with the wife of a Marion store-owner before his presidency. The Babylonian image was a fantasy, and in all essentials Harding had been an honest and

exceptionally shrewd president. But by then it was too late. A *New York Times* poll of seventy-five historians in 1962 showed that he was rated 'a flat failure' with 'very little dissent'.<sup>49</sup>

The treatment of Harding is worth dwelling on because, taken in conjunction with a similar denigration of his vice-president and successor Calvin Coolidge, a man of totally different temperament, it amounts to the systematic misrepresentation of public policy over a whole era. Coolidge was the most internally consistent and single-minded of modern American presidents. If Harding loved America as Arcadia, Coolidge was the best-equipped to preserve it as such. He came from the austere hills of Vermont, of the original Puritan New England stock, and was born over his father's store. No public man carried into modern times more comprehensively the founding principles of Americanism: hard work, frugality, freedom of conscience, freedom from government, respect for serious culture (he went to Amherst, and was exceptionally well-read in classical and foreign literature and in history). He was sharp, hatchet-faced, 'weaned on a pickle' (Alice Longworth), a 'runty, aloof little man, who quacks through his nose when he speaks . . . he slapped no man on the back, pawed no man's shoulder, squeezed no man's hand' (William Allen White).<sup>50</sup> He married a beautiful, raven-haired schoolteacher called Grace, about whom no one ever said a critical word. During their courtship he translated Dante's *Inferno* into English but immediately after the wedding ceremony he presented her with a bag of fifty-two pairs of socks that needed darning. He always saved his money. As Harding's vice-president he lived in four rooms in Willard's Hotel and gladly accepted the role as the Administration's official diner-out – 'Got to eat somewhere.' He ran the White House down to the smallest detail (rather like Curzon, but much more efficiently), scrutinizing and initialing all household bills, and prowling round the deepest recesses of the kitchens. He banked his salary and by 1928 had \$250,000 invested.<sup>51</sup> He went to bed at ten, a point celebrated by Groucho Marx in *Animal Crackers*: 'Isn't it past your bedtime, Calvin?'. But the notion propagated by Mencken – 'He slept more than any other president, whether by day or by night. Nero fiddled but Coolidge only snored' – was misleading.<sup>52</sup> No president was ever better briefed on anything that mattered or less often caught unprepared by events or the doings of his team.

It suited Coolidge, in fact, to mislead people into believing he was less sophisticated and active than he was (a ploy later imitated by Dwight Eisenhower). 'A natural churchwarden in a rural parish,' wrote Harold Laski, 'who has by accident strayed into great affairs.'<sup>53</sup> That was exactly the impression Coolidge wished to convey. In fact few men have been better prepared for the presidency,

moving up every rung of the public ladder: parish councillor, assemblyman, mayor, State Representative, State Senator, President of the State Senate, Lieutenant-Governor, Governor, Vice-President. At every stage he insisted that government should do as little as was necessary ('He didn't do anything', remarked the political comic Will Rogers, 'but that's what the people wanted done').<sup>54</sup> But he also insisted that, when it did act, it should be absolutely decisive. He made his national reputation in 1919 by crushing the Boston police strike: 'There is no right to strike against the public safety by anybody, anywhere, anytime.' He was elected Vice-President under the slogan 'Law and Order', and President with the messages 'Keep Cool with Coolidge', 'Coolidge or Chaos' and 'The chief business of the American people is business'. He articulated a generally held belief that the function of government is primarily to create a climate in which agriculture, manufacturing and commerce can seize the opportunities which God and nature provide. At the climax of his campaign for the presidency in 1924 a deputation of America's most successful men of affairs, led by Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone and Thomas Edison, called at his house. Edison, who as the world's best-known inventor acted as spokesman, told the crowd outside, 'The United States is lucky to have Calvin Coolidge.'<sup>55</sup> He won this and all his other contests handsomely, most of them by landslides.

Coolidge reflected America's Arcadian separateness during the 1920s by showing that, in deliberate contrast to the strident activism taking over so much of Europe and driven by the idea that political motion had replaced religious piety as the obvious form of moral worth, it was still possible to practise successfully the archaic virtue of *stasis*. Coolidge believed that all activity – above all of government – not dictated by pressing necessity was likely to produce undesirable results and certainly unforeseen ones. His minimalism extended even, indeed especially, to speech. It was said that he and his father, Colonel Coolidge, communicated 'by little more than the ugh-ugh of the Indian'.<sup>56</sup> He rejoiced in his nickname 'Silent Cal'. 'The Coolidges never slop over', he boasted. His advice as president to the Massachusetts senate was: 'Be brief. Above all, be brief.' Taking over the White House, he settled the 'Ohio Gang' scandals by acting very fast, appointing special counsel and by saying as little as possible himself. Campaigning in 1924, he noted: 'I don't recall any candidate for president that ever injured himself very much by not talking.'<sup>57</sup> 'The things I never say never get me into trouble', he remarked. In his *Autobiography*, he said his most important rule 'consists in never doing anything that someone else can do for you'. Nine-tenths of a president's callers at the White

House, he stressed, 'want something they ought not to have. If you keep dead still they will run out in three or four minutes.'<sup>58</sup>

Coolidge was as successful in handling the press as Harding but for quite different reasons. Not only did he keep no press secretary and refuse to hold on-the-record press conferences; he resented it if journalists addressed any remarks to him, even 'Good morning'. But if written questions were submitted in advance to his forbidding factotum, C. Bascom Slemph, he would write the answers himself: short, very dry, but informative and truthful.<sup>59</sup> The press liked his dependability, flavoured by eccentric habits: he used to get his valet to rub his hair with vaseline and, in the Oval Office, he would sometimes summon his staff by bell and then hide under his desk, observing their mystification with his curious wry detachment. Journalists also sensed he was wholly uncorrupted by power. On 2 August 1927, he summoned thirty of them, told them, 'The line forms on the left', and handed each a two-by-nine-inch slip of paper on which he had typed: 'I do not choose to run for President in 1928.' His final departure from the White House was characteristic. 'Perhaps one of the most important accomplishments of my administration', he snapped at the press, 'has been minding my own business.'<sup>60</sup>

Yet if Coolidge was sparing of words, what he did say was always pithy and clear, showing that he had reflected deeply on history and developed a considered, if sombre, public philosophy. No one in the twentieth century, not even his eloquent contemporary F.E. Smith, Earl of Birkenhead, defined more elegantly the limitations of government and the need for individual endeavour, which necessarily involved inequalities, to advance human happiness. 'Government cannot relieve from toil', he told the Massachusetts senate in 1914. 'The normal must take care of themselves. Self-government means self-support . . . . Ultimately, property rights and personal rights are the same thing . . . . History reveals no civilized people among whom there was not a highly educated class and large aggregations of wealth. Large profits means large payrolls. Inspiration has always come from above.'<sup>61</sup> Political morality, he insisted, must always be judged not by intentions but by effects: 'Economy is idealism in its most practical form', was the key sentence in his 1925 Inaugural. In an address to the New York chamber of commerce on 19 November that year he gave in lucid and lapidary form perhaps the last classic statement of *laissez-faire* philosophy. Government and business should remain independent and separate. It was very desirable indeed that one should be directed from Washington, the other from New York. Wise and prudent men must always prevent the mutual usurpations which foolish or greedy men sought on either side.

Business was the pursuit of gain but it also had a moral purpose: 'the mutual organized effort of society to minister to the economic requirement of civilization . . . . It rests squarely on the law of service. It has for its main reliance truth and faith and justice. In its larger sense it is one of the greatest contributing forces to the moral and spiritual advancement of the race.' That was why government had a warrant to promote its success by providing the conditions of competition within a framework of security. Its job was to suppress privilege wherever it manifested itself and uphold lawful possession by providing legal remedies for all wrongs: 'The prime element in the value of all property is the knowledge that its peaceful enjoyment will be publicly defended.' Without this legal and public defence 'the value of your tall buildings would shrink to the price of the waterfront of old Carthage or corner-lots in ancient Babylon'. The more business regulated itself, the less need there would be for government to act to ensure competition; it could therefore concentrate on its twin task of economy and of improving the national structure within which business could increase profits and investment, raise wages and provide better goods and services at the lowest possible prices.<sup>62</sup>

This public philosophy appeared to possess a degree of concordance with the actual facts of life which was rare in human experience. Under Harding and still more under Coolidge, the USA enjoyed a general prosperity which was historically unique in its experience or that of any other society. When the decade was over, and the prosperity had been, for the moment, wholly eclipsed, it was seen retrospectively, especially by writers and intellectuals, as grossly materialistic, febrile, philistine, and at the same time insubstantial and ephemeral, unmerited by any solid human accomplishment. The judgemental images were biblical: of a grotesque Belshazzar's Feast before catastrophe. 'The New Generation had matured,' Scott Fitzgerald wrote in 1931, 'to find all gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken; all they knew was that America was going on the greatest, gaudiest spree in history.'<sup>63</sup> Edmund Wilson saw the Twenties as an aberration in the basic seriousness of the American conscience: 'the fireworks of the Twenties were in the nature of a drunken fiesta'.<sup>64</sup> In *The Epic of America*, published in 1931, James Truslow Adams summed it up: 'Having surrendered idealism for the sake of prosperity, the "practical men" bankrupted us on both of them.'<sup>65</sup> There were indeed some intellectuals who felt the whole attempt to spread general prosperity was misconceived and certain to invoke destruction. Michael Rostovtzeff, then finishing his monumental history of the economy of antiquity, asked: 'Is it possible to extend a higher civilization to the lower classes without debasing its

standard and diluting its quality to the vanishing point? Is not every civilization bound to decay as soon as it begins to penetrate the masses?'<sup>66</sup>

But the view that the 1920s was a drunken spree destructive of civilized values can be substantiated only by the systematic distortion or denial of the historical record. The prosperity was very widespread and very solid. It was not universal: in the farming community particularly it was patchy, and it largely excluded certain older industrial communities, such as the textile trade of New England.<sup>67</sup> But it was more widely distributed than had been possible in any community of this size before, and it involved the acquisition, by tens of millions, of the elements of economic security which had hitherto been denied them throughout the whole of history. The growth was spectacular. On a 1933-8 index of 100, it was 58 in 1921 and passed 110 in 1929. That involved an increase in national income from \$59.4 to \$87.2 billion in eight years, with real *per capita* income rising from \$522 to \$716: not Babylonian luxury but a modest comfort never hitherto possible.<sup>68</sup> The expansion expressed itself not merely in spending and credit. For the first time, many millions of working people acquired insurance (life and industrial insurance policies passed the 100 million mark in the 1920s), savings, which quadrupled during the decade, and a stake in industry. Thus, an analysis of those buying fifty shares or more in one of the biggest public utility stock issues of the 1920s shows that the largest groups were (in order): housekeepers, clerks, factory workers, merchants, chauffeurs and drivers, electricians, mechanics and foremen.<sup>69</sup> The Twenties was also characterized by the biggest and longest building-boom: as early as 1924 some 11 million families had acquired their own homes.

The heart of the consumer boom was in personal transport, which in a vast country, where some of the new cities were already thirty miles across, was not a luxury. At the beginning of 1914, 1,258,062 cars had been registered in the USA, which produced 569,054 during the year. Production rose to 5,621,715 in 1929, by which time cars registered in the USA totalled 26,501,443, five-sixths of the world production and one car for every five people in the country. This gives some idea of America's global industrial dominance. In 1924 the four leading European car producers turned out only 11 per cent of the vehicles manufactured in the USA. Even by the end of the decade European registrations were only 20 per cent of the US level and production a mere 13 per cent.<sup>70</sup> The meaning of these figures was that the working class as a whole was acquiring the individual freedom of medium- and long-distance movement hitherto limited to a section of the middle class. Meanwhile, though rail was in decline,

the numbers carried falling from 1,269 million in 1920 to 786 million in 1929, the middle class was moving into air travel: air passengers rose from 49,713 in 1928 to 417,505 in 1930 (by 1940 the figure was 3,185,278, and nearly 8 million by 1945).<sup>71</sup> What the Twenties demonstrates was the relative speed with which industrial productivity could transform luxuries into necessities and spread them down the class pyramid.

Indeed, to a growing extent it was a dissolvent of class and other barriers. Next to cars, it was the new electrical industry which fuelled Twenties prosperity. Expenditure on radios rose from a mere \$10,648,000 in 1920 to \$411,637,000 in 1929, and total electrical products tripled in the decade to \$2.4 billion.<sup>72</sup> First the mass radio audience, signalled by the new phenomenon of 'fan mail' in autumn 1923, then regular attendance, especially by young people, at the movies (from 1927 the talkies) brought about the Americanization of immigrant communities and a new classlessness in dress, speech and attitudes which government policy, under Wilson, had been powerless to effect and which Harding and Coolidge wisely forwent. Sinclair Lewis, revisiting 'Main Street' for the *Nation* in 1924, described two working-class, small-town girls wearing 'well-cut skirts, silk stockings, such shoes as can be bought nowhere in Europe, quiet blouses, bobbed hair, charming straw hats, and easily cynical expressions terrifying to an awkward man'. One of them served hash. 'Both their dads are Bohemian; old mossbacks, tough old birds with whiskers that can't sling more English than a muskrat. And yet in one generation, here's their kids – real queens.'<sup>73</sup>

Such young people identified with movie-stars; for them, movies were a force of liberation, children from parents, wives from husbands. A motion-picture research survey quoted one seventeen-year-old: 'Movies are a godsend, and to express my sentiments long may they live and long may they stay in the land of the free and the home of the brave.' Another: 'I began smoking after watching Dolores Costella.'<sup>74</sup> Smoking was then seen as progressive and liberating, specially for women; and healthy – 'Reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet'; 'slenderize in a Sensible Way'. Advertising was a window into liberation too, especially for women of immigrant families. It educated them in the possibilities of life. The Twenties in America marked the biggest advances for women of any decade, before or since. By 1930 there were 10,546,000 women 'gainfully employed' outside the home: the largest number, as before, were in domestic/personal service (3,483,000) but there were now nearly 2 million in clerical work, 1,860,000 in manufacturing and, most encouraging of all, 1,226,000 in the professions.<sup>75</sup> Equally significant, and culturally more important, were the liberated housewives,

the 'Blondies', to whom their appliances, cars and husbands' high wages had brought leisure for the first time. Writing on 'The New Status of Women' in 1931, Mary Ross epitomized the Blondies 'raised . . . above the need for economic activity':

They raise their children – one, two, occasionally three or four of them – with a care probably unknown to any past generation. It is they who founded the great culture-club movement . . . they who spend the great American income, sustain the movie industry, buy or borrow the novels, support the fashions and the beauty-culture businesses, keep bridge and travel and medical cults at high levels of activity and help along the two-car-family standard. Out of this sudden burst of female leisure have come many good things, much of the foundation of American philanthropy for example.<sup>76</sup>

The coming of family affluence was one factor in the decline of radical politics and their union base. A 1929 survey quoted a union organizer: 'The Ford car has done an awful lot of harm to the unions here and everywhere else. As long as men have enough money to buy a second-hand Ford and tires and gasoline, they'll be out on the road and paying no attention to union meetings.'<sup>77</sup> In 1915, 1921 and 1922 the unions lost three key Supreme Court actions, and their 1919 strikes were disastrous failures. American Federation of Labor membership dropped from a high-point of 4,078,740 in 1920 to 2,532,261 in 1932. 'Welfare capitalism' provided company sports facilities, holidays with pay, insurance and pension schemes, so that by 1927 4,700,000 workers were covered by group insurance and 1,400,000 were members of company unions.<sup>79</sup> The American worker appeared to be on the threshold of a hitherto unimaginable bourgeois existence of personal provision and responsibility which made collective action increasingly superfluous.

This was, as might have been expected, linked to a cultural liberation which belied the accusations of philistinism hurled (later, rather than at the time) at the Coolidge era. Perhaps the most important single development of the age was the spread of education. Between 1910 and 1930 total educational spending rose fourfold, from \$426.25 million to \$2.3 billion; higher education spending increased fourfold too, to nearly one billion a year. Illiteracy fell during the period from 7.7 to 4.3 per cent. The Twenties was the age of the Book of the Month Club and the Literary Guild; more new books were bought than ever before but there was a persistent devotion to the classics. Throughout the Twenties, *David Copperfield* was rated America's favourite novel, and among those voted 'the ten greatest men in history' were Shakespeare, Dickens, Tennyson and Longfellow.<sup>80</sup> Jazz Age it may have been but by the end of the decade there were 35,000 youth orchestras in the nation. The decade was marked

both by the historical conservation movement which restored colonial Williamsburg and the collection of contemporary painting which created the Museum of Modern Art in 1929.<sup>81</sup>

The truth is the Twenties was the most fortunate decade in American history, even more fortunate than the equally prosperous 1950s decade, because in the Twenties the national cohesion brought about by relative affluence, the sudden cultural density and the expressive originality of 'Americanism' were new and exciting. In 1927 André Siegfried, the French academician, published *America Comes of Age*, in which he argued that 'as a result of the revolutionary changes brought about by modern methods of production . . . the American people are now creating on a vast scale an entirely original social structure'. The point might have brought a wry response from Henry James, who had died eleven years before. In 1878 he had written a little biography of Hawthorne which contained a celebrated and (to Americans) highly offensive passage listing all the 'items of high civilization, as it exists in other countries, which are absent from the texture of American life' and which – so he argued – supplied the rich social texture essential to the writing of imaginative literature. America had, he enumerated,

No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages, nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor Norman churches; no great Universities, nor public schools – no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class – no Epsom nor Ascot!<sup>82</sup>

By the end of the Twenties America had achieved the social depth and complexity whose absence James had mourned, and achieved it moreover through what Hawthorne himself dismissed as the 'commonplace prosperity' of American life.<sup>83</sup> But it was prosperity on an unprecedented and monumental scale, such as to constitute a social phenomenon in itself, and bring in its train for the first time a national literary universe of its own. The decade was introduced by F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* (1918) and it ended with *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) by Ernest Hemingway, who was to prove the most influential writer of fiction in English between the wars. It included Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* (1920), John Dos Passos's *Three Soldiers* (1921), Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1926), William Faulkner's *Soldier's Pay* (1926), Upton Sinclair's *Boston* (1928) and Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929). The emergence of this galaxy of novels, and of playwrights like Eugene O'Neill and Thornton Wilder, was evidence, as Lionel Trilling put it,

that 'life in America has increasingly thickened since the nineteenth century', producing not so much the 'social observation' James required of a novel but an 'intense social awareness', so that 'our present definition of a serious book is one which holds before us an image of society to consider and condemn'.<sup>84</sup>

This growing tendency of American culture to dispense with its umbilical source of supply from Europe began in the 1920s to produce forms of expression which were *sui generis*, not merely in cinema and radio broadcasting, where specific American contributions were present at the creation, but on the stage. The most spectacular maturing of the decade was the New York musical. It was the progeny, to be sure, of the Viennese operetta, the French boulevard music-play, English Gilbert and Sullivan comic operas and the English music-hall (its origins might be traced back, perhaps, to *The Beggar's Opera* of 1728) but the ingredients of American minstrel-show, burlesque, jazz and vaudeville transformed it into a completely new form of popular art. There had been prolific composers in the proto-genre before 1914, notably Irving Berlin and Jerome Kern. But their work then seemed so marginal and fugitive that some of Kern's earliest and best songs have disappeared without leaving any copy.<sup>85</sup> It was in the early Twenties that the spectacular new prosperity of the Broadway theatres combined with the new talents – George Gershwin, Richard Rodgers, Howard Dietz, Cole Porter, Vincent Youmans, Oscar Hammerstein, Lorenz Hart and E. Y. Harburg – to bring the American musical into full flower. On 12 February 1924 Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* was performed by the Paul Whiteman band at the Aeolian Hall. It was the archetypal creative event of the decade. And that season, just after Coolidge had got himself elected in his own right, Gershwin's *Lady, Be Good!*, the first mature American musical, opened on 1 December in the Liberty Theatre, starring Fred Astaire and his sister Adele.<sup>86</sup> It was the outstanding event of a Broadway season which included Youmans' *Lollypop*, Kern's *Sitting Pretty*, Rudolph Friml's and Sigmund Romberg's *The Student Prince*, Irving Berlin's *Music Box Revue* and Sissie and Blake's *Chocolate Dandies* – among about forty musicals – as well as Marc Connelly's *Green Pastures*, Aaron Copland's First Symphony and the arrival of Serge Koussevitsky at the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Indeed, with the possible exception of Weimar Germany, the America of Coolidge prosperity was the leading theatre of western culture at this time, the place where the native creator had the widest range of opportunities and where the expatriate artist was most likely to find the freedom, the means and the security to express himself.

The trouble with Twenties expansion was not that it was philistine or socially immoral. The trouble was that it was transient. Had it endured, carrying with it in its train the less robust but still (at that time) striving

economies of Europe, a global political transformation must have followed which would have rolled back the new forces of totalitarian compulsion, with their ruinous belief in social engineering, and gradually replaced them with a relationship between government and enterprise closer to that which Coolidge outlined to the business paladins of New York City. In 1929 the United States had achieved a position of paramountcy in total world production never hitherto attained during a period of prosperity by any single state: 34.4 per cent of the whole, compared with Britain's 10.4, Germany's 10.3, Russia's 9.9, France's 5.0, Japan's 4.0, 2.5 for Italy, 2.2 for Canada and 1.7 for Poland. The likelihood that the European continent would lean towards America's 'original social structure', as Siegfried termed it, increased with every year the world economy remained buoyant. Granted another decade of prosperity on this scale our account of modern times would have been vastly different and immeasurably happier.

On 4 December 1928 Coolidge gave his last public message to the new Congress:

No Congress of the United States ever assembled, on surveying the state of the Union, has met with a more pleasing prospect . . . . The great wealth created by our enterprise and industry, and saved by our economy, has had the widest distribution among our own people, and has gone out in a steady stream to serve the charity and business of the world. The requirements of existence have passed beyond the standard of necessity into the region of luxury. Enlarging production is consumed by an increasing demand at home and an expanding commerce abroad. The country can regard the present with satisfaction and anticipate the future with optimism.<sup>87</sup>

This view was not the flatulent self-congratulation of a successful politician. Nor was it only the view of the business community. It was shared by intellectuals across the whole spectrum. Charles Beard's *The Rise of American Civilization*, published in 1927, saw the country 'moving from one technological triumph to another, overcoming the exhaustion of crude natural resources and energies, effecting an ever-widening distribution of the blessings of civilization – health, security, material goods, knowledge, leisure and aesthetic appreciation . . . .'<sup>88</sup> Writing the same year, Walter Lippmann considered: 'The more or less unconscious and unplanned activities of businessmen are for once more novel, more daring and in a sense more revolutionary, than the theories of the progressives.'<sup>89</sup> John Dewey, in 1929, thought the problem was not how to prolong prosperity – he took that for granted – but how to turn 'the Great Society' into 'the Great Community'.<sup>90</sup> Even on the Left the feeling spread that perhaps business had got it right after all. Lincoln

Steffens, writing in February 1929, felt that both the USA and the Soviet systems might be justified: 'The race is saved one way or the other and, I think, both ways.'<sup>91</sup> In 1929 the *Nation* began a three-month series on the permanence of prosperity, drawing attention to pockets of Americans who had not yet shared in it; the opening article appeared on 23 October, coinciding with the first big break in the market.

It may be that Coolidge himself, a constitutionally suspicious man, and not one to believe easily that permanent contentment is to be found this side of eternity, was more sceptical than anyone else, and certainly less sanguine than he felt it his duty to appear in public. It is curious that he declined to run for president again in 1928, when all the omens were in his favour, and he was only fifty-six. He told the chief justice, Harlan Stone, 'It is a pretty good idea to get out when they still want you.' There were very severe limits to his political ambitions, just as (in his view) there ought to be very severe limits to any political activity. Stone warned him of economic trouble ahead. He too thought the market would break. His wife Grace was reported: 'Poppa says there's a depression coming.' But Coolidge assumed it would be on the 1920 scale, to be cured by a similar phase of masterly inactivity. If something more was required, he was not the man. Grace Coolidge said he told a member of the cabinet: 'I know how to save money. All my training has been in that direction. The country is in a sound financial condition. Perhaps the time has come when we ought to spend money. I do not feel I am qualified to do that.' In his view, Hoover was the Big Spender; not the last of them, the first of them. He viewed Hoover's succession to the presidency without enthusiasm: 'That man has offered me unsolicited advice for six years, all of it bad.' Coolidge was the last man on earth to reciprocate with his own. Asked, during the interregnum in early 1929, for a decision on long-term policy, he snapped, 'We'll leave that to the Wonder Boy.' He left the stage without a word, pulling down the curtain on Arcadia.