

# Myths and Misconceptions: The Great Depression

### 1. **The 1930s Great Depression was the first national depression in the United States**

Although the Great Depression of the 1930s was the longest and most disruptive economic crisis in United States history, economic panics, recessions, and depressions had been cyclical events since the nineteenth century—severe depressions occurred in 1819, 1837, 1857, 1873, and 1893. Most of these depressions were worse than the one that came before. As the nation’s economy and population grew, so did the numbers of people affected in each crisis. Economic transformations during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries left more Americans working for wages and paying for goods in cash rather than raising their own food and bartering for goods; this made them far more vulnerable to uncertainties in banking and the stock exchange.

### 2. **Everyone in the Dust Bowl left the Great Plains for the West.**

John Steinbeck’s 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath* and its popular film adaptation reinforced the mistaken view that millions fled the Dust Bowl and sought work in California. In fact, while 16,000 farmers moved in search of better opportunities, three-quarters of farmers in the Dust Bowl region stayed put; many who did migrate settled in neighboring states. Migrants from the southern plains made up only a small portion of the 1.2 million migrants to California. Most who migrated west came from a wider swath of the Midwest and moved not only because of the drought but because of the steep drop in agricultural prices and the growing mechanization of Midwestern agriculture, which was eliminating the need for a large rural labor force.

### 3. **The Dust Bowl was exclusively a natural disaster caused by the drought.**

Dry spells were common in the Great Plains, occurring roughly every twenty-five years. However, drought alone was not enough to cause the extreme dust storms and devastation of the Dust Bowl—human misuse of the land was also a crucial factor. For centuries, prairie grasses covered the southern Plains, held in place by the region’s delicate topsoil. But beginning in the 1890s, settlers plowed up grasses in order to plant wheat and cotton, and growing cattle and sheep herds further destroyed this protective layer. Farmers planted even more acres of wheat as the market boomed during World War I and the decade following. By the time drought hit in the 1930s, the topsoil was exhausted and the wind carried the soil away.

### 4. **President Roosevelt and the New Deal ended the Great Depression.**

As extensive as they were, none of Roosevelt’s New Deal recovery programs ended mass unemployment or restored long-term economic growth in the United States. The country’s entry into World War II in 1941, and the accompanying rise in industrial manufacturing to meet the military’s needs, finally brought the unemployment rate down below 10% and eliminated the last effects of the Great Depression. Massive government and military spending then continued in postwar years and into the Cold War, doubling economic growth and insuring historically low unemployment rates.

5. **Everybody in the country supported President Roosevelt and the New Deal.**

The New Deal was criticized by both conservative and progressive groups. Conservatives claimed New Deal programs were socialism in disguise, while liberals and radicals attacked them for not providing enough relief and maintaining the fundamental aspects of capitalism. The New Deal's National Recovery Act (NRA)—which mandated price controls, minimum wages, and the right of workers to unionize—drew extensive criticism from business leaders, and the massive government spending on relief and employment programs prompted general conservative criticism. Most businessmen feared that federal jobs programs would lead to higher taxes and a spirit of working-class defiance. For their part, socialist, communist, and labor activists argued that the reforms did not go far enough, and that New Deal programs protected the banking system and large corporations.