

The Situation at the Turn of the Century: America in 1900

The Gilded Age saw enormous industrial progress accompanied by the growth of appalling conditions in the slums of the cities and in the plight of farmers and others ground up by the “wheels of progress.” The “war between capital and labor” (so called by historian Page Smith) showed that Americans were literally prepared to fight for their economic rights, as they had done in 1776, and from 1861 to 1865. If the terrible conditions of the working poor had not been addressed, it is highly possible that some sort of revolution might have taken place. In fact, a revolution of sorts did take place, through it came largely from the top—or at least from the middle class. This revolution was called the Progressive Movement, and in many ways to was a conservative movement, not meant to upset society, but to fix what was wrong with it in order to retain its essential character.

The progress that Henry George had talked about in his work, *Progress and Poverty*, made possible the Progressive movement in many ways. Despite the harsh conditions for workers, living standards had risen dramatically for many since the Civil War. Education opportunities were expanded, people had more leisure time, newspapers, books and magazines proliferated, and a new breed of journalists began to examine American life in detail. These new journalists became known as the “muckrakers,” and they benefited from the wide circulation of magazines and newspapers made possible through advertising and cheaper, mass methods of production.

Although the muckrakers themselves were sometimes guilty of the things they complained about, muckraking, which we now call “investigative journalism,” became a highly respected vocation. Writers like Jacob Riis, Lincoln Steffens and Ida Tarbell wrote long, detailed articles and entire books exposing fraud, waste, corruption and other evils in government, business and social conditions, such as the slums of the cities. They took on bossism, profiteering, child labor, public health and safety, prostitution, alcohol, political corruption and almost every aspect of public and even private life. They achieved some spectacular successes at virtually every level, from child labor laws across the country to four constitutional amendments: direct election of Senators, women's suffrage, prohibition of alcohol and the income tax.

There was a good deal of moralism in the Progressive movement, and Progressives were often seen as sanctimonious busybodies and meddlers, poking around in things that were none of their business. For others the Progressives, and the muckrakers who provided the raw material for those reformers, were upholding American values and the American way of life. For still others they were helping working people by rescuing capitalism from its worst excesses, and because businessmen were smart enough to see that discontented, angry workers were a threat to their livelihood, they often supported Progressivism and even led the charge, though it might cost them in the short run. This phenomenon of short-term sacrifice for long-term advantage is an example of what is often called “enlightened self-interest.”

In the political arena the Progressives wanted good government at all levels, and among their more notable achievements were the aforementioned direct election of Senators and women's suffrage. But good government meant more than expanded democracy, or honesty in public officials. Progressives wanted aggressive government that foresaw problems and acted to prevent calamities before they occurred rather than reacting to damage already done. Thus they demanded safety legislation, closer regulation of public health issues and better management of things like public utilities. They also sought to make government more efficient, so that the taxpayer got what he was paying for. If Americans did not have good, government, said the Progressives, the they had only themselves to blame. The Progressives were activists, generally impatient, often misguided, but rarely satisfied until they had achieved a good portion of their goals.

The roots of Progressivism go back to the Populist era. The Progressives did not discover for the first time that America had problems, nor were they the first reformers. But it was the largest movement of its kind in American history, and its effects were felt for a long time. Indeed, muckraking (ala 60 minutes) is still a popular indoor sport, and present day reformers often refer to themselves as Progressives. (It's a term Republicans can use to avoid calling themselves liberals.)

Summary Outline: Objectives of the Progressives

Political Reform: Greater Democracy at all Levels

- Cities First: "invisible government"
- Problem of state versus city sovereignty
- Elected local officials—building coalitions

- Initiative, referendum and recall
- Direct Primaries
- The Presidential election system is undemocratic. Electoral college reform [still needed]
- Seventeenth Amendment: Direct election of Senators
- Women's suffrage

Good Government

- Scientific Management: The Gospel of Efficiency applied to city hall.
- Budgeting, accounting; fair taxation. Attack Machine Politics, Faulty Institutions;
- "Municipal socialism"; no radical reforms called for.
- Commissioners, city manager plan.

Activist Government

- Greater involvement by government in public affairs to produce increased services, schools, loans, roads, conservation, public health, welfare, care of handicapped, farm aid, child labor, mandatory school attendance, transportation safety.
- Private charity inadequate to meet needs; settlement houses in slums.

Regulation of Business

- The Abuses of Capitalism: The Sherman Act is insufficient
- Fair trade practices
- The Moral Imperatives of Wealth: Enlightened Self Interest
- As stronger control measures instituted, burden of proof begins to shift from government to business.
- Balance between laissez faire and socialism; trust busting versus regulation.
- Better wages and job protection for workers

Social Justice: Welfare legislation—aid to the urban poor

- Cleaning up the Workplace: Workmen's Compensation Laws; accident insurance
- Fixing accident responsibility; building codes; worker safety; Labor Laws: Women and Children
- Prohibition: The WCTU gets muscle; the Anti-Saloon League

Public Service

- Social and Economic Reforms: "Gas and Water Socialism"
- Consumer issues: food and drugs

IMPORTANT DATES OF THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

The events listed below are but a small fraction of the actions that were taken nationwide as the Progressive era unfolded. Progressives operated at all levels—national, state, county, city, and so on. Child labor laws were passed in many states, ordinances to help the poorer classes were passed in towns and cities, and jurisdictions at all levels took measures to make government more efficient and responsive to people's needs.

Not all groups benefited from Progressivism. Indians and African Americans were all but excluded, and except for the very important 19th Amendment, the Progressive movement did little to help women.

- 1894: National Municipal League created to reform cities
- 1895: Anti-Saloon League founded.
- 1898: Erdman Act outlaws yellow dog contracts for ICC companies.
- 1900: Currency Act puts U.S. on gold standard; ILGWU founded; Socialist Party founded.
- 1901: McKinley Assassinated; Theodore Roosevelt becomes president of the U.S.
- 1902: Roosevelt forms Trust Policy, sues Northern Securities Company, mediates coal strike.
 - Newlands Act (National Reclamation Act) gets strong support from TR—sets aside land sales money for irrigation projects.
 - State Political Reform Movements: initiative, referendum, direct primary, recall, etc.
- 1903: Expedition Act—priority in federal courts expedites antitrust cases.
 - Dick Act passes—Emory Upton reorganizes the Armed Forces to correct problems uncovered by Spanish-America War. Creates Joint Staff, etc.
 - Elkins Act reinforces Interstate Commerce Act; rebates specifically illegal.
 - Department of Commerce and Labor includes Bureau of Corporations to help businesses clean up their acts and avoid antitrust suits.
 - Muckrakers begin to arouse public opinion on social ills.
- 1904: National Child Labor Committee formed; Northern Securities case hits court; TR elected by wide margin.
- 1905: Industrial Workers of the World (IWW—the "Wobblies") founded—urged social revolution, overthrow of capitalism. Leader is "Big Bill" Haywood.
- *Lochner v. New York* Supreme Court Case strikes down New York law limiting bakers' work hours
- 1906: Meat Inspection Act and Pure Food and Drug Act passed. Manufacture, sale, transportation of adulterated, misbranded or harmful foods is illegal. (Impetus provided by Sinclair's *The Jungle*.)
 - Immunity of Witnesses Act protects whistle-blowers.
 - Hepburn Act beefs up ICC control of Railroads, gives ICC broader jurisdiction, effective control over rates. Goes beyond railroads. Takes all TR's influence to force through Congress.
- 1907: Panic reveals basic flaws in system. Money crunch.
- 1908: White House Conservation Conference.
 - Aldrich-Vreeland Act authorizes special paper currency to ease shortage of money
 - *Muller v. Oregon* case—Supreme Court upholds law limiting work hours for women.
- 1909: Payne-Aldrich tariff lowers rates to about 38%.
 - N.A.A.C.P. founded.
- 1910: Mann-Elkins Act: Places telephone, telegraph and wireless (radio) under I.C.C.
 - Publicity Act: Election contributions must be disclosed.
 - Postal Savings Bank system established. (Had been Populist goal)

- Mann Act prohibits white slavery. (Transporting females across state lines for immoral purposes illegal.)
- 1911: Supreme Court orders dissolution of Standard Oil Company.
 - Triangle Shirtwaist Fire kills 146 workers in New York City, leads to more job safety legislation
- 1912: Republican Party divides; TR runs as Progressive; election demonstrates great popular endorsement of Progressivism: 75% vote for TR, Wilson or Eugene Debs.
 - Wilson elected. Socialists make respectable showing.
- 1913: 16th Amendment adopted: graduated income tax redistributes wealth;
 - 17th Amendment provides for direct election of Senators.
 - Underwood Tariff reduces rates in accord with Progressives' desires; first significant reduction since Civil War.
 - Federal Reserve Act creates 12 members banks, controls interest rates; First U.S. banking system since Jackson's days.
 - 30,000 march for women's suffrage in New York City.
 - Henry Ford creates the moving assembly line.
- 1914: Federal Trade Commission Act guards against "unfair trade practices."
 - Clayton Antitrust Act strengthens Sherman Act. Many specific prohibitions against tie-ins, price discrimination, etc. Corporate officers personally liable. Includes labor, agriculture organizations.
- 1916: Adamson Act mandates 8-hour day, time and a half for overtime for RR workers under I.C.C.
 - Federal Farm Loan Act and Warehouse Act assist farmers.
 - Wilson reelected over Hughes.
- 1919: 18th Amendment outlaws sale of alcoholic beverages in the U.S. Volstead Act carries out intent through legislation. Prohibition begins.
- 1920: 19th Amendment declared ratified; women have the right to vote.
 - Federal bureau of the Budget established to oversee government spending
- 1921: Sheppard-Towner Act assist pregnant women, infants with health care.
- 1924: Robert LaFollette gains 4.8 million votes as Progressive Party candidate for president.

Additional Progressive measures were passed in 1920s and during the New Deal.