The Progressive Era (1890 - 1920)

It seemed a triumphant moment when the United States catapulted to the top of the world’s industrial producers by the end of the nineteenth century. The bitter legacy of the Civil War seemed to have subsided (for whites, at least) as the country got down to the business of technological advancement, manufacturing efficiency, transportation revolution, and wealth creation. Yet many Americans fell behind as the nation raced toward the future; the poor seemed to be growing in number and forming a distinct urban underclass, crammed into slums and with little hope of advancement. At the same time, industrial titans amassed great fortunes unprecedented in American history; the gulf between "haves" and "have nots" had never seemed as wide. Predictable resentments on the part of the poor against the rich exploded into raw class antagonism with the revelation of acts of corruption and shady dealings on the part of some businessmen. Strikes often ended in violence; the specter of all-out class warfare loomed ominously over the country. Even as the United States surged toward a new century of industrial strength and dynamism, it seemed that the nation faced a grave danger of coming apart at the seams.

This was the world that the Progressives sought to reform. With a vested faith in their Christian principles and in the benefits of modernity, expertise, and technological advancement, the Progressives campaigned for a series of reforms they believed would stave off social revolution by allowing social progress for most citizens. They derived a sense of purpose from preserving their concept of American identity and tradition against the onslaught of changes that engulfed them, from the rise of big business to the demands of organized labor and the influx of foreign immigrants. The Progressives were a mixed group, coming from various classes and backgrounds, inspired by different motives and objectives. But throughout the Gilded Age of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, they exerted a profound influence on America’s politics, society, and economy.

Why Should I Care?

The history of the Progressive Era touches on central themes in American history: the power of the state, the size and influence of corporations, economic regulation and free market capitalism, working conditions and the quality of life for industrial workers, and the distribution of wealth. The political corruption and corporate power that characterized the post-Civil War period reached such a level by 1900 that many citizens felt that core American values were threatened. The cherished tenets of the modern world’s first republic—individualism, equal opportunity, meritocracy, and republican government itself—seemed under attack. Urban political machines used bribery and patronage to maintain an anti-democratic chokehold on power in municipalities across the country. Some industrial tycoons learned they could amass unprecedented profits not only through innovation and entrepreneurship but also through monopolization and exploitation of workers. In short, both democracy and free-market capitalism seemed, to many, to be imperiled by an epidemic of corruption, in which powerful special interests exploited their positions of influence in
government and business to enrich themselves at the expense of the majority of the American people.

The Progressive Era was the first period in American history when more workers labored in factories than on farms. The country had never before led the world in manufacturing and there had been no such thing as a billion-dollar business before U.S. Steel was capitalized in 1901. The country was wholly unprepared for the rapidity or the ramifications of its own economic and industrial growth. Average citizens quickly reacted against what many saw as the unjust influence of the wealthy and powerful on their lives, and they demanded government intervention on their behalf. But by 1900, Americans had already seen prior reform movements—from the National Labor Union to the Populist Party—fail for lack of organization and support, or because they were co-opted by mainstream politicians. Progressives were determined to do something to right the wrongs that plagued their society, and they achieved more success than any of their reformist predecessors. Yet their movement was an extremely complicated endeavor involving a diverse cross-section of people, and Progressivism ultimately (and predictably) left a mixed record of success and failure in its wake. This varied legacy should provide a telling history lesson for all future proponents of reform and progress.

Progressivism is the term applied to a variety of responses to the economic and social problems rapid industrialization introduced to America. Progressivism began as a social movement and grew into a political movement. The early progressives rejected Social Darwinism. In other words, they were people who believed that the problems society faced (poverty, violence, greed, racism, class warfare) could best be addressed by providing good education, a safe environment, and an efficient workplace. Progressives lived mainly in the cities, were college educated, and believed that government could be a tool for change. Social reformers, like Jane Addams, and journalists, like Jacob Riis and Ida Tarbel, were powerful voices for progressivism. They concentrated on exposing the evils of corporate greed, combating fear of immigrants, and urging Americans to think hard about what democracy meant. Other local leaders encouraged Americans to register to vote, fight political corruption, and let the voting public decide how issues should best be addressed (the initiative, the referendum, and the recall). On a national level, progressivism gained a strong voice in the White House when Theodore Roosevelt became president in 1901. TR believed that strong corporations were good for America, but he also believed that corporate behavior must be watched to ensure that corporate greed did not get out of hand (trust-busting and federal regulation of business). Progressivism ended with World War I when the horrors of war exposed people’s cruelty and many Americans associated President Woodrow Wilson’s use of progressive language (“the war to make the world safe for democracy”) with the war.