**The Progressive Era**

During the period known as the Progressive Era (1890s to about 1920) the U.S. government became increasingly activist in both domestic and foreign policy. Progressive, that is, reform-minded, political leaders sought to extend their vision of a just and rational order to all areas of society and some, indeed, to all reaches of the globe.

**America Looks Outward**

During the 1890s, U.S. foreign policy became aggressively activist. As American industrial productivity grew, many reformers urged the need for foreign markets. Others held that the United States had a mission to carry Anglo-Saxon culture to all of humankind, to spread law and order and American civilization. In 1895 the United States intervened bluntly in the Venezuela Boundary Dispute between Venezuela and imperial Britain, warning that, under the Monroe Doctrine, American force might be used if Venezuela were not treated equitably. A Cuban revolution against Spain, begun in 1895, finally led to the Spanish-American War (1898), undertaken to free Cuba. From that war the United States emerged with a protectorate over Cuba and an island empire consisting of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam. The United States also annexed the Hawaii in 1898, completing a bridge to the markets of the Far East. In 1900 the American government announced the Open Door Policy, pledging to support continued Chinese independence as well as equal access for all nations to China's markets.

William McKinley's assassination brought Theodore Roosevelt to the presidency in 1901. A proud patriot, he sought to make the United States a great power in the world. In 1903 he aided Panama in becoming independent of Colombia, then secured from Panama the right for the United States to build and control a canal through the isthmus. In 1904, in the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, he asserted the right of the United States to intervene in the internal affairs of Western Hemisphere nations to prevent "chronic wrongdoing." The following year his good offices helped end the Russo-Japanese War. Having much strengthened the navy, Roosevelt sent (1907) the Great White Fleet on a spectacular round-the-world cruise to display American power.

**Progressivism at Home**

Meanwhile, the Progressive Era was also underway in domestic politics. City governments were transformed, becoming relatively honest and efficient; social workers labored to improve slum housing, health, and education; and in many states reform movements democratized, purified, and humanized government. Under Roosevelt the national government strengthened or created regulatory agencies that exerted increasing influence over business enterprise: the Hepburn Act (1906) reinforced the Interstate Commerce Commission; the Forest Service, under Gifford Pinchot from 1898 to 1910, guided lumbering companies in the conservation of-and more rational and efficient exploitation of-woodland resources; the Pure Food and Drug Act (1906) attempted to protect consumers from fraudulent labeling and adulteration of products. Beginning in 1902, Roosevelt also used the Justice Department and lawsuits (or the threat of them) to mount a revived assault on monopoly under the Sherman Anti-Trust Law. William Howard Taft, his successor as president (1909-13), drew back in his policies, continuing only the antitrust campaign. He approved passage of the Sixteenth Amendment (the income tax amendment, 1913), however; in time it would transform the federal government by giving it access to enormous revenues.

Republicans were split in the election of 1912. The regular nomination went to Taft, and a short-lived Progressive party was formed to run Theodore Roosevelt. Democrat Woodrow Wilson (1913-21) was therefore able to win the presidency. Attacking corporate power, he won a drastic lowering of the tariff (1913) and establishment of a Tariff Commission (1916); creation of the Federal Reserve System (1913) to supervise banking and currency; a broadened antimonopoly program under the Clayton Anti-Trust Act (1914); control over the hours of labor on the railroads (Adamson Act, 1916); and creation of a body to ensure fair and open competition in business (Fair Trade Commission, 1914).

During the Progressive Era, southern governments imposed a wide range of Jim Crow laws on black people, using the rationale that such legalization of segregation resulted in a more orderly, systematic electoral system and society. Many of the steps that had been taken toward racial equality during the Reconstruction period were thus reversed. The federal government upheld the principle of racial segregation in the U.S. Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), as long as blacks were provided with "separate but equal" facilities. In the face of the rigidly segregated society that confronted them, blacks themselves were divided concerning the appropriate course of action. Since 1895, Booker T. Washington had urged that blacks should not actively agitate for equality, but should acquire craft skills, work industriously, and convince whites of their abilities. W. E. B. Du Bois insisted instead (in *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903) that black people ceaselessly protest Jim Crow laws, demand education in the highest professions as well as in crafts, and work for complete social integration. In 1910 the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded to advance these ideals.

**Intervention and World War**

President Taft continued to stress the economic aspects of Roosevelt's interventionist spirit. Under Taft's foreign policy (called dollar diplomacy) U.S. firms were encouraged to increase investments in countries bordering the Caribbean in the hope that the American economic presence would ensure political stability there. President Wilson went a step further, seeking not simply to maintain order, but to advance democracy and self-rule. In 1915 he sent troops into Haiti to put an end to the chaos of revolution-and to protect U.S. investments there-and in 1916 he did the same in the Dominican Republic; the two countries were made virtual protectorates of the United States. With Nicaragua he achieved the same end by diplomacy. In hope of tumbling the Mexican dictator Victoriano Huerta, Wilson at first denied him diplomatic recognition, then in April 1914 sent troops to occupy the Mexican port city of Veracruz and keep from Huerta its import revenues. The Mexicans were deeply offended, and in November 1914, Wilson withdrew American forces. The bloody civil war that racked Mexico until 1920 sent the first large migration of Mexicans, perhaps a million people, into the United States.

After the outbreak of World War I in August 1914, Wilson sought vainly to bring peace. In early 1917, however, Germany's unrestricted use of submarine attacks against neutral as well as Allied shipping inflamed American opinion for war. Wilson decided that if the United States was to have any hope of influencing world affairs, it was imperative that it enter the war and fight to protect democracy against what he called German autocracy.

America's entry into the war (April 1917) was the climax of the Progressive Era: Wilson's aim was the extension of democracy and the creation of a just world order. In January 1918 he issued his Fourteen Points as a proposed basis for peace: freedom of the seas and removal of all barriers to trade; an end to secret diplomacy; general disarmament; self-government for the submerged nationalities in the German and Austro-Hungarian empires; and a league of nations. The addition of more than a million American troops to the Allied armies turned the balance against the Germans in 1918, and an armistice on November 11 ended the war. At the Paris Peace Conference, however, Wilson failed in much of his program, for the other Allies were not interested in a "peace without victory." The British would not agree to freedom of the seas; tariffs did not tumble; self-determination was often violated; key negotiations were kept secret; but in the end Wilson obtained his greatest objective, establishment of the League of Nations to provide collective security against future aggression. Many at home, however, preferred to return to America's traditional isolation from world affairs. When Wilson tried imperiously to force the Senate to accept the entire treaty, he failed. The United States never became a member of the League of Nations.

[**http://www.scholastic.com/browse/subarticle.jsp?id=1672**](http://www.scholastic.com/browse/subarticle.jsp?id=1672)

**The Progressive Era**

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**3**

**Leaders in the Progressive Era**

The national political leaders included Theodore Roosevelt, Robert M. La Follette, Sr., and Charles Evans Hughes on the Republican side, and William Jennings Bryan, Woodrow Wilson and Al Smith on the Democratic side. Many others, from politicians to social activists, business owners to philosophers, preachers to reporters, contributed to the Progressive movement. The following are examples of a few major figures:

Following the assassination of President McKinley in September 1901, Theodore Roosevelt, at age 42, succeeded to the office, becoming the youngest United States President in history. ***Theodore Roosevelt*** (October 27, 1858-January 6, 1919) Leading his party and country into the Progressive Era, he championed his "Square Deal" domestic policies, promising the average citizen fairness, breaking of trusts, regulation of railroads, and pure food and drugs. Making conservation a top priority, he established a myriad of new national parks, forests, and monuments intended to preserve the nation's natural resources. In foreign policy, he focused on Central America, where he began construction of the Panama Canal. His successful efforts to end the Russo-Japanese War won him the 1906 Nobel Peace Prize.

***Susan B. Anthony*** (February 15, 1820-March 13, 1906) was an American social reformer and feminist who played a pivotal role in the women's suffrage movement. In 1851, she met Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who became her lifelong friend and co-worker in social reform activities, primarily in the field of women's rights. In 1852, they founded the New York Women's State Temperance Society after Anthony was prevented from speaking at a temperance conference because she was a woman. In 1878, Anthony and Stanton arranged for Congress to be presented with an amendment giving women the right to vote. Popularly known as the Anthony Amendment and introduced by Sen. Aaron A. Sargent (R-CA), it became the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920.

[***Upton Sinclair***](https://www.boundless.com/u-s-history/definition/upton-sinclair/) (September 20, 1878-November 25, 1968) was an American author who wrote nearly 100 books and other works across a number of genres. In 1906, Sinclair acquired particular fame for his classic muckraking novel, The Jungle, which exposed conditions in the U.S. meat packing industry, causing a public uproar that contributed in part to the passage a few months later of the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act. In 1919, he published The Brass Check, a muckraking exposé of American journalism that publicized the issue of yellow journalism and the limitations of the “free press” in the United States. Four years after publication of The Brass Check, the first code of ethics for journalists was created. Writing during the Progressive Era, Sinclair describes the world of industrialized American from both the working man's point of view and the industrialist. Novels like King Coal (1917), The Coal War (published posthumously), Oil! (1927) and The Flivver King (1937) describe the working conditions of the coal, oil and auto industries at the time.

**4**