Chapter 17

The Progressive Era

1890-1920

Section 1-The Drive for Reform

Industrialization, urbanization and immigration brought many benefits to America, but they also produced challenging social problems. In response, a movement called Progressivism emerged in the 1890s.

“Progressives” believed that new ideas and honest, efficient government could bring about social justice.

The people who made up the Progressive Movement came from all walks of life, political parties, social classes, ethnic groups and religions.

Progressives shared a common belief that industrialization and urbanization had created troubling social and political problems. They wanted to bring about reforms that would correct these problems and injustices. To do this, they encouraged their state legislatures and the federal government to enact laws to address the issues faced by the poor.

Their goal was to use logic and reasoning to make society work in a more efficient and orderly manner. Many were motivated by religion and they sought social justice.

Progressives focused on different problems:

Female Progressives focused on winning the right to vote for women

Other Progressives considered honest government to be the most important goal.

Some worried about big businesses (an end to the trusts; fair prices and competition)

Other Progressives focused on the class system (sought to reduce the gap between rich and poor; attacked harsh worker conditions; wanted to improve city slums and the lives of poor children)

Socially conscious journalists and other writers helped push the need for reform. Their sensational investigative reports uncovered a wide range of problems affecting Americans. The public was horrified by what they revealed.

These journalists gained the name muckrakers because they were thought to be too fascinated with the ugly side of things. (A muckrake is a tool used to clean manure and hay out of animals’ stables)

One leading muckraker was Lincoln Steffens who published a book called The Shame of the Cities, a collection of articles on political corruption, in 1903. His reports exposed how the government of Philadelphia let utility companies charge their customers excessively high fees and he showed how corrupt politicians won elections by bribing and threatening voters.

Another influential muckraker was Jacob Riis, a photographer for the New York Evening Sun. Riis photographed the crowded, unsafe, rat-infested tenement buildings where the urban poor lived. He published How the Other Half Lives that shocked the nation’s conscience and led to reforms.

Fiction writers also helped put a human face on the social problems of the early 1900s. They developed a new genre—the naturalist novel—that honestly portrayed human misery and the struggles of common people.

One of the most famous was Upton Sinclair in his book, The Jungle, where he related the despair of immigrants working in Chicago’s stockyards and revealed the unsanitary conditions of the industry.

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The work of the muckrakers increased popular support for Progressivism and reform began in many areas.

Many Progressives thought that Christianity should be the basis of social reform. A Baptist minister named Walter Rauschenbusch blended ideas from German socialism and American Progressivism to form what he called the Social Gospel, which was a reform movement that sought to improve society through Christian principles. Practically, they called for changes in labor and big business.

An important goal of many Progressives was to improve the lives of the poor in cities. One approach was the settlement house, which was a community center that provided social services to the urban poor. (By social services we mean things like classes in English and provided child care and kindergartens for working mothers.)

A woman named Jane Addams became a leading figure in the settlement house movement. In 1889, Addams opened the Hull House. Its success inspired other college-educated, middle-class women to become social workers.

Religious organizations such as the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) also provided services to the urban poor. Their goal was to promote Christian values and they also offered classes and sports.

Another area of reform was protecting children and improving education. Leading this effort was a lawyer named Florence Kelley. Kelley helped:

Convince Illinois to ban child labor and other states soon followed

Form the National Child Labor Committee, which successfully lobbied the federal government to create the U.S. Children’s Bureau, which examined any issue that affected the health and welfare of children.

A number of states also passed laws that required children to attend school until a certain age.

There were heated debates about what children should learn and how they should learn it. This debate still rages today.

Another area of reform was helping industrial workers. In the early 1900s, the U.S. had the highest rate of industrial accidents in the world (30K a year died/ ½ million injured). Long hours, poor ventilation, hazardous fumes and unsafe machinery threatened workers’ health and lives.

In March 1911, a fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York City killed 146 young female workers. These workers died because managers had locked the exits to keep them from taking breaks. This shocked and outraged Americans; and it led to reform. New York passed laws to make workplaces safer, and other cities and states followed.

Progressives also realized that they needed to reform the political process in order to reform society.

They had a lot of success reforming election rules:

They established direct primaries (an election in which citizens themselves vote to select nominees for upcoming elections) on the state level.

They wanted to be sure that elected officials would follow citizens’ wishes so they worked for 3 other political reforms:

The initiative gave people the power to put a proposed new law directly on the ballot in the next election by collecting citizens’ signatures on a petition. This meant voters themselves could pass laws instead of waiting for politicians to act.

The referendum allowed citizens to approve or reject laws passed by a legislature.

The recall gave voters the power to remove public servants from office before their terms ended.

Popular Progressive politicians included Theodore Roosevelt (Governor of NY) and Woodrow Wilson (Governor of New Jersey).

Section 2-Women Make Progress

A big part of the Progressive Movement was improving the lives of women in America.

Some Progressives fought for better working conditions for women. They succeeded in several states. For example, a 1903 Oregon law capped women’s workdays at 10 hours. Five years later, Muller v. Oregon (1908), the Supreme Court reviewed this law and agreed that long working hours harmed women and their families.

Another goal of Progressives was to improve family life. They pushed for laws that could help mothers keep families healthy and safe. One focus was the temperance movement led by the Women’s Christian Temperance Union.

This group promoted temperance, the practice of never drinking alcohol.

They felt that alcohol led men to spend their earnings on liquor, neglect their families and abuse their wives.

Their work led to the passing of the 18th amendment, which outlawed the production and sale of alcohol.

A nurse named Margaret Sanger thought that family life and women’s health would improve if mothers had fewer children. In 1916, Sanger opened the country’s first birth-control clinic.

One of the boldest goals of Progressive women was suffrage, the right to vote.

They argued this was the only way to make sure that the government would protect children, foster education, and support family life.

In the 1890s, the national suffrage effort was reenergized by Carrie Chapman Catt, who traveled around the country urging women to join the National Women’s Suffrage Association (NAWSA).

In 1900, she became the president of NAWSA.

Catt called for action on 2 fronts: Some teams of women lobbied Congress to pass a constitutional amendment giving women the right to vote. Meanwhile others used the new referendum process to try and pass state suffrage laws. (By 1918, this approach had won 3 states).

Some women, known as social activists, grew more daring in their strategies to win the vote. Alice Paul, their best-known leader, believed drastic steps were needed to win the vote. In 1917, Paul formed the National Woman’s Party (NWP), which used public protest marches. (The NWP became the first group to march with picket signs outside the White House.)

When the U.S. entered WWI in 1917, NAWSA and the NWP heavily supported the war effort. This helped convince legislators to support a women’s suffrage amendment.

In June 1919, Congress approved the 19th Amendment (by one vote in the Senate!), which stated that the right to vote shall not be denied or abridged on account of sex. In August of 1920, Tennessee became the 36th state to ratify the amendment (also by one vote!) and it became official.

Carrie Chapman Catt and Alice Paul are both credited with the victory. The rival groups (NAWSA and NWP) both contributed to the triumph of the women’s suffrage movement.

Section 3-The Struggle Against Discrimination

The Progressive Era fought for equality on so many different levels, but it presented some contradictions—it was not for nonwhite or immigrant Americans.

Most Progressives were white, Protestant reformers who were indifferent or actively hostile to minorities. They tried to make the U.S. a model society by encouraging everyone to follow white, middle-class ways of life. For example:

Settlement houses and other civic groups played a prominent role in the Americanization efforts. While they taught immigrants English, their programs also tried to change how immigrants lived. They advised immigrants to dress like white middle-class Americans and pushed them to replace much of their culture because they believed that assimilating immigrants into American society would make them more loyal and moral citizens.

Remember… Booker T. Washington encouraged patience and urged blacks to move slowly toward racial progress. W.E.B. DuBois urged blacks to demand immediately all the rights guaranteed by the Constitution.

In 1905, DuBois and other leaders met at Niagra Falls. The Niagra Movement denounced the idea of gradual progress and said Booker T. Washington was too willing to compromise blacks’ basic rights. Despite their efforts, the Niagra Movement never grew stronger than a few hundred members. They realized they needed a stronger voice.

In the summer of 1908, a white mob in Springfield, Illinois attempted to lynch 2 black men being held at the city jail. When the mob learned the men had been moved to safety, they turned their anger on the black residents of the town. They killed 2 blacks and burned 40 homes.

This riot got the attention of a white reformers, making them realize that blacks needed help protecting their lives, winning the right to vote and securing their civil rights.

In 1909 they joined with black leaders to create the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

The NAACP aimed to help blacks be:

Physically free from forced, low-paid labor

Mentally free from ignorance

Politically free from disenfranchisement

Socially free from insult

The group’s strategy was to use the courts to challenge unfair laws.

NAACP leaders included blacks and whites: Ida B. Wells, Florence Kelley, Jane Addams

Section 4-Roosevelt’s Square Deal

In 1901, upon the death of President McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt became president of the U.S. After a string of weak and ineffective presidents, Roosevelt was a charismatic person who embraced Progressive ideals and ushered in a new era.

Roosevelt had gained a reputation for being smart, energetic and opinionated. He was also famous for forming the Rough Riders, which was the name given to the 1st U.S. Volunteer Cavalry in the Spanish-American War.

Roosevelt greatly expanded the power of the president. He used his office and its powers to convince Americans of the need for change and to push through his reform proposals. He called his program the Square Deal, and its goals were to keep the wealthy and powerful from taking advantage of small business owners and the poor.

Roosevelt lived out his Square Deal by taking on big businesses. For example:

He convinced Congress to establish the Department of Commerce and Labor to monitor businesses engaged in interstate commerce and to keep capitalists from abusing their power.

In 1887, Congress created the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) to oversee railroad charges for shipments that passed through more than one state. (However, by 1900, the Supreme Court had stripped most of the ICC’s power.)

Roosevelt pushed Congress to pass the Elkins Act in 1903, which imposed fines on railroads that gave special rates to favored shippers.

He also got Congress to pass the Hepburn Act, which gave the Interstate Commerce Commission strong enforcement powers. This law gave the government the power to set and limit shipping costs and it also set the maximum prices for ferries, bridge tolls and oil pipelines.

It did not take long for Roosevelt and his administration to earn a reputation as “trustbusters.” Roosevelt was not interested in bringing down all large companies. He saw a difference between “good trusts” and “bad trusts.” Big businesses could often be more efficient than small ones. He believed big businesses were only bad when they bullied smaller companies and cheated consumers. So he supported powerful corporations as long as they did business fairly.

Roosevelt also responded to the outrage following the publication of The Jungle. He had Congress pass the Meat Inspection Act which provided federal agents to inspect meat sold across state lines and required federal inspection of meat-processing plants. He also passed the Pure Food and Drug Act which placed the same controls on other foods and on medicines and banned the interstate shipment of impure food and the mislabeling of food and drugs.

Section 5-Wilson’s New Freedom

Woodrow Wilson, another popular Progressive politician, became president in 1912.

Wilson shaped his ideas about good government into a program he called the New Freedom. His plan was very similar to Roosevelt’s and would place strict government controls on corporations.

Wilson attacked what he called the “triple wall of privilege”—the tariffs, the banks and the trusts—that blocked businesses from being free.

Under Wilson, Congress:

Passed the 16th Amendment, which set up an income tax.

Passed the Federal Reserve Act (1913) which placed national banks under the control of a Federal Reserve Board, which set up regional banks to hold reserve funds from commercial banks. This system helps protect the American economy from having too much money in the hands of one person, bank or region.

Created the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) which had members who monitored business practices that might lead to a monopoly and they also watched out for false advertising or dishonest labeling.

Passed the Clayton Antitrust Act (1914), which strengthened earlier antitrust laws by spelling out those activities in which businesses could not engage.

Lasting legacy of Progressives:

Their political reforms left a lasting legacy on American politics (initiative, referendum, recall, 19th amendment…)

Their social reforms paved the way for future trends (the federal government grew to offer more protection for individuals’ lives)

The American economy benefited from the antitrust laws, Federal Reserve Board and other regulations on businesses)