CHAPTER 28

Progressivism and the Republican Roosevelt, 1901–1912

# focus questions

1. What were the roots of the progressive movement in the United States?

2. Describe how the Muller and Lochner cases contributed to or hurt the progressive movement.

3. What were the three C’s of Roosevelt’s political platform? How were these implemented?

4. Explain the differences between Taft and Roosevelt. How did this difference split the Republican Party in the election of 1912?

5. What was Taft’s dollar diplomacy?

# Chapter Themes

**Theme:** The strong progressive movement successfully demanded that the powers of government be applied to solving the economic and social problems of industrialization. Progressivism first gained strength at the city and state level, and then achieved national influence in the moderately progressive administrations of Theodore Roosevelt.

**Theme:** Roosevelt’s hand-picked successor, William H. Taft, aligned himself with the Republican Old Guard, causing Roosevelt to break away and lead a progressive third-party crusade.

chapter summary

The progressive movement of the early twentieth century became the greatest reform crusade since abolitionism. Inaugurated by Populists, socialists, social gospelers, female reformers, and muckraking journalists, progressivism attempted to use governmental power to correct the many social and economic problems associated with industrialization.

Progressivism began at the city and state level, and first focused on political reforms before turning to correct a host of social and economic evils. Women played a particularly important role in galvanizing progressive social concern. Seeing involvement in such issues as reforming child labor, poor tenement housing, and consumer causes as a wider extension of their traditional roles as wives and mothers, female activists brought significant changes in both law and public attitudes in these areas.

At the national level, Roosevelt’s Square Deal used the federal government as an agent of the public interest in the conflicts between labor and corporate trusts. Rooseveltian progressivism also acted on behalf of consumer and environmental concerns. Conservatism became an important public crusade under Roosevelt, although sharp disagreements divided preservationists from those who favored the multiple use of nature. The federal emphasis on rational use of public resources generally worked to benefit large enterprises and to inhibit action by the smaller users.

Roosevelt personally selected Taft as his political successor, expecting him to carry out “my policies.” But Taft proved to be a poor politician who was captured by the conservative Republican Old Guard and rapidly lost public support. The conflict between Taft and pro-Roosevelt progressives finally split the Republican Party, with Roosevelt leading a third-party crusade in the 1912 election.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* Analyze the roots of progressivism and the various elements that made up the progressive coalition. Show particularly the role of muckraking journalists and female reformers in arousing public opinion in favor of reform.

REFERENCE: William L. O’Neill, *The Progressive Years: America Comes of Age* (1975).

* Examine the critical role of women in progressive reform, and show how their efforts were largely—although not entirely—focused and successful in areas that seemed consistent with their social roles as protectors and nurturers of the family.

REFERENCE: Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform* (1991).

* Discuss consumer protection and environmental conservation as examples of middle-class concerns that progressivism and progressive political leaders such as Roosevelt promoted.

REFERENCES: Elmo Richardson, *The Politics of Conservation* (1968); James Harvey Young, *Pure Food: Securing the Federal Food and Drug Act of 1906* (1989).

* Discuss the contrast between Roosevelt’s regulatory New Nationalism and Wilson’s more libertarian New Freedom in the campaign of 1912.

REFERENCE: Morton Keller, *Regulating a New Economy: Public Policy and Economic Change in America, 1900–1933* (1990).

# for further interest: additional class topics

* Consider one city or state as a case study in the actual conflicts and achievements of progressivism. Cincinnati or Cleveland are good urban examples, and Wisconsin is the best state example.
* Use excerpts from the work of some muckrakers, such as Lincoln Steffens or Ida Tarbell, to show how journalists aroused public concern and promoted involvement in progressive reform. (See boxed quote on page 641.)
* Discuss Roosevelt as both personality and progressive political leader.
* Examine the rise of conservationism as a national concern to (a) Roosevelt’s concern to preserve rugged American values and (b) the increasing needs of an urban populace for escape and revival in nature.
* Conduct a class debate on a topic such as American Women Should Have the Right to Vote. Primary source readings will come from the following book: *Opposing Viewpoints in American History—Volume II: From Reconstruction to the Present*, San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 1996. Another good source of debate topics is Larry Madaras and James M. SoRelle, *Taking Sides—Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in American History, Volume II: Reconstruction to the Present*, Connecticut: McGraw-Hill, 2000.
* Have students read selections from Herbert Croly’s *The Promise of American Life* (1909). A systematic study of American culture at the beginning of the twentieth-century, Croly envisions a society moving away from the individualistic liberalism to a more organized and planned society.
* Have students read Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906). Use the novel as a way to explore the ways in which literature can bring about real change within a society. How accurately does literature have to represent the truth—how accurate was Sinclair’s depiction of the meat-packing industry, and what kinds of changes took place as a result of Sinclair’s novel?

# character sketches

## Lincoln Steffens (1866–1936)

Steffens was the muckraking journalist who helped stir the nation to progressive reform and, in the 1930s, wrote an influential autobiography claiming to show the limits of progressivism.

After growing up in a moderately affluent San Francisco family, Steffens spent some years randomly studying and traveling in Europe. He had difficulty finding a career, but a young German student whom he had met in Europe died and left Steffens his substantial estate, enabling Steffens to live independently and pursue unconventional journalism.

Steffens’s *The Shame of the Cities* was so shocking because he used massive documentation to supposedly demonstrate that practically everyone was not merely corrupt but abusing power for his or her private interests. After a disillusioning fling with Christian reform, Steffens turned toward tougher movements and wrote favorably about revolutionary Mexico, Mussolini’s Italy, and Lenin’s Russia. When he returned from Russia in 1919, he said, “I have seen the future, and it works.”

**Quote:** “I was not the original muckraker—the prophets of the Old Testament were ahead of me.… I did not intend to be a muckraker; I did not know that I was one till President Roosevelt picked the name out of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* and pinned it on us.” (Autobiography, 1931)

REFERENCE: Justin Kaplan, *Lincoln Steffens: A Biography* (1974).

## Ida Tarbell (1857–1944)

Tarbell was the muckraking journalist and reformer whose critical articles on Standard Oil helped bring about the breakup of Rockefeller’s giant petroleum trust.

Tarbell’s father made wooden kegs for the infant Pennsylvania oil industry. When she was researching the Standard Oil articles, she learned that one of her father’s business partners had committed suicide after being squeezed out by Rockefeller oil interests.

Originally an ardent feminist who traveled to France to write about the role of women in the French Revolution, Tarbell later turned against feminism and suffragism, perhaps because she felt that feminism had deprived her of marriage and motherhood.

She was a very popular biographer and lecturer and wrote best-selling books about Lincoln, Napoleon, and Madame Roland. Despite her sharp criticism of Rockefeller, she admired much of American business and looked favorably on Henry Ford and scientific management.

**Quote:** “[Rockefeller] has never lowered [the price of oil] a point if it could be avoided, and in times of public stress he has taken advantage of the very misery of the poor to demand higher prices.… Does it pay the public to trust the control of a great necessity of life to such a man?” (1904)

REFERENCE: Kathleen Brady, *Ida Tarbell: Portrait of a Muckraker* (1984).

## Upton Sinclair (1878–1968)

Sinclair was the reform-minded journalist and novelist whose works helped inspire consumer protection and other progressive movements.

Raised in an aristocratic southern family, impoverished by the Civil War, Sinclair moved to the Lower East Side of New York and worked his way through the City College of New York by writing hack journalism.

He was an enthusiast who got carried away by almost any cause with which he came in contact. Sinclair spent months in the stockyards researching *The Jungle* and donated the proceeds to a utopian commune. He founded the Intercollegiate Socialist Society with Jack London and wrote many more muckraking novels attacking financiers (*The Moneychangers*), coal mines (*King Coal*), the petroleum industry (*Oil!*), and so on. By age eighty-four, he had written seventy-nine books.

In 1934, he ran for governor of California on a tax and pension program called EPIC (End Poverty In California). The campaign was unsuccessful but attracted much national attention.

**Quote:** “And as for the other men who work in tank rooms full of steam, where there were open vats near the level of the floor, their peculiar trouble was that they fell into the vats; and when they were fished out, there was never enough of them left to be worth exhibiting—sometimes they would be overlooked for a day, till all but the bones of them had gone out to the world as Durham’s Pure Beef Lard.” (*The Jungle,* 1906)

REFERENCE: Leon Harris, *Upton Sinclair: American Rebel* (1975).

## Robert M. La Follette (1855 – 1925)

Nicknamed “Fighting Bob,” Robert La Follette was an American politician who served in the U.S. Congress, the U.S. Senate, and as governor of Wisconsin. He ran for the presidency in the election of 1924, accepting the nomination of the Progressive Party.

La Follette was best known for his strong opposition to American involvement in World War I. He also supported child labor laws, social security, women’s suffrage, and other progressive reforms.

**Quote:** “It is well for us to remember that war is always cruel; that its iron tread means destruction and devastation, whether its march is across Europe or from Atlanta to the sea; that war arouses all the fiercest human passions; that there are always cases of brutality and outrage—and that usually there is quite as much of it on one side as upon the other. … Believing in democracy, in the right of self-government—ready to defend the precious heritage of our own sovereignty—let us here and now resolve and declare that we will never permit the armed forces of the United States to be used to despoil our sister republics of their property, interfere with their right to govern themselves according to their own standards or violate their sovereignty—as sacred to them as American sovereignty is to us. … I am not an extremist, I do not say there may not be supreme principles for which men must fight to the death as a last resort. But I do believe that as organized society in its slow evolution has developed more rational means of settling individual differences than brute force, so must the nations of the world ultimately find other ways of deciding their disagreements than war.” (*The Political Philosophy of Robert M. La Follette*, 1920)

REFERENCES: Robert M. La Follette, *A Personal Narrative of Political Experiences* (1913); Nancy C. Unger, *Fighting Bob La Follette—The Righteous Reformer* (2000).

# questions for class discussion

1. Why did the progressives believe that strong government action was the only way to tackle the social and economic problems of industrialization? How did this approach differ from traditional American emphasis on voluntary solutions to social problems?

2. Why were women so critical to the successes of the progressive movement? Were there any weaknesses in their ideas and approaches to social reform? (See boxed quote on page 645 as well as section Examining the Evidence on page 648.)

3. Why was Roosevelt such a popular progressive leader? In what ways did he sound like a more ardent reformer than he really was? (See boxed quotes on pages 649 and 651.)

4. To what extent was progressivism really a middle-class reform effort that did not really reflect the interests or concerns of the poor and working classes it claimed to benefit? (See Thinking Globally section on pages 642-643.) How did some of the progressive concern for conservation and environment reflect the perspectives of more affluent Americans?

5. Did the progressive movement make any long-lasting contributions to American society?

**CONTENDING VOICES: THEODORE ROOSEVELT VS. IDA TARBELL**

**Questions for Class Discussion**

1. How did Roosevelt analyze the activities of the muckraking journalists in 1906?

2. How did muckraker Tarbell analyze Roosevelt’s comments?

# makers of america: THE ENVIRONMENTALISTS

## Questions for Class Discussion

1. What really caused the sudden upsurge in concern for preserving America’s environment at the beginning of the twentieth century? To what extent was this concern motivated by nostalgia for an older America, and to what extent by a desire to preserve nature and natural resources for future generations?

2. What were the underlying issues in the debate between rational use environmentalists and the more thoroughgoing preservationists? How did the rise of modern ecological science tilt that debate?

## Suggested Student Exercises

* Examine a comprehensive map of all of American’s national parks, wildlife preserves, and national forests, along with the dates they were established. See what patterns can be discovered regarding the relationship between areas set aside for preservation and recreation and changing American society (for example, where and when were preserved areas established near to major urban populations, and where and when were very remote lands set aside).
* Examine the ideas and actions of some of the major national figures who shaped American environmental awareness, for example, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, Ansel Adams, Rachel Carson, or others. Compare and contrast their different approaches to nature and preservation, and consider what tensions as well as shared outlooks have shaped the environmental movement.

# varying viewpoints

**Expanding the View**

* Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (1955).

A view of progressives as backward-looking individualists:

“Progressivism, at its heart, was an effort to realize familiar and traditional ideals under novel circumstances.… At the core of their conception of politics was a figure quite as old-fashioned as the figure of the little competitive entrepreneur who represented the most commonly accepted economic ideal. This old-fashioned character was the Man of Good Will, the same innocent, bewildered, bespectacled, and mustached figure we see in the cartoons today labeled John Q. Public—a white collar or small business voter-taxpayer with perhaps a modest home in the suburbs.”

* Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism* (1963).

A view of progressivism as a victory for business conservatism:

“The New Freedom, in its concrete legislative aspects, was little more than the major demands of politically oriented big businessmen. They had defined the issues, and it was they who managed to provide the direction for change.… In its larger outlines it was they who gave progressivism its essential character. By the end of 1914 they had triumphed, and to the extent that the new laws were vague and subject to administrative definitions by boards and commissions, they were to totally dominate the extensive reign of political capitalism that had been created in the United States by 1915.”

* Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (1967).

A view of progressives as forward-looking bureaucrats:

“Experts in administration supported by a variety of professionals sought solutions to the city’s problems through proper procedures and continuous enforcement.… A blend of many ideas, the new political theory borrowed its most revolutionary qualities from bureaucratic thought.… Trained, professional servants would staff a government broadly and continuously involved in society’s operations.… This revolutionary approach to government, incomplete as it was, eventually dominated the politics of the early twentieth century.”

# Questions for Class Discussion

. According to each of these historians, who were the progressives, and what were their central values?

. How would each of these historians relate the progressive constituency to the basic progressive approach to government?

. How would each interpret the progressive attack on political bosses and the establishment of independent regulatory commissions to monitor businesses such as the railroads, meat packing, and banking?