

**ONLY YESTERDAY: AN INFORMAL
HISTORY OF THE 1920S**
(FREDERICK LEWIS ALLEN)

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Much modern popular history is mendacious, written with an ideological agenda that deliberately distorts, or omits, or simply lies about, the truth. Sometimes, therefore, reading history written in the past can offer better information. Earlier historians were often more objective, ideology being less prevalent. Their biases, if they have any, are usually obvious. Thus I thought that *Only Yesterday*, a semi-famous history of the 1920s, published in 1931 by a mass-market journalist/intellectual of the time, Frederick Lewis Allen, might teach me something new about that decade. But I found, to my sorrow, that I learned little new, and I was instead again reminded of how early the rot in America's ruling classes set in.

In today's common imagination, the 1920s are the "Roaring Twenties"—an economic boom combined with a new focus on the freedom to do as one pleased (even if Prohibition was the law of the land). The HBO series *Boardwalk Empire* gives a flavor of the times—or at least reflects the common imagination. *Only Yesterday* contains nothing that is not precisely in-line with today's common imagination about the decade, which suggests one of two things. Either today's common imagination correctly reflects the reality of the 1920s—or today's common imagination was shaped by men like Allen, with their own agenda, and does not fully reflect reality.

After reading this book, I conclude the latter seems more likely. It would appear that since all his readers lived through the period he covers, Allen could not distort history. Up to a point, that's true, since he couldn't simply lie like many modern historians do. But Allen still distorts, because he is preaching to the choir—he is writing to people like him, members of the 1920s professional-managerial elite, sympathetic to the Progressives and Woodrow Wilson, violently opposed to Calvin Coolidge, and eager to find and support a candidate like Franklin Roosevelt, although he is nowhere mentioned in this book. Allen's main air is one of supercilious superiority; he knows what is good for the country, and he is pleased to be able to report that the benighted

masses are generally getting with the program advocated by their betters. He reports the 1920s through this lens, not objectively. And that his book has been used for decades in schools and colleges reinforces my conclusion that our image of the 1920s, in particular that it was a decade of moral progress, rather than moral decay, arises from this book and the ideology its author pushes.

Allen begins with a great deal of detail about Wilson's attempts to force America to join the League of Nations. Using a combination of over-the-top language about the utopia the League would bring and what he knew to be falsehoods about the League's origin and purpose, Wilson, the first ideological President, desperately tried to get America to take the medicine he was sure would be good for it. "He warned his audiences that if the Treaty were not ratified, disorder would shake the foundations of the world, and he envisioned 'those heights upon which there rests nothing but the pure light of the justice of God.'" But America, we know, was not interested, something Allen attributes mostly to a lack of "idealism" and a desire to return to "normalcy," along with a variety of special interests, not to simply a clear-eyed rejection of what Wilson had to offer. Wilson failed, as we also know.

In the next section, Allen's prejudices really begin to show. He sneers at length at "The Big Red Scare." I don't know how significant the Communist threat in America was in 1919 and 1920. Certainly, there were many militants demanding Communism and anarchism, and the war atmosphere, combined with the Bolshevik victory in Russia and numerous bombings of public places in America killing hundreds of people (with an impact on society like September 11th on us), certainly led many to rationally believe that Communism was a real present threat to America. That it didn't turn out to be a problem in the end does not prove that it was not a problem at the time. Communists certainly were a huge problem later, in the 1940s and 1950s, when circumstances were more favorable to Communist traitors and to Communist power gains. Not to mention that the crackdown on Communists in 1919 may have prevented it being a bigger problem in 1921.

Allen's claim, though, is that the public was stupid, the "Red Scare" was a chimera put out by the Attorney General, Mitchell Palmer, for no good reason while Wilson was incapacitated and unable to stop him, and there was zero basis for concern. Allen, who has nothing to

say about the massive suspensions of civil liberties by Wilson and the federal government during World War I, nor about the hundreds of African Americans killed in race pogroms at the exact same time as the so-called Red Scare in places like Tulsa, claims that this period was “in a very literal sense, a reign of terror,” even though no Communist was harmed or killed (except a few executed for proven crimes) and within a few months they could stop even looking over their shoulders. The reader concludes that suppression of the Left is Allen’s only concern, and that suggests that he’s simply protecting his own kind and enlarging their freedom for future operation.

That said, it’s certainly possible Allen is objectively describing the ideological oppression that he says briefly swept over the country for a few months. Students and businessmen, he says, were only able to state their real opinions in whispers; schoolteachers were made to sign ideological commitments; college professors were dismissed for wrongthink; the media spread historical propaganda; and much more along the same lines. All of it is very familiar, because it is precisely the treatment conservatives suffer under in America today, under constant vicious attack by the woke Left that controls all the levers of power. In 1919, though, things quickly returned to normal, whereas our current Scare isn’t a scare at all, but a deliberate attempt to exercise total ideological dominance and total power. That’s why today’s atmosphere of Left terror has lasted for years, not months, is accelerating, not slowing, and is very unlikely to stop unless it is stopped by force.

This is also the chapter in which we are introduced to Calvin Coolidge, not by name, but as the Governor of Massachusetts, “an inconspicuous, sour-faced man with a reputation for saying as little as possible and never jeopardizing his political position by being betrayed into a false move.” Allen’s treatment of Coolidge, the substance of whose Presidency he barely mentions, further betrays his bias in favor of the Left. Coolidge’s *Autobiography* is “smug”; in all his writings and speeches “the most original thing you will find in them is his uncompromising unoriginality.” For no given reason at all, Allen claims “his presidential record was surprisingly negative.” He was “uninspired and unheroic”—Allen wants, obviously, the so-called inspiration and heroism that the Progressives and other men of the Left foisted on America.

As to the common people, Allen complains that in the 1920s “public spirit,” that is, eagerness for Left nostrums, “was at low ebb.” Instead, Americans filled up their time with becoming excited about boxing matches and local crimes given national attention, sniffs Allen, along with crosswords and mah-jongg. Allen is glad that at least religiosity declined, accelerated by the appearance of the prosperity gospel and by propaganda pushing science as exalting itself over religion. But what makes up for it in Allen’s eyes is “The Revolution in Manner and Morals” and its effect on the common people, both of which he celebrates, not analyzes. (And revolution was no doubt what it was, although nothing compared to what the Baby Boomers managed to bequeath to us since the late 1960s.) Allen attributes the new moral laxity to many factors: the war, the “growing independence of the American woman,” arising from labor-saving housekeeping devices and an increased ability to be employed outside the home; Freudianism; automobiles; Prohibition; and mass media, especially movies and the new risqué magazines. Slickly, he deliberately confuses new hairstyles and clothing with substantive changes in morals, a motte-and-bailey technique allowing him to respond to any criticism of the corrosive social effect of lax sexual morality with a snippy comment about rubes who think that hairstyles have a moral component.

What is very evident is that in every area, the ruling classes set new low standards permitting and encouraging hugely increased moral laxity, which quickly filtered down to the lower orders. Among the “prosperous classes,” “It was better to be modern, —everybody wanted to be modern, —and sophisticated, and smart, to smash the conventions and to be devastatingly frank.” Allen loves all of the resulting moral laxity spreading through the country. Obscene material is, righteously, “upheld by a liberal judge and endorsed by intelligent public opinion.” Those trying to maintain the rules on obscenity found “the intellectuals of the whole country were laughing at them. . . . [T]he taste of the country demanded a new sort of reading matter.” That is, for Allen, the “taste of the country” is really the “taste of the left-wing intellectuals.” He even has a whole chapter celebrating left-wing intellectuals, whom he calls “highbrows,” such as Sinclair Lewis (and also H. L. Mencken, not strictly speaking left-wing but just as corrosive), and magazines like the *American Mercury* (where the odious Albert Jay Nock got his start).

This is contrasted with the “hinterlands [where] there was still plenty of old-fashioned sentimental thinking about sex,” leading to “frantic efforts to stay the tide of moral change” by people unable to “all at once forget the admonitions of their childhood.” Sure, Allen says, this laxity led to some temporary bad manners, but was all to the good with a few years of practice in the new laxity.

The masses experienced, despite Prohibition, a great deal of new freedom, the release from old moral codes and expectations, and for Allen, this is all to the good, as long as they keep the right people in charge. Not necessarily in charge of the government—the federal government did not have the powers it does now, and its only real relevancy was in foreign affairs and, as the Progressive agenda of hugely expanding federal power began its first major project, Prohibition. Rather, in charge of society at every level.

Allen covers Prohibition and the resulting big-city crime, especially Al Capone. He admits Prohibition sharply reduced alcohol consumption, and resultant pathologies, among the common people, but “among the prosperous classes which set the standards of national social behavior, alcohol flowed more freely than ever.” In other words, the rotten ruling classes of the 1920s were responsible for the ills of Prohibition, too. When Allen wrote this book, Prohibition was still in effect, so there is no resolution, just lots of text about the social ills resulting. Other chapters cover land speculation boom and bust in Florida, and, for the last third of the book, the run-up in the stock market and the subsequent crash, in more detail than is really interesting.

At the end, the modern reader has learned nothing new about the 1920s, and as I have shown, has good reason to suspect he has been led by the nose down the ideological garden path. Like so much else used in the educational system today, this book is still force-fed to present-day students because it is useful as propaganda to advance the indoctrination of the Left. I suspect that there exist now-obscure works that portray an entirely different picture of the 1920s. Find those books, and give them to your children, not this toxic mush.