

2. THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

OVERVIEW OF VIDEO

In the early years of the 20th century, the United States suffered a backlash from the excesses of the so-called “Gilded Age” that followed the Civil War. During the terms of presidents Teddy Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and Woodrow Wilson the country was witness to so many reforms that this period of time came to be known as the Progressive Era.

Reacting to the extremes of wealth and poverty, the abuses of big businesses, and the influx of job seekers that caused overcrowding in large cities, journalists, farmers, and public figures began to stir up public opinion. Big business lost much of its stranglehold on the working classes, and women’s 72-year fight for the right to vote came to a climax. Former loyal followers began to withhold support from their political parties, and new parties such as the Progressives, Populists, and Socialists were formed, promising to solve the social and political issues that plagued the nation. It was during the Progressive Era that terms like “muckrakers,” “square deal,” and “suffrage” entered the national lexicon.



NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR HISTORY

(From The National Center for History in the Schools, 1996. Found at: <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/nchs/standards/>)

U.S. History—Era 7—Standard 1:

How Progressives and others addressed problems of industrial capitalism, urbanization, and political corruption.

1A—The student understands the origin of the Progressives and the coalitions they formed to deal with issues at the local and state levels.

1B—The student understands Progressivism at the national level.

1C—The student understands the limitations of Progressivism and the alternatives offered by various groups.

VOCABULARY

capitalism	muckraker	Populist	Socialist
civil service	mugwumps	Progressive	suffrage
federal reserve	natural resources	reform	temperance
lynching	patronage	segregation	trust

BEFORE THE VIDEO

Review the events that led up to the Progressive Era before watching the video. (These events are summarized briefly at the beginning of the episode.) Emphasize:

- ★ President Garfield’s assassination by a disgruntled party loyalist, and how the Pendleton Act ended the partisan policy of “To the victor belong the spoils” in handing out civil service jobs.
- ★ The coining of the term “mugwumps,” the issues surrounding the presidential election between Grover Cleveland and Benjamin Harrison of 1888, and the McKinley tariff bill.
- ★ The efforts to regulate big business culminating in the Sherman Antitrust Act, and the way the U.S. Treasury surpluses were handled first by President Cleveland and then by President Harrison.

“My goal is not to smash corporations, but to drive them out of politics.”

—Robert La Follette
Governor of
Wisconsin,
1900–1904

DURING THE VIDEO

There are natural PAUSE POINTS within this episode that separate the content into sections. Pause the video at these times for class discussion, using the following questions as springboards.

1. TIME CODE 9:30—Why do you think Wisconsin was called a “laboratory for reform”? What are some of the Progressive reforms that came about through reform movements in states?

ANSWER: “Battling Bob” La Follette, the governor of Wisconsin, instituted direct primaries, controls on railroad rates, a competitive civil service, and many other reforms. Teddy Roosevelt called this state a laboratory for reform because these measures were so successful that other states followed Wisconsin’s lead. Other states led to the reform movements of secret ballots, initiatives, recalls, and direct primaries.

2. TIME CODE 14:03—Why did some Progressives take up the cause for women’s suffrage? One of the approaches suffragettes took toward getting the vote was to go directly to the states for voting rights. How many states had given women the right to vote by 1914?

ANSWER: Progressives thought women would be more amenable to reform legislation than men. In addition to the four states mentioned in the video, seven more states, all west of the Mississippi, granted women the ballot by 1914.

3. TIME CODE 20:13—What traits in the youthful TR showed up in President Theodore Roosevelt? How did these traits help him to get reelected in 1904?

ANSWER: Teddy Roosevelt never lost his dynamic energy, his curiosity about a variety of interests, or his enthusiasm. He saw the Presidency as a “bully pulpit” from which to spread his ideas to the American public. His reputation as a trust-buster and fighter for governmental regulation of business endeared him to the American public and ensured his reelection.

AFTER THE VIDEO

The episode ends with an on-screen Video Quiz, a series of True/False questions (see page 12). This quiz may be copied for classroom use.

Video Quiz Answer Key

1. *F* 2. *F* 3. *T* 4. *F* 5. *F* 6. *T* 7. *T* 8. *T* 9. *T* 10. *F*

For in-depth discussion:

1. How did President Taft disappoint the reformers on conservation? On the tariff? How did this lead to the formation of the Progressive Party?
2. Why was the Federal Reserve System one of Wilson’s greatest achievements? What other financial reforms did he establish?
3. What were some of the limitations of the Progressive Era in relation to African Americans? Why was this area neglected in the rush toward sweeping reforms?

EXTENDING THE LESSON

Research topics for group or individual study:

1. **Time, Continuity, and Change.** Explain how the Progressives drew upon the American past to develop a notion of democracy responsive to the distinctive needs of an industrialized society. Note the lasting effects of the Progressives evident in America today.
2. **Viewpoints.** Identify the issues raised by various activist women in the first quarter of the 20th century. How did mainstream Progressives respond to them, particularly in the area of economic protectionism?
3. **Political Perspectives.** Compare and contrast the Populist, Socialist, and Progressive agendas for change.
4. **Presidential Focus.** Evaluate the presidential leadership of Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and Woodrow Wilson in terms of their leadership style and their effectiveness in obtaining passage of reform measures. How does the leadership style of the U.S. President today compare to that of each of these three presidents?

*“I’m as strong
as a bull
moose . . . and
ready for the
fight!”*

—Theodore Roosevelt,
1912



“... a man
could run his
hand over these
piles of meat
and sweep off
handfuls of the
dried dung of
rats.”

—Upton Sinclair,
1906
The Jungle

5. **History and Technology.** Investigate the anti-pollution movements begun in Pittsburgh in 1898, culminating in the creation of the Committee on Smoke Abatement. What was the cause of the air pollution in Pittsburgh and other large cities at that time? Who were the main figures in this battle, and what was the result?
6. **Signs of the Times.** Assess Progressive efforts to protect the rights of workers and consumers. What federal agencies came into being during this time? Describe the efforts Eugene V. Debs made toward labor reform, the end of capitalism, and the Socialist Party.
7. **Curriculum Connections (Literature).** Read and prepare a summary of the issues addressed in Upton Sinclair’s book *The Jungle*. This book won Sinclair fame and fortune and led to the implementation of the Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906. Compare and contrast the conditions described in the novel with other accounts of working conditions in Chicago’s meatpacking plants at that time.
8. **Your Region in History.** Evaluate Progressive reforms to expand democracy at the local and state levels. Did any big city in your state or region experience major reform in the early 1900s? Describe how it happened. List some Progressive measures passed by the legislature of your state between 1900 and 1914.
9. **Career exploration (Investigative Reporter).** Lincoln Steffens was the pioneer of investigative reporting, writing articles on misgovernment in the cities in his exposé *The Shame of the Cities*. Explain how the field of journalism laid the groundwork and spread the word for Progressive plans to reform American society. How is an investigative reporter different from other journalists? What career opportunities are available in the field of journalism today? What education and job skills are necessary for someone interested in this career?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Chambers, John Whiteclay III. *Tyranny of Change: America in the Progressive Era, 1890–1920*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000.

This book explores the latest scholarship about the social, cultural, political, and economic changes that produced modern America. He illuminates the experiences of blacks, Asians, Latinos, as well as other workingmen and women in the cities and countryside, as they struggled to improve their lives in a transformed economy.

Gurko, Miriam. *The Ladies of Seneca Falls: The Birth of the Women’s Rights Movement*. New York: Random House, 1987.

Traces the course of the women’s rights movement from its origin in the Seneca Falls Convention through the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment giving women the right to vote.

Morris, Edmund. *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*. New York: Modern Library, 2001. Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Theodore Roosevelt: naturalist, writer, hunter, cowboy, soldier, and politician, who, by the turn of the 20th century,

had built himself up from a frail, asthmatic boy to become the youngest and arguably the most charismatic president in U.S. history to that time.

Sinclair, Upton. *The Jungle*. New York: Modern Library, 2002.

Through the eyes of Jurgis Rudkus, a young Lithuanian immigrant, the author explores the workingman's lot at the turn of the 20th century: the backbreaking labor, the injustices of "wage-slavery," the bewildering chaos of urban life. It was a story so shocking that it launched a government investigation. First published in 1906.

Weinberg, Arthur and Lila (Eds.) *The Muckrakers*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001.

Gathering the most significant pieces published during the heyday of the muck-raking movement, the editors bring to life this unique era of exposure and self-examination. Includes concise commentary on the background of each piece's subject and the specific and long-range repercussions of its publication. The volume features the work of both journalists and fiction writers, including Ida Tarbell, Lincoln Steffens, Upton Sinclair, Ray Stannard Baker, Samuel Hopkins Adams, Thomas W. Lawson, Charles Edward Russell, and Mark Sullivan.

WEB RESOURCES

Note: Teachers should preview all sites to ensure they are age-appropriate for their students. At the time of publication, all URLs were valid.

An online resource examining the Chicago Haymarket Square riots:

<http://www.chicagohistory.org/dramas/index.htm>

The Library of Congress exhibit on women's suffrage:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/vfwhtml/vfwhome.html>

Excellent site that provides a comprehensive documentation of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire:

<http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/>

This site developed at Ohio State University looks at the issues and candidates of the pivotal 1912 presidential election:

<http://1912.history.ohio-state.edu/>

The Library of Congress online exhibit that maps the evolution of the American conservation movement:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amrvhtml/conshome.html>

VIDEO QUIZ: THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

Name _____

Date _____

Read each of the following statements and circle T if it is true, or F if it is false.

- T F 1. During the Progressive Era the work week was limited to thirty to forty hours per week.
- T F 2. Muckrakers were Republicans who refused to support their party's presidential candidate because they opposed reform.
- T F 3. Political groups of the early 1900s included Progressives, Populists, and Socialists.
- T F 4. The issues of the Progressive Era are no longer present today.
- T F 5. Jacob Riis led a reform in Wisconsin to help improve his state's government.
- T F 6. Jane Addams co-founded a settlement house to solve neighborhood problems.
- T F 7. In 1919, the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified, providing suffrage for women.
- T F 8. Upton Sinclair brought the horror of Chicago's meatpacking factories to the public's attention.
- T F 9. Woodrow Wilson became president as a result of Taft and Roosevelt's battle with one another.
- T F 10. One of the main reforms of the Progressive Era was the successful improvement of American civil rights.