It was late Saturday afternoon on March 25, 1911, but at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in New York City, hundreds of young women and a few men were still at work. In the eighth- and ninth-floor workrooms, the clatter of sewing machines filled the air. Suddenly fire broke out. Feeding on bolts of cloth, the fire soon turned the upper floors into an inferno. Panicked workers rushed for the doors, only to find some of them locked. Other doors opened inward (a fire-law violation) and were jammed shut by the crush of people trying to get out.

There were a few miraculous escapes. Young Pauline Grossman crawled to safety across a narrow alleyway when three male employees formed a human bridge. As others tried to cross, however, the weight became too great, and the three men fell to their deaths. Dozens of workers leaped from the windows to certain death on the sidewalk below.

Immigrant parents searched all night for their daughters; newspaper reporters could hear “a dozen pet names in Italian and Yiddish rising in shrill agony above the deeper moan of the throng.” Sunday’s headlines summed up the grim count: 141 dead.

The Triangle fire offered particularly horrifying evidence of what many citizens had recognized for years. Industrialization, for all its benefits, had taken a heavy toll on American life. For immigrants in unsafe factories and unhealthy slums, life often meant a desperate cycle of poverty, exhausting

CHAPTER OUTLINE

- Progressives and Their Ideas
- State and Local Progressivism
- Progressivism and Social Control
- Blacks, Women, and Workers Organize
- National Progressivism Phase I: Roosevelt and Taft, 1901–1913
- National Progressivism Phase II: Woodrow Wilson, 1913–1917
labor, and early death. In the aftermath of the Triangle Shirtwaist factory tragedy, New York passed a series of laws regulating factories and protecting workers.

Industrialization, urban growth, and the rise of great corporations affected all Americans. A new middle class of white-collar workers and urban professionals gained political influence. As middle-class women joined clubs and reform organizations, they became powerful voices in addressing the social issues of the day.

From this volatile social stew erupted a wave of reformist energy that came to be called the progressive movement. Historians once portrayed this movement rather simplistically as a triumph of “the people” over evil corporations. More recent historians have complicated this picture, noting the role of special-interest groups (including big business) in promoting specific reforms, as well as the movement’s darker side; its failures, and, above all, its rich diversity.

The progressive movement was a response to vast changes after the Civil War that had obliterated the familiar contours of an older, simpler America. Whatever their specific agendas, all progressives grappled with the new world of corporations, factories, cities, and immigrants. In contrast to the agrarian-based populists (see Chapter 20), progressives concentrated on the social effects of the new urban-industrial order.

Emerging in the 1890s at the city and state levels, a dizzying array of organizations, many led by women, pursued varied reform objectives. Under the influence of journalists, novelists, religious leaders, social thinkers, and politicians, these grass-roots efforts evolved into a powerful national movement. At the federal level, the reform spirit gripped Congress and the White House. By 1917, when reform gave way to war, America’s political and social landscape had been transformed. New organization, new laws, and new regulatory agencies had arisen to grapple with the consequences of helter-skelter urbanization, industrial expansion, and corporate growth. The progressives could be maddeningly moralistic. They had their blind spots (especially on such subjects as immigration and race), and their reforms didn’t always work out as planned. But, on balance, their imposing record of achievement left a powerful legacy for future generations to build upon.

This chapter focuses on five major questions:

- How did intellectuals, novelists, and journalists help lay the groundwork for the progressive movement?
- What problems of the new urban-industrial order particularly disturbed progressives, and how did they address these problems?
- How did progressive reform affect ordinary Americans, including workers, women, immigrants, city dwellers, and African Americans?
- As progressivism emerged as a national movement, which politicians and issues proved most important?
- How did progressivism change Americans’ view of the proper role of government?

**Progressives and Their Ideas**

As the twentieth century dawned, local groups across the nation grappled with the problems of the new urban-industrial order. Workers protested unsafe and exhausting jobs. Expert commissions investigated social and economic conditions. Women’s clubs turned from cultural uplift to reform. Intellectuals challenged the ideological foundations of a business-dominated social order, and journalists publicized municipal corruption and industrialism’s human toll. Reform gained momentum as activists tried to make government more democratic, eradicate dangerous conditions in cities and factories, and curb corporate power.
Looking back on all these efforts, historians grouped them under a single label: “the progressive movement.” In fact, “progressivism” was never a single movement. It is perhaps best understood as a widespread yearning for reform and an exciting sense of new social possibilities. This yearning found many outlets and focused on a wide array of issues.

**The Many Faces of Progressivism**

Who were the progressives, and what reforms did they pursue? To answer these questions, we need to look at the pattern of urban growth in the early twentieth century. Along with immigration, a rapidly growing middle class transformed U.S. cities. From the men and women of this class—most of whom were native-born, white, and Protestant—came many of the leaders and foot soldiers of the progressive movement.

From 1900 to 1920, the white-collar work force jumped from 5.1 million to 10.5 million—more than double the growth rate of the labor force as a whole. As industry grew, the number of secretaries, civil engineers, and people in advertising increased phenomenally. This white-collar class included corporate technicians and desk workers; the owners and managers of local businesses; and professionals such as lawyers, physicians, and teachers. Existing professional societies such as the American Bar Association grew rapidly. Scores of new professional groups arose, from the American Association of Advertising Agencies (1917) to the American Association of University Professors (1915). The age of organization had dawned, bringing new professional allegiances, a new emphasis on certification and licensing, and in general a more standardized, routinized society. For many middle-class Americans, membership in a national professional society provided a sense of identity that might earlier have come from neighborhood, church, or political party affiliations. Ambitious, well educated, and valuing social stability, the members of this new middle class were eager to make their influence felt.

For middle-class women, the city offered both opportunities and frustrations. Young unmarried women often became schoolteachers, secretaries, typists, clerks, and telephone operators. The number of women in such white-collar jobs surged from 949,000 in 1900 to 3.4 million in 1920. The ranks of college-educated women, although still small, more than tripled in this twenty-year period.

But for middle-class married women caring for homes and children, city life could mean isolation and frustration. The divorce rate crept up from one in twelve marriages in 1900 to one in nine by 1916. As we shall see, many middle-class women joined female white-collar workers and college graduates in leading a resurgent women's movement. Cultural commentators wrote nervously of the “New Woman.”

The progressive reform impulse drew on the energies of men and women of this new urban middle class. The initial reform impetus came not from political parties but from women's clubs, settlement houses, and private groups with names like the Playground Association of America, the National Child Labor Committee, the National Consumers' League, and the American League for Civic Improvement. In this era of organizations, the reform movement, too, drew strength from organized interest groups.

Important as it was, the native-born middle class was not the only force behind progressivism. On issues affecting factory workers and slum dwellers, the urban-immigrant political machines—and workers themselves—provided critical support and often took the initiative. Some corporate leaders helped shape regulatory measures in ways to serve their interests.

What, then, was progressivism? At the most basic level, it was a series of political and cultural responses to industrialization and its by-products: immigration, urban growth, the rise of corporate power, and widening class divisions. In contrast to populism, progressivism's strength lay in the cities, and it enlisted many more journalists, academics, social theorists, and urban dwellers generally. Finally, most progressives were reformers, not radicals. They wished to remedy the social ills of industrial capitalism, not uproot the system itself.

But which parts of the urban-industrial order most needed attention, and what remedies were required? These key questions stirred deep disagreements, and the progressive impulse spawned an array of activities that sometimes overlapped and sometimes diverged. Many reformers wanted stricter regulation of business, from local transit companies to the almighty trusts. Others focused on protecting workers and the urban poor. Still others tried to reform the structure of government, especially at the municipal level. Finally, some reformers, viewing immigration, urban immorality, and social disorder as the central problems, fought for immigration restriction or various social-control strategies. All this contributed to the mosaic of progressive reform.

Central to progressivism was the confidence that all social problems could be solved through careful study and organized effort. Progressives had a high regard for
science and expert knowledge. Scientific and technological expertise had produced the new industrial order, and progressives tended to believe that such expertise would also solve the social problems spawned by industrialism. Progressives marshaled research data, expert opinion, and statistics to support their various causes.

Some historians have portrayed progressivism as an organizational stage that all modernizing societies pass through. This is a useful perspective, provided we remember that it was not an automatic process unfolding independently of human will. Eloquent leaders, gifted journalists, activist workers, and passionate reformers all played a role. Human emotion—whether indignation over child labor, intense moralism, fear of the alien, hatred of unbridled corporate power, or raw political ambition—drove the movement forward.

**Intellectuals Offer New Social Views**

A group of early-twentieth-century thinkers helped build progressivism’s ideological scaffolding. As we have seen, some Gilded Age intellectuals had argued that Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution justified brutal, unrestrained economic competition. In the 1880s and 1890s, sociologist Lester Ward, utopian novelist Edward Bellamy, and leaders of the settlement-house and Social Gospel movements had all attacked this harsh version of Social Darwinism (see Chapters 18 and 19). This attack intensified as the twentieth century opened.

One of the sharpest critics of the new business order was economist Thorstein Veblen, who was reared by frugal Norwegian-American parents on a farm in Minnesota. In *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), Veblen mercilessly satirized the lifestyle of the newly rich captains of industry. Dissecting their habits the way an anthropologist might study the customs of an exotic tribal people, he argued that they built showy mansions, threw elaborate parties, and otherwise engaged in “conspicuous consumption” to flaunt their wealth and assert their claims to superiority.

While Veblen scorned the “wastemanship” of the business class, he shared the era’s admiration for efficiency, science, and technical expertise. In later works, he argued that workers and engineers, shaped by the discipline of the machine, were better fitted to lead society than the nation’s corporate leaders.

Other intellectuals built a case for reform. Harvard philosopher William James, in an influential 1907 essay called “Pragmatism,” argued that truth emerges not from abstract theorizing but from the experience of coping with life’s realities. James emphasized the fluidity of knowledge and the importance of practical action. In this way, he contributed to the progressives’ skepticism toward the conventional wisdom of conservatives, and to their confidence that social conditions could be bettered through intelligent and purposeful action.

No thinker better captured this faith in the power of new ideas to transform society than Herbert Croly. The
son of New York journalists and reformers, Croly grew up in a cosmopolitan world where social issues were hotly debated. In *The Promise of American Life* (1909), he called for an activist government of the kind advocated by Alexander Hamilton, the first secretary of the Treasury, in the 1790s. But rather than serving only the interests of the business class, as Hamilton had proposed, Croly argued that this activist government should promote the welfare of all citizens.

To build support for this enlarged view of government, Croly argued, intellectuals must play a key role. In 1914 he founded the *New Republic* magazine to promote progressive ideas.

Few intellectuals argued more effectively for organized efforts to address the social by-products of industrialization than the settlement-house leader Jane Addams. In her books *Democracy and Social Ethics* (1902) and *Twenty Years at Hull House* (1910), Addams rejected the idea that unrestrained competition offered the best path to social progress. Instead, she argued, in a complex, modern industrial society, each individual’s well-being depends on the well-being of all. Addams urged privileged middle-class men and women to recognize their common interests with the laboring masses, and to take the lead in demanding better conditions in factories and immigrants slums. Teaching by example, Addams made her Chicago social settlement, Hull House, a center of social activism and legislative-reform initiatives.

For philosopher John Dewey, the key social institution that could bring about a more humane and cooperative social order was the public school. With public-school enrollment growing from about 7 million in 1870 to more than 23 million in 1920, Dewey saw schools as potent engines of social change. Banishing bolted-down chairs and desks from his model school at the University of Chicago, he encouraged pupils to interact with one another. The ideal school, he said in *Democracy and Education* (1916), would be an “embryonic community” where children would learn to live as members of a social group.

For other thinkers, the key to social change lay in transforming the nation’s courts. Conservative judges citing ancient precedents had upheld corporate interests and struck down reform legislation for decades. A few jurists, however, had argued for a more flexible view. In *The Common Law* (1881), law professor Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., had insisted that law must evolve as society changes. In a phrase much quoted by progressives, he had declared, “The life of the law has not been logic; it has been experience.” Appointed to the Supreme Court in 1902, Holmes wrote a series of eloquent opinions dissenting from the conservative Court majority. Under the influence of the new social thinking, the courts slowly became more receptive to reform legislation.

**Novelists, Journalists, and Artists Spotlight Social Problems**

While intellectuals and social thinkers reoriented American social thought, novelists and journalists roused the reform spirit by chronicling corporate wrongdoing, municipal corruption, slum conditions, and industrial abuses. Advances in printing and photo reproduction ensured a mass audience and sharpened the emotional impact of their message.

In his popular novel *The Octopus* (1901), the young San Francisco writer Frank Norris portrayed the epic struggle between California railroad owners and the state’s wheat growers. Basing his fiction on the actual practices of Gilded Age railroad barons, Norris described the bribery, intimidation, rate manipulation, and other means they used to promote their interests.

Theodore Dreiser’s novel *The Financier* (1912) featured a hard-driving business tycoon utterly lacking a social conscience. Like Norris, Dreiser modeled his story on the career of an actual tycoon, Charles Yerkes, a railway financier with a reputation for underhanded practices. Like Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class*, such works undermined the reputation of the industrial elite and stimulated pressures for tougher regulation of business.

Also influential in forging the progressive spirit were articles exposing urban political corruption and corporate wrongdoing published in mass magazines such as *McClure’s* and *Collier’s*. President Theodore Roosevelt criticized the authors as “muckrakers” obsessed with the seamier side of American life, but the name became a badge of honor. Journalist Lincoln Steffens began the exposé vogue in October 1902 with a *McClure’s* article documenting municipal corruption in St. Louis and the efforts of a crusading district attorney to fight it.

The muckrakers emphasized facts rather than abstractions. To gather material, some worked as factory laborers or lived in slum tenements. In a 1903 series, journalist Maria Van Vorst described her experiences working in a Massachusetts shoe factory where women’s fingernails rotted away from repeated immersion in caustic dyes.

The muckrakers awakened middle-class readers to conditions in industrial America. The circulation of *McClure’s* and *Collier’s* soared. Some magazine exposés later appeared in book form, including Lincoln Steffens’s...
political corruption, regulate corporate behavior, and improve conditions in factories and city slums. Eventually, these state and local movements came together in a powerful national surge of reform.

**Reforming the Political Process**

In a series of grass-roots campaigns beginning in the 1890s, native-born elites and middle-class reformers battled corrupt city governments. New York City experienced a succession of reform spasms in which Protestant clergy rallied the forces of righteousness against Tammany Hall, the city’s entrenched Democratic organization. In Detroit the reform mayor Hazen Pingree (served 1890–1897) brought honesty to city hall, lowered transit fares, adopted a fairer tax structure, and provided public baths and other services for the poor. Pingree once slapped a health quarantine on a brothel, holding a prominent business leader hostage until he promised to back Pingree’s reforms.

In San Francisco, a courageous newspaper editor led a 1907 crusade against the city’s corrupt boss, Abe Reuf. Thanks to attorney Hiram Johnson, who took over the case when the original prosecutor was gunned down in court, Reuf and his cronies were convicted. Sternly self-righteous and full of reform zeal—one observer called him “a volcano in perpetual eruption”—Johnson rode his newly won fame to the California governorship and the U.S. Senate.

In Toledo, Ohio, a colorful eccentric named Samuel M. (“Golden Rule”) Jones led the reform crusade. A self-made businessman converted to the Social Gospel (see Chapter 19), Jones introduced profit sharing in his factory, and as mayor he established playgrounds, free kindergartens, and lodging houses for homeless transients.

The political reform movement soon moved beyond simply “throwing the rascals out” to probing the roots of urban misgovernment, including the private monopolies that ran municipal water, gas, electricity, and transit systems. Reformers passed laws regulating the rates these utilities could charge, raising their taxes, and curbing their political influence. (Some even advocated public ownership of these companies.) This new regulatory structure would remain the rule for a century, until an equally strong deregulatory movement swept the nation in the 1990s.

Reflecting the Progressive Era vogue of expertise and efficiency, some municipal reformers advocated substituting professional managers and administrators, chosen in citywide elections, for mayors and aldermen elected on a ward-by-ward basis. Natural disasters

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*The Shame of the Cities* (1904), Ida Tarbell’s damning *History of the Standard Oil Company* (1904), and David Graham Phillips’s *Treason of the Senate* (1906).

Artists and photographers played a role as well. A group of New York painters dubbed the Ashcan School portrayed the harshness of life in the city’s crowded slums. The Wisconsin-born photographer Lewis Hine captured images of immigrants and factory laborers. As official photographer for the National Child Labor Committee from 1911 to 1916, Hine took photographs of child workers with stunted bodies and worn expressions that helped build support for national legislation outlawing child labor.

**State and Local Progressivism**

While they read novels, magazine articles, and works of social analysis on the problems besetting urban-industrial America, middle-class citizens also observed these problems firsthand in their own communities. In fact, the progressive movement began with grass-roots campaigns from New York to San Francisco to end urban
sometimes gave a boost to this particular reform. Dayton, Ohio, went to a city-manager system after a ruinous flood in 1913. Supposedly above politics, these experts were expected to run the city like an efficient business.

Municipal reform attracted different groups depending on the issue. The native-born middle class, led by clergymen, editors, and other opinion molders, provided the initial impetus and core support. Business interests often pushed for citywide elections and the city-manager system, since these changes tended to reduce immigrants’ political clout and increase the influence of the corporate elite. Reforms that addressed the immediate needs of ordinary city dwellers, such as improved city services, won support from immigrants and even from political bosses who realized that explosive urban growth was swamping the old, informal system of meeting constituents’ needs.

The electoral-reform movement soon expanded to the state level. By 1910, for example, all states had replaced the old system of voting, which involved preprinted ballots bearing the names of specific candidates, with the secret ballot, which made it harder to rig elections. An electoral reform introduced in Wisconsin in 1903, the direct primary, enabled rank-and-file voters rather than party bosses to select the candidates who would run in the general election.

To restore government by the people rather than by moneyminded interests, some western states inaugurated electoral reforms known as the initiative, referendum, and recall. By an initiative, voters can instruct the legislature to consider a specific bill. In a referendum, they can actually enact a law or (in a nonbinding referendum) express their views on a proposed measure. By a recall petition, voters can remove a public official from office if they muster enough signatures.

While these reforms aimed to democratize voting, party leaders and interest groups soon learned to manipulate the new electoral machinery. Ironically, the new procedures may have weakened party loyalty and reduced voter interest. Voter-participation rates dropped steeply in these years, while political activity by organized interest groups increased.

Regulating Business, Protecting Workers

The late-nineteenth-century corporate consolidation that produced giants like Carnegie Steel and Standard Oil (see Chapter 18) continued after 1900. The United States Steel Company created by J. P. Morgan in 1901 controlled 80 percent of all U.S. steel production. A year later Morgan combined six competing companies into the International Harvester Company, which dominated the farm-implement business. The General Motors Company, formed in 1908 by William C. Durant with backing from the Du Pont Corporation, bought various independent automobile manufacturers, from the inexpensive Chevrolet to the luxury Cadillac, and consolidated their operations under one corporate umbrella.

Many workers benefited from this corporate growth. Industrial workers’ average annual real wages (defined, that is, in terms of actual purchasing power) rose from $532 in the late nineteenth century to $687 by 1915. In railroading and other unionized industries, wages climbed still higher. But even though the cost of living was far lower than today, such wages could barely sup-
port a family and provided little cushion for emergencies. To survive, entire families went to work. Two-thirds of young immigrant women entered the labor force in the early 1900s, working as factory help or domestics or in small establishments like laundries and bakeries. Even children worked. In 1910 the nonfarm labor force probably included at least 1.6 million children aged ten to fifteen who were working in factories, mills, tenement sweatshops, and street trades such as shoe shining and newspaper vending (see Table 21.1). The total may have been higher, since many “women workers” listed in the census were in fact young girls. One investigator found a girl of five working at night in a South Carolina textile mill.

Most laborers faced long hours and great hazards. Despite the eight-hour movement of the 1880s, in 1900 the average worker still toiled 9 1/2 hours a day. Some southern textile mills required workdays of 12 or 13 hours. In one typical year (1907), 4,534 railroad workers and more than 3,000 miners were killed on the job. Few employers accepted responsibility for work-related accidents and illnesses. Vacations and retirement benefits were practically unheard of.

New industrial workers accustomed to the rhythms of farm labor faced the discipline of the time clock and the machine. Efficiency experts used time-and-motion studies to increase production and make human workers as predictable as machines. In *Principles of Scientific Management* (1911), Frederick W. Taylor explained how to increase output by standardizing job routines and rewarding the fastest workers. “Efficiency” became a popular catchword, but most workers deeply resented the pressures to speed up output.

For Americans troubled by the social implications of industrialization, the expansion of corporate power and the hazards of the workplace stirred urgent concern. The drive to regulate big business, inherited from the populists, thus became a vitally important impetus for progressivism. Since corporations had benefited from the government’s economic policies, such as high protective tariffs, reformers reasoned, they should also be subject to government supervision.

Of the many states that passed laws regulating railroads, mines, and other businesses, none did so more avidly than Wisconsin under Governor Robert (“Fighting Bob”) La Follette. As a Republican congressman, La Follette had feuded with the state’s conservative party leadership, and in 1900 he won the governorship as an independent. Challenging the state’s long-dominant business interests, La Follette and his administration adopted the direct-primary system, set up a railroad regulatory commission, increased corporate taxes, and limited campaign spending. Reflecting progressivism’s faith in experts, La Follette met regularly with reform-minded professors at the University of Wisconsin. He also set up a legislative reference library so lawmakers would not be solely dependent on corporate lobbyists for factual information. La Follette’s reforms gained national attention as the “Wisconsin Idea.”

If electoral reform and corporate regulation represented the brain of progressivism, the impulse to improve conditions in factories and mills represented its heart. This movement, too, began at the local and state level. By 1907, for example, some thirty states had outlawed child labor. A 1903 Oregon law limited women in industry to a ten-hour workday.

Campaigns to improve industrial safety and otherwise better conditions for the laboring masses won support from political bosses in cities with large immigrant populations, such as New York, Cleveland, and Chicago. New York state senator Robert F. Wagner, a leader of Tammany Hall, headed the investigating committee set...
up after the 1911 Triangle fire. Thanks to the committee’s efforts, New York legislators passed fifty-six worker-protection laws, including required fire-safety inspections of factories. By 1914, spurred by the Triangle disaster, twenty-five states had passed laws making employers liable for job-related injuries or deaths.

Florence Kelley was a leader in the drive to remedy industrial abuses. The daughter of a conservative Republican congressman, Kelley became a Hull House resident in 1891. Investigating conditions in factories and sweatshops, in 1893 she helped secure passage of an Illinois law prohibiting child labor and limiting working hours for women. In 1899 she became general secretary of the National Consumers’ League, which mobilized consumer pressure for improved factory conditions. Campaigning for a federal child-labor law, Kelley pointedly asked, “Why are seals, bears, reindeer, fish, wild game in the national parks, buffalo, [and] migratory birds all found suitable for federal protection, but not children?”

Like many progressive reforms, the crusade for workplace safety relied on expert research. Alice Hamilton, for example, a pioneer in the new field of “industrial hygiene,” taught bacteriology at Northwestern University while also working with Jane Addams at Hull House. In 1910, fusing her scientific training and her reformist impulses, she conducted a major study of lead poisoning among industrial workers. Appointed as an investigator by the U.S. Bureau of Labor in 1911, Hamilton became an expert on—and public campaigner against—work-related medical hazards.

Workers, who understood the hazards of their jobs better than anyone, provided further pressure for reform. For example, when the granite industry introduced new power drills that created a fine dust that workers inhaled, the Granite Cutters’ Journal warned of “stone cutters’ consumption” and called the new drills “widow makers.” Sure enough, investigators soon linked the dust to a deadly respiratory disease, silicosis. This, too, became another industrial hazard that workersafety advocates sought to remedy.

**Making Cities More Livable**

In the early twentieth century, America became an urban nation. By 1920 the urban population passed the 50 percent mark, and sixty-eight U.S. cities boasted more than a hundred thousand inhabitants. New York City grew by 2.2 million from 1900 to 1920, and Chicago by 1 million.

Political corruption was only one of many problems plaguing these burgeoning urban centers. As manufacturing and businesses grew, a surging tide of immigrants and native-born newcomers engulfed the cities. Overwhelmed by this rapid growth, many cities became dreary, sprawling human warehouses. They lacked adequate parks, municipal services, public-health resources, recreational facilities, and other basic civic amenities. Unsurprisingly, as the progressive movement took shape, this worrisome tangle of urban problems loomed large.

Drawing on the efforts of Frederick Law Olmsted and others (see Chapter 19), reform-minded men and women campaigned for parks, boulevards, and street lights and proposed laws against billboards and unsightly overhead electrical wires. An influential voice for city planning and beautification was Daniel Burnham, chief architect of the 1893 Chicago world’s fair. Burnham led a successful 1906 effort to revive a plan for Washington, D.C., first proposed by Charles L’Enfant in 1791. He also developed city plans for Cleveland, San Francisco, and other cities.

Burnham’s 1909 plan for Chicago offered a seductive vision of a city both more efficient and more beautiful. He recommended lakefront parks and museums, wide boulevards to improve traffic flow, and a redesign of Chicago’s congested major thoroughfare, Michigan Avenue. The focal point of Burnham’s dream city was a majestic domed city hall and vast civic plaza. Although not all of Burnham’s plan was adopted, Chicago spent more than $300 million on projects reflecting his ideas. Many Progressive Era urban planners shared Burnham’s faith that more beautiful cities and imposing public

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<td>Percentage of children employed</td>
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*Nonagricultural workers.

Source: The Statistical History of the United States from Colonial Times to the Present (Stamford, Conn.: Fairfield Publishers, 1965).
buildings would ensure a law-abiding and civic-minded urban populace.

Beyond urban beautification, the municipal reform impulse also included such practical goals as decent housing and better garbage collection and street cleaning. Providing a model for other cities and states, the New York legislature passed laws imposing strict health and safety regulations on tenements in 1911.

Public health loomed large as well. With the discovery in the 1880s that germs cause diseases such as cholera and typhoid fever, municipal hygiene and sanitation became high priorities. Progressive reformers called for improved water and sewer systems, regulation of milk suppliers and food handlers, school medical examinations and vaccination programs, and informational campaigns to spread public-health information to the urban masses.

All these efforts bore fruit. From 1900 to 1920, infant mortality (defined as death in the first year of life) dropped from 165 per 1,000 population to around 75, and the tuberculosis death rate fell by nearly half. The municipal health crusades had a social-class dimension. Middle-class reformers set the “sanitary agenda,” and the campaigns often targeted immigrants and the poor as the sources of contagion. When Mary Mallon, an Irish-immigrant cook in New York, was found to be a healthy carrier of the typhoid bacillus in 1907, she was confined for years by the city health authorities and demonized in the press as “Typhoid Mary.”

Urban reformers also shared the heightened environmental consciousness of these years (see Chapter 17). The battle against air pollution illustrates both the promise and the frustrations of municipal environmentalism. Coal-fueled steam boilers, the major energy source for factories, produced massive amounts of soot and smoke. Factory chimneys belching smoke had once inspired pride, but by the early 1900s physicians had linked factory smoke to respiratory problems, and civic reformers were deploring the resulting air pollution.

As with other progressive reforms, the antismoke campaign combined expertise with activism. Civil engineers formed the Smoke Prevention Association in 1906, and researchers at the University of Pittsburgh—one of the nation’s smokiest cities with its nearby steel mills—documented the hazards and costs of air pollution. Chicago merchant Marshall Field declared that the “soot tax” he paid to clean his stores was larger than his real-estate taxes. As women’s clubs and other civic groups embraced the cause, many cities passed smoke-abatement laws.

Success proved elusive. Railroads and corporations fought back in the courts and often won. With coal still
Progressivism and Social Control

Progressives’ belief that they could improve society through research, legislation, and aroused public opinion sprang from their confidence that they knew what was best for other people. While municipal corruption, unsafe factories, and corporate abuses captured their attention, so, too, did issues of personal behavior, particularly the behavior of immigrants. The problems they addressed deserved attention, but their self-righteous rhetoric and the remedies they proposed also betrayed an impulse to impose their own moral standards by force of law.

Moral Control in the Cities

Early twentieth-century urban life was more than crowded slums and exhausting labor. For all their problems, cities also offered fun and diversion. Department stores, vaudeville, music halls, and amusement parks (see Chapter 19) continued to flourish. While some vaudeville owners strove for respectability, raucous and bawdy routines full of sexual innuendo, including those of the comedienne Mae West, were popular with working-class audiences. New York City’s amusement park, Coney Island, drew more patrons than ever. A subway ride from the city, it attracted as many as a million visitors a day by 1914.

For families, amusement parks provided escape from tenements. For female garment workers or department-store clerks, they provided an opportunity to spend time with friends, meet young men, and show off new outfits. With electrification, simply riding the streetcars or taking an evening stroll on well-lit downtown streets became leisure activities in themselves News of Orville and Wilbur Wright’s successful airplane flight in 1903, and the introduction of Henry Ford’s Model T in 1908, which transformed the automobile from a toy of the rich to a vehicle for the masses, heightened the sense of exciting changes ahead, with cities at the heart of the action.

Jaunty popular songs, introduced in the music halls and produced in a district of lower Manhattan called Tin Pan Alley, added to the vibrancy of city life. The blues, rooted in the chants of southern black sharecroppers, reached a broader public with such songs as W. C. Handy’s classic “St. Louis Blues” (1914). Ragtime, another import from the black South (see Chapter 19), enjoyed great popularity in early-twentieth-century urban America. Both the black composer Scott Joplin, with such works as “Maple Leaf Rag” (1899), and the white composer Irving Berlin, with his hit tune “Alexander’s Rag-Time Band” (1911), contributed to this vogue.

These years also brought a new medium of mass entertainment—the movies. Initially a part of vaudeville shows, movies soon migrated to five-cent halls called “nickelodeons” in immigrant neighborhoods. At first featuring brief comic sequences like The Sneeze or The Kiss, the movies began to tell stories with The Great Train Robbery (1903). A Fool There Was (1914), with its famous line, “Kiss me, my fool!”, made Theda Bara (really
Theodosia Goodman of Cincinnati, the first female movie star. The British music-hall performer Charlie Chaplin emigrated to America in 1913 and appeared in some sixty short two-reel comedies between 1914 and 1917. Like amusement parks, the movies allowed immigrant youth to briefly escape parental supervision. As a New York garment worker recalled, “The one place I was allowed to go by myself was the movies. My parents wouldn’t let me go anywhere else.”

Ironically, the diversions that made city life more bearable for the poor struck some middle-class reformers as moral traps no less dangerous than the physical hazards of the factory or the slum tenement. Fearful of immorality and social disorder, reformers campaigned to regulate amusement parks, dance halls, and the movies. The early movies, in particular, struck many middle-class men and women as degenerate, and the darkened nickelodeons were seen as potential dens of vice. Warning of “nickel madness,” reformers demanded film censorship. Several states and cities set up censorship boards, and the Supreme Court upheld such measures in 1915.

Building on the moral-purity crusade of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and other groups in the 1890s (see Chapter 19), reformers also targeted prostitution, a major urban problem. Male procurers lured young women into the business and then took a share of their income. The paltry wages paid women for factory work or domestic service attracted many to this more-lucrative occupation. One prostitute wrote that she was unwilling “to get up at 6:30...and work in a close stuffy room... until dark for $6 or $7 a week” when an afternoon with a man could bring in more.

Addressing the issue in the usual progressive fashion, investigators gathered statistics on what they called “the social evil.” The American Social Hygiene Association (1914), financed by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., sponsored medical research on sexually transmitted diseases, paid for “vice investigations” in various cities, and drafted model municipal statutes against prostitution.

As prostitution came to symbolize the larger moral dangers of cities, a “white slave” hysteria gripped the nation. Novels, films, and muckraking articles warned of farm girls’ being kidnapped and forced into urban brothels. The Mann Act (1910) made it illegal to transport a woman across a state line “for immoral purposes.” Amid much fanfare, reformers shut down the red-light districts of New Orleans, Chicago, and other cities.

Racism, anti-immigrant prejudice, fear of the city, and anxieties about changing sexual mores all fueled the antiprostitution crusade. Tipped off by neighbors and angry spouses, authorities employed the new legislation to pry into private sexual behavior. Scam artists entrapped men into Mann Act violations and blackmailed them. In 1913 the African-American boxer Jack Johnson, who had won the heavyweight championship five years earlier, was convicted under the Mann Act for traveling with a (white) woman across state lines for “immoral purposes.” Johnson went abroad to escape imprisonment.

**Battling Alcohol and Drugs**

Temperance had long been part of the American reform agenda, but reformers’ tactics and objectives changed in the Progressive Era. Most earlier campaigns had urged individuals to give up drink. The powerful Anti-Saloon League (ASL), founded in 1895, shifted the emphasis to
legislating a ban on the sale of alcoholic beverages. The ASL was a typical progressive organization. Full-time professionals ran the national office, while Protestant ministers staffed a network of state committees. The ASL presses in Westerville, Ohio, produced propaganda documenting alcohol’s role in many social problems and touting prohibition as the answer. As the ASL added its efforts to those of the WCTU and various church bodies, many localities banned the sale of alcoholic beverages and the campaign for national prohibition gained strength.

This was a heavy-drinking era, and alcohol abuse did indeed contribute to domestic abuse, health problems, and work injuries. But like the antiprolititution crusade, the prohibition campaign became a symbolic battleground pitting native-born citizens against the new immigrants. The ASL, while it raised legitimate issues, also embodied Protestant America’s impulse to control the immigrant city.

These years also saw the first sustained campaign against drug abuse—and for good reason. Physicians, patent-medicine peddlers, and legitimate drug companies freely prescribed or sold opium (derived from poppies) and its derivatives morphine and heroin. Cocaine, extracted from coca leaves, was widely used as well. Coca-Cola contained cocaine until about 1900.

As reformers focused on the problem, the federal government backed a 1912 treaty aimed at halting the international opium trade. The Narcotics Act of 1914, also known as the Harrison Act, banned the distribution of heroin, morphine, cocaine, and other addictive drugs except by licensed physicians or pharmacists. In their battle against drugs, as in their environmental concerns, the progressives anticipated an issue that would remain important into the twenty-first century. But this reform, too, had racist undertones. Antidrug crusaders luridly described Chinese “opium dens” and warned that “drug-crazed Negroes” imperiled white womanhood.

Immigration Restriction and Eugenics

While many of the new city dwellers came from farms and small towns, the main source of urban growth continued to be immigration. More than 17 million newcomers arrived from 1900 to 1917 (many passing through New York’s immigration center, Ellis Island), and most settled in cities (see Figure 21.1). As in the 1890s (see Chapter 19), the influx came mainly from southern and eastern Europe, but more than two hundred thousand Japanese and forty thousand Chinese also arrived between 1900 and 1920, as well as thousands of Mexicans seeking railroad work. Some immigrants prospered, but many sank into poverty or survived precariously on the economic margins.

The dismay that middle-class Americans felt about appalling conditions in the urban slums stimulated support not only for protective legislation, but also for immigration restriction. If the immigrant city was a morass of social problems, some concluded, then immi-
grants should be excluded. Prominent Bostonians formed the Immigration Restriction League in 1894. The American Federation of Labor, fearing job competition, also endorsed restriction.

Progressives who supported this reform characterized their case with claims of scientific expertise. In 1911 a congressional commission produced a massive statistical study allegedly proving the new immigrants’ innate degeneracy. Sociologist Edward A. Ross, a prominent progressive, described the recent immigrants as “low-browed, big-faced persons of obviously low mentality.”

Led by Massachusetts senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Congress passed literacy-test bills in 1896, 1913, and 1915, only to see them vetoed. These measures would have excluded would-be immigrants over sixteen years old who were unable to read, either in English or in some other language, thus discriminating against persons lacking formal education. In 1917 one such bill became law over President Woodrow Wilson’s veto. Immigrants also faced physical examinations and tests in which legitimate public-health concerns became mixed up with stereotypes of entire ethnic groups as mental or physical defectives. This, too, was part of progressivism’s mixed legacy.

Anti-immigrant fears helped fuel the eugenics movement. Eugenics is the control of reproduction to alter a plant or animal species, and some U.S. eugenicists believed that human society could be improved by this means. A leading eugenicist, the zoologist Charles B. Davenport, urged immigration restriction to keep America from pollution by “inferior” genetic stock.

In The Passing of the Great Race (1916), Madison Grant, a prominent progressive and eugenics advocate, used bogus data to denounce immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, especially Jews. He also viewed African Americans as inferior. Anticipating the program of Adolf Hitler in the 1930s (see Chapter 25), Grant called for racial segregation, immigration restriction, and the forced sterilization of the “unfit,” including “worthless race types.” The vogue of eugenics gave “scientific” respectability to anti-immigrant sentiment, as well as
the racism, that pervaded white America in these years. Inspired by eugenics, many states legalized the sterilization of criminals, sex offenders, and persons adjudged mentally deficient. In the 1927 case *Buck v. Bell*, the Supreme Court upheld such laws.

**Racism and Progressivism**

Progressivism arose at a time of significant changes in African-American life, and also of intense racism in white America. These racial realities are crucial to a full understanding of the movement.

Most of the nation's 10 million blacks lived in the South as sharecroppers and tenant farmers in 1900. As devastating floods and the cotton boll weevil, which spread from Mexico in the 1890s, worsened their lot, many southern blacks left the land. By 1910 over 20 percent of the black population lived in cities, mostly in the South, but many in the North as well. Black men in the cities took jobs in factories, mines, docks, and railroads or became carpenters, plasterers, or bricklayers. Many black women became domestic servants, seamstresses, or workers in laundries and tobacco factories. By 1910, 54 percent of America's black women held jobs.

Across the South, legally enforced racism peaked in the early twentieth century. Local “Jim Crow” laws segregated streetcars, schools, parks, and even cemeteries. The facilities for blacks, including the schools, were invariably inferior. Many southern cities imposed residential segregation by law until the Supreme Court restricted it in 1917. Most labor unions excluded black workers. Disfranchised and trapped in a cycle of poverty, poor education, and discrimination, southern blacks faced bleak prospects.

Fleeing poverty and racism and drawn by job opportunities, two hundred thousand blacks migrated North between 1890 and 1910. Wartime opportunities drew still more in 1917–1918 (see Chapter 22), and by 1920, 1.4 million African Americans lived in the North. They found conditions only slightly better than in the South. In northern cities, too, racism worsened after 1890 as hard times and immigration heightened social tensions. (Immigrants, competing with blacks for jobs and housing, sometimes exhibited the most intense racial preju-
Segregation, though not imposed by law, was enforced by custom and sometimes by violence. Blacks lived in run-down “colored districts,” attended dilapidated schools, and worked at the lowest-paying jobs.

Their ballots—usually cast for the party of Lincoln—brought little political influence. The only black politicians tolerated by Republican politicians were those willing to distribute low-level patronage jobs and otherwise keep silent. African Americans in the segregated army faced hostility not only from white soldiers and officers, but also from civilians near the bases. Even the movies preached racism. D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) disparaged blacks and glorified the Ku Klux Klan.

Smoldering racism sometimes exploded in violence. Antiblack rioters in Atlanta in 1906 murdered twenty-five blacks and burned many black homes. From 1900 to 1920 an average of about seventy-five lynchings occurred yearly. Some lynch mobs used trumped-up charges to justify the murder of blacks whose assertive behavior or economic aspirations angered whites. Some lynchings involved incredible sadism: with large crowds on hand, the victim’s body was mutilated, and graphic postcards were sold later. Authorities rarely intervened. At a 1916 lynching in Texas, the mayor warned the mob not to damage the hanging tree, since it was on city property.

In the face of such hostility, blacks developed strong social institutions and a vigorous culture. Black religious life, centered in the African Methodist Episcopal church, proved a bulwark of support. Working African-American women, drawing on strategies dating to slavery days, relied on relatives and neighbors to provide child care. Dedicated teachers and administrators at a handful of black higher-education institutions such as Fisk in Nashville and Howard in Washington, D.C., carried on. John Hope, a university-trained classics scholar who became president of Atlanta’s Morehouse College in 1906, assembled a distinguished faculty, championed African-American education, and fought racial segregation. His sister Jane (Hope) Lyons was dean of women at Spelman College, another black institution in Atlanta.

The urban black community included several black-owned insurance companies and banks, a small elite of entrepreneurs, teachers, ministers, and sports figures like Jack Johnson. Although major-league baseball excluded blacks, a thriving Negro League attracted many black fans.

In this racist age, progressives compiled a mixed record on racial issues. Lillian Wald, director of New York’s Henry Street Settlement, protested racial injustice. Muckraker Ray Stannard Baker documented racism in his 1908 book, *Following the Color Line*. Settlement-house worker Mary White Ovington helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (see below) and wrote *Half a Man* (1911) about the emotional scars of racism.

But most progressive kept silent as blacks were lynched, disfranchised, and discriminated against. Many saw African Americans, like immigrants, not as potential allies but as part of the problem. Viewing blacks as inferior and prone to immorality and social disorder, white progressives generally supported or tolerated segregated schools and housing, restrictions on black voting rights, the strict moral oversight of African-American communities, and, at best, paternalistic efforts to “uplift” this supposedly backward and childlike people. Viciously racist southern politicians like Governor James K. Vardaman of Mississippi and Senator Ben Tillman of South Carolina also supported progressive reforms. Southern woman-suffrage leaders argued that granting women the vote would strengthen white supremacy.
The organizational impulse so important to progressivism generally also proved a useful strategy for groups that found themselves discriminated against or exploited. African Americans, middle-class women, and wage workers all had ample reason for dissatisfaction in these years, and all three groups organized to address those grievances.

African-American Leaders Organize Against Racism

With racism on the rise, Booker T. Washington’s accommodationist message (see Chapter 20) seemed increasingly unrealistic, particularly to educated northern blacks. In 1902 William Monroe Trotter, the editor of the *Boston Guardian*, a black newspaper, called Washington’s go-slow policies “a fatal blow...to the Negro’s political rights and liberty.” Another opponent was black journalist Ida Wells-Barnett. Moving to Chicago from Memphis in 1892 after a white mob destroyed her offices, she mounted a national antilynching campaign, in contrast to Booker T. Washington’s public silence on the subject. Washington’s self-help theme would appeal to later generations of African Americans, but in the early twentieth century, many blacks confronting lynching, blatant racism, and rising segregationist pressures tired of his cautious approach.

Washington’s most potent challenger was W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963). After earning a Ph.D. in history from Harvard in 1895, Du Bois taught at Atlanta University. Openly criticizing Washington in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), he rejected Washington’s call for patience and his exclusive emphasis on manual skills. Instead, Du Bois demanded full racial equality, including the same educational opportunities open to whites, and called on blacks to resist all forms of racism.

Du Bois’s militancy signaled a new era of African-American activism. In 1905, under his leadership, blacks who favored vigorous, sustained resistance to racism held a conference at Niagara Falls. For the next few years, participants in the “Niagara Movement” met annually. Meanwhile, a group of white reformers had also grown dissatisfied with Washington’s cautiousness. Their leader was newspaper publisher Oswald Garrison Villard, grandson of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. In 1909 Villard and his allies, Du Bois, and other blacks from the Niagara Movement formed the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). This new organization called for vigorous activism, including legal challenges, to achieve political equality for blacks and full integration into American life. Attracting the urban black middle class, by 1914 the NAACP had six thousand members in fifty branches.

Revival of the Woman-Suffrage Movement

As late as 1910, women could vote in only four thinly populated western states: Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, and Idaho. Woman suffrage failed in six state referenda after 1896. But the progressive reform movement, in
which women played a leading role, gave the cause fresh vitality. Middle-class women found disfranchisement especially galling when recently arrived immigrant men could vote. A vigorous suffrage movement in Great Britain reverberated in America as well. Like progressivism itself, this revived campaign started at the grass roots. A suffrage campaign in New York State in 1915, though unsuccessful, underscored the movement’s new momentum.

So, too, did events in California. Indeed, the California campaign, as recounted by historian Gayle Gulett, illustrates both the strengths and the limitations of the revived movement. In the 1880s California’s women’s clubs focused mainly on cultural and domestic themes. By the early 1900s they had evolved into a potent statewide organization actively pursuing municipal reforms and public-school issues. This evolution convinced many members that full citizenship meant the right to vote. A state woman-suffrage referendum lost in 1896, but the leaders bounced back to form alliances with labor leaders and male progressives, built on a shared commitment to “good government” and opposition to municipal corruption. But while joining forces with male reformers, these woman-suffrage strategists always insisted on the unique role of “organized womanhood” in building a better society. Success came in 1911 when California voters approved woman suffrage.

“Organized womanhood” had its limits. The California campaign was led by elite and middle-class women, mainly based in Los Angeles and San Francisco. Working-class women and farm women played little role in this campaign, while African-American, Mexican-American, and Asian-American women were almost totally excluded.

New leaders translated the momentum in California and other states into a revitalized national movement. When Susan B. Anthony retired from the presidency of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) in 1900, Carrie Chapman Catt of Iowa succeeded her. Under Catt’s shrewd direction, NAWSA adopted the so-called Winning Plan: grass-roots organization with tight central coordination.

Suffragists shrewdly deployed techniques drawn from the new urban consumer culture. They not only lobbied legislators, but also organized parades in open cars; devised catchy slogans; ran newspaper ads; put up posters; waved eye-catching banners; held fundraisers; arranged photo opportunities for the media; and distributed fans, playing cards, and other items emblazoned with the suffrage message. Gradually, state after state fell into the suffrage column (see Map 21.1). A key victory came in 1917 when New York voters approved a woman-suffrage referendum.

As in California (and like progressive organizations generally), NAWSA’s membership remained largely white, native born, and middle class. Few black, immigrant, or working-class women joined. Some upper-class women opposed the reform. The leader of the “Antis,” the wealthy Josephine Dodge of New York, argued that women already had behind-the-scenes influence, and that to invade the male realm of electoral politics would tarnish their moral and spiritual role.

Not all suffragists accepted Catt’s strategy. Alice Paul, who had observed the British suffragists’ militant tactics while studying in England, grew impatient with NAWSA’s state-by-state approach. In 1913 Paul founded the Congressional Union, later renamed the Woman’s party, to pressure Congress to enact a woman-suffrage amendment. Targeting the “the party in power”—in this case, the Democrats—Paul and her followers picketed the White House round the clock in the war year of 1917 and posted large signs accusing President Wilson of
hypocrisy in championing democracy abroad while opposing woman suffrage at home. Several protesters were jailed and, when they went on a hunger strike, force-fed. At both the state and federal level, the momentum of the organized woman-suffrage movement had become well-nigh irresistible.

**Enlarging “Woman’s Sphere”**

As the careers of such women as Florence Kelley, Alice Hamilton, and Ida Wells-Barnett make clear, the suffrage cause did not exhaust women's energies in the Progressive era. Women's clubs, settlement-house residents, and individual female activists joined a wide range of reform efforts. These included the campaigns to bring playgrounds and day nurseries to the slums, abolish child labor, help women workers, and ban unsafe foods and quack remedies. As Jane Addams observed, the nurturing that women gave their own children could also draw them into broader political activism in an industrial age when hazards came from outside the home as well as inside.

Cultural assumptions about “woman's sphere” weakened as women became active on many fronts. Penologist Katherine Bement Davis served as the innovative superintendent of a women’s reformatory and then as New York City’s commissioner of corrections. Anarchist Emma Goldman crisscrossed the country lecturing on politics, feminism, and modern drama while coediting a radical monthly, *Mother Earth*. A vanguard of pioneering women in higher education included Marion Talbot, first dean of women at the University of Chicago.

In *Women and Economics* (1898) and other works, feminist intellectual Charlotte Perkins Gilman explored the historical and cultural roots of female subordination and gender stereotyping; and linked women's inferior status to their economic dependence on men. Confining women to the domestic sphere, Gilman argued, was an evolutionary throwback that had become outdated and inefficient. She advocated economic independence for
women through equality in the workplace; the collectivization of cooking, cleaning, and other domestic tasks; and state-run day-care centers. In the novel *Herland* (1915), Gilman wittily critiqued patriarchal assumptions by injecting three naïve young males into a utopian society populated exclusively by women.

No Progressive Era reform raised the issue of women’s rights more directly than the campaign challenging federal and state laws banning the distribution of contraceptives and birth-control information. Although countless women, particularly the poor, suffered exhaustion and health problems from frequent pregnancies, artificial contraception was widely denounced as immoral. In 1914 Margaret Sanger of New York, a practical nurse and socialist whose mother had died after bearing eleven children, began her crusade for birth control, a term she coined. When the authorities prosecuted her journal *The Woman Rebel* on obscenity charges, Sanger fled to England. She returned in 1916 to open the nation’s first birth-control clinic in Brooklyn. In 1918 she founded a new journal, the *Birth Control Review*, and three years later she founded the American Birth Control League, the ancestor of today’s Planned Parenthood Federation.

Meanwhile, another New Yorker, Mary Ware Dennett, a feminist and activist, had also emerged as an advocate of birth control and sex education. (Her 1919 pamphlet for youth, *The Sex Side of Life*, discussing human reproduction in clear, straightforward terms, was long banned as obscene.) Dennett founded the National Birth Control League (later the Voluntary Parenthood League) in 1915. While Sanger championed direct action, Dennett urged lobbying efforts to amend obscenity laws. More importantly, while Sanger insisted that contraceptives should be supplied only by physicians, Dennett argued that they should be freely available. Sanger’s inability to tolerate any other leaders in the movement made for bad relations between the two women.

In retrospect, the emergence of the birth-control movement stands as one of progressivism’s most important and little-recognized legacies. At the time, however, it stirred bitter resistance among conservatives and many religious leaders. Indeed, not until 1965 did the Supreme Court fully legalize the dissemination of contraceptive materials and information.

**Workers Organize; Socialism Advances**

In this age of organization, labor unions continued to expand. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) grew from fewer than half a million members in 1897 to some 4 million by 1920. This was still only about 20 percent of the industrial work force. With recent immigrants hungry for jobs, union activities could be risky. The boss could always fire an “agitator” and hire a docile newcomer. Judicial hostility also plagued the movement. In the 1908 *Danbury Hatters* case, for example, the Supreme Court forbade unions from organizing boycotts in support of strikes. Such boycotts were a “conspiracy in restraint of trade,” said the high court, and thus a violation of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. The AFL’s...
strength remained in the skilled trades, not in the factories and mills where most immigrants and women worked.

A few unions did try to reach these laborers. The International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU), founded in 1900 by immigrants working in New York City’s needle trades, conducted a successful strike in 1909 and another after the 1911 Triangle fire. The women on the picket lines found these strikes both exhilarating and frightening. Some were beaten by police; others fired. The 1909 strike began when young Clara Lemlich jumped up as speechmaking droned on at a protest rally and passionately called for a strike. Thousands of women garment workers stayed off the job the next day. Through such strikes, workers gained better wages and improved working conditions.

Another union that targeted the most exploited workers was the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), nicknamed the Wobblies, founded in Chicago in 1905. The IWW’s colorful leader was William “Big Bill” Haywood, a compelling orator. Utah-born Haywood became a miner as a boy and joined the militant Western Federation of Miners in 1896. In 1905 he was acquitted of complicity in the assassination of an antilabor former governor of Idaho. IWW membership peaked at around thirty thousand, and most members were western miners, lumbermen, fruit pickers, and itinerant laborers. But it captured the imagination of young cultural rebels in New York City’s Greenwich Village, where Haywood often visited.

The IWW led mass strikes of Nevada gold miners; Minnesota iron miners; and timber workers in Louisiana, Texas, and the Northwest. Its greatest success came in 1912 when it won a bitter textile strike in Massachusetts. This victory owed much to two women: the birth-control reformer Margaret Sanger, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, a fiery Irish-American orator who publicized the cause by sending strikers’ children to sympathizers in New York City for temporary care. Although the IWW’s reputation for violence was much exaggerated, it faced government harassment, especially during World War I, and by 1920 its strength was broken.

Other workers, as well as some middle-class Americans, turned to socialism. All socialists advocated an end to capitalism and backed public ownership of factories, utilities, railroads, and communications systems, but they differed on how to achieve these goals. The revolutionary ideology of German social theorist Karl Marx won a few converts, but the vision of democratic socialism achieved at the ballot box proved more appealing. In 1900 democratic socialists formed the Socialist Party of America (SPA). Members included Morris Hillquit, a New York City labor organizer; Victor Berger, the leader of Milwaukee’s German socialists; and Eugene V. Debs, the Indiana labor leader. Debs, a popular orator, was the SPA’s presidential candidate five times.
between 1900 and 1920. Many cultural radicals of New York’s Greenwich Village embraced socialism as well and supported the radical magazine *The Masses*, founded in 1911.

Socialism’s high-water mark came around 1912 when SPA membership stood at 118,000. Debs won more than 900,000 votes for president that year (about 6 percent of the total), and the Socialists elected a congressman (Berger) and hundreds of municipal officials. The Intercollegiate Socialist Society carried the message to college campuses. The party published over three hundred daily and weekly newspapers, many in foreign languages for immigrant members.

**National Progressivism**

**Phase I: Roosevelt and Taft, 1901–1913**

By around 1905 local and state reform activities were coalescing into a national movement. Symbolically, in 1906 Wisconsin governor Robert La Follette went to Washington as a U.S. senator. Five years earlier, progressivism had found its first national leader, Theodore Roosevelt, nicknamed “TR”.

Bombastic, self-righteous, and jingoistic—but also brilliant, politically savvy, and endlessly interesting—Roosevelt became president in 1901 and at once made the White House a cauldron of activism. Skillfully orchestrating public opinion, the popular young president pursued his goals—labor mediation, consumer protection, conservation, business virtue, and engage-
ment abroad (see Chapter 20)—while embracing and publicizing progressives’ ideas and objectives.

Roosevelt's activist approach to the presidency permanently enlarged the powers of the office. TR's hand-picked successor, William Howard Taft, lacked the master's political genius, however, and his administration floundered amid sniping among former allies.

In the exciting election of 1912, voters faced a choice among four major presidential candidates: the conservative Taft; the socialist Eugene V. Debs; Theodore Roosevelt; and political newcomer Woodrow Wilson, who offered differing visions of progressive reform.

Roosevelt's Path to the White House

On September 6, 1901, in Buffalo, anarchist Leon Czolgosz shot William McKinley. At first the president seemed likely to recover, and Vice President Theodore Roosevelt proceeded with a hiking trip in New York's Adirondack Mountains. But on September 14, McKinley died. At age forty-two, Theodore Roosevelt became president of the United States.

Many politicians shuddered at the thought of the impetuous Roosevelt as president. Republican kingmaker Mark Hanna exclaimed, "My God, that damned cowboy in the White House!" Roosevelt did, indeed, display many traits associated with the West. The son of an aristocratic New York family of Dutch origins, he was sickly as a child. But a bodybuilding program and summers in Wyoming transformed him into a model of physical fitness. When his young wife died in 1884, he stoically carried on. Two years on a Dakota ranch (1884–1886) further toughened him and deepened his enthusiasm for what he termed "the strenuous life."

Plunging into politics at a time when his social peers considered it unfit for gentlemen, he served as a state assemblyman, New York City police commissioner, and a U.S. civil-service commissioner. In 1898, fresh from his Cuban exploits (see Chapter 20), he was elected New York's governor. Two years later, the state's Republican boss, eager to be rid of him, arranged for Roosevelt's nomination as vice president.

As was the case with everything he did, TR found the presidency energizing. "I have been President emphatically . . . ," he boasted; "I believe in a strong executive." He enjoyed public life and loved the limelight. "When Theodore attends a wedding he wants to be the bride," his daughter observed, "and when he attends a funeral he wants to be the corpse." With his toothy grin, machine-gun speech, and amazing energy, he dominated the political landscape. When he refused to shoot a bear cub on a hunting trip, a shrewd toy maker marketed a cuddly new product, the Teddy Bear.

Labor Disputes, Trustbusting, Railroad Regulation

The new president's political skills were quickly tested. In May 1902 the United Mine Workers Union (UMW) called a strike to gain not only higher wages and shorter hours but also recognition as a union. The mine owners refused even to talk with the UMW leaders. After five months, with winter looming, TR acted. Summoning the two sides to the White House and threatening to take over the mines, he won their reluctant acceptance of an arbitration commission to settle the dispute. The commission granted the miners a 10 percent wage increase and reduced their working day from ten to nine hours.

TR's approach to labor disputes differed from that of his predecessors, who typically sided with management, sometimes using troops as strikebreakers. Though not consistently prolabor, he defended workers' right to organize. When a mine owner insisted that the miners' welfare be left to those "to whom God in his infinite wisdom has given control of the property interests of the country," Roosevelt derided such "arrogant stupidity."

With his elite background, TR neither feared nor much liked business tycoons. The prospect of spending time with "big-money men," he once wrote a friend, "fills me with frank horror." While he believed that big corporations contributed to national greatness, he also embraced the progressive conviction that business behavior must be regulated. A strict moralist, he held corporations, like individuals, to a high standard.

At the same time, Roosevelt the political realist also understood that many Washington politicians abhorred his views—among them Senator Nelson Aldrich of Rhode Island, a wily defender of business interests. Roosevelt's progressive impulses and his grasp of power realities in capitalist America remained in continuing tension.

Another test of Roosevelt's political skill came in 1901 when J. P. Morgan formed the United States Steel Company, the nation's first billion-dollar corporation. As public distrust of big corporations deepened, TR dashed to the head of the parade. His 1902 State of the Union message gave high priority to breaking up business monopolies, or "trustbusting." Roosevelt's attorney general soon filed suit against the Northern Securities Company, a giant holding company that had recently
been formed to control railroading in the Northwest, for violating the Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890—a law that hitherto had seemed pathetically ineffective. On a speaking tour that summer, TR called for a “square deal” for all Americans and denounced special treatment for capitalists. “We don't wish to destroy corporations,” he said, “but we do wish to make them...serve the public good.” In 1904, on a 5 to 4 vote, the Supreme Court ordered the Northern Securities Company dissolved.

The Roosevelt administration filed forty-three other antitrust lawsuits. In two key cases decided in 1911, the Supreme Court ordered the breakup of the Standard Oil Company and the reorganization of the American Tobacco Company to make it less monopolistic.

As the 1904 election neared, Roosevelt made peace with his party’s business wing, writing cordial letters to J. P. Morgan and other magnates. When the convention that unanimously nominated Roosevelt in Chicago adopted a probusiness platform, $2 million in corporate contributions poured in. The Democrats, meanwhile, eager to erase the taint of radicalism, embraced the gold standard and nominated a conservative New York judge, Alton B. Parker.

Winning easily, Roosevelt turned to one of his major goals: railroad regulation. He now saw corporate regulation as a more promising long-term strategy than antitrust lawsuits. This shift underlay his central role in the passage of the Hepburn Act of 1906. This measure empowered the Interstate Commerce Commission to set maximum railroad rates and to examine railroads’ financial records. It also curtailed the railroads’ practice of distributing free passes to ministers and other influential shapers of public opinion.

The Hepburn Act displayed TR’s knack for political bargaining, as he skillfully fenced with Senator Aldrich and other conservatives. In one key compromise, he agreed to delay tariff reform in return for railroad regulations. Although the Hepburn Act did not fully satisfy reformers, it did significantly increase the government’s regulatory powers.

**Consumer Protection and Racial Issues**

No progressive reform proved more popular than the campaign against unsafe and falsely labeled food, drugs, and medicine. Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906) graphically described the foul conditions in some meatpacking plants. Wrote Sinclair in one vivid passage, “[A] man could run his hand over these piles of meat and sweep off handfuls of dried dung of rats. These rats were nuisances, and the packers would put poisoned bread out for them, they would die, and then rats, bread, and meat would go into the hoppers together.” (The socialist Sinclair also detailed the exploitation of immigrant workers, but this message proved less potent. “I aimed at the nation’s heart, but hit it in the stomach,” he later lamented.) Women’s organizations and consumer groups rallied public opinion on this issue, and an Agriculture Department chemist, Harvey W. Wiley, helped shape the proposed legislation. Other muckrakers exposed useless or dangerous patent medicines, many laced with cocaine, opium, or alcohol. One tonic “for treatment of the alcohol habit” contained 26.5 percent alcohol. Peddlers of these nostrums freely claimed that they could cure cancer, grow hair, and restore sexual vigor.

Sensing the public mood, Roosevelt supported the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act, both passed in 1906. The former outlawed the sale of adulterated foods or drugs and required accurate ingredient labels; the latter imposed strict sanitary rules on meatpackers and set up a federal meat-inspection system. The more reputable food-processing, meatpacking, and medicinal companies, eager to regain public confidence, supported these regulatory measures.

On racial matters, Roosevelt’s record was marginally better than that of other politicians in this dismally racist age. He appointed a black to head the Charleston customhouse despite white opposition, and closed a Mississippi post office rather than yield to demands that he dismiss the black postmistress. In a symbolically important gesture, he dined with Booker T. Washington at the White House. The worst blot on his record came in 1906 when he approved the dishonorable discharge of an entire regiment of black soldiers, including Congressional Medal of Honor winners, in Brownsville, Texas, because some members of the unit, goaded by racist taunts, had killed a local civilian. The “Brownsville Incident” incensed black Americans. (In 1972, when most of the men were long dead, Congress removed the dishonorable discharges from their records.)

**Environmentalism Progressive-Style**

With Theodore Roosevelt in the White House, environmental concerns ranked high on the national agenda. Singling out conservation in his first State of the Union message as “the most vital internal question” facing America, he highlighted an issue that still reverberates.

By 1900 decades of urban-industrial growth and western expansion had taken a heavy toll on the land. In
the West, land-use disputes raged as mining and timber interests, farmers, ranchers, sheep growers, and preservationists advanced competing claims.

While business interests and boosters preached exploitation of the West’s resources and agricultural groups sought government aid for irrigation projects, organizations such as the Sierra Club battled to preserve the unspoiled beauty of wilderness areas. Socially prominent easterners also embraced the wilderness cause. Under an act passed by Congress in 1891, Presidents Harrison and Cleveland had set aside some 35 million acres of public lands as national forests.

In the early twentieth century, a wilderness vogue swept America. Amid cities and factories, the wilderness promised tranquility and solace. As Sierra Club president John Muir observed, “I never saw a discontented tree.” Popular writers evoked the tang of the campfire and the lure of the primitive. Summer camps, which began in the 1890s, as well as the Boy Scouts (founded in 1910) and Girl Scouts (1912), gave city children a taste of wilderness living.

Between the wilderness enthusiasts and the developers stood government professionals like Gifford Pinchot who saw the public domain as a resource to be managed wisely. Appointed by President Roosevelt in 1905 to head the new U.S. Forest Service, Pinchot stressed not preservation but conservation—the planned, regulated use of forest lands for public and commercial purposes.

Wilderness advocates viewed Pinchot’s Forest Service warily. They welcomed his opposition to mindless exploitation but worried that the multiple-use approach would despoil wilderness areas. As a Sierra Club member wrote, “It is true that trees are for human use. But there are . . . uses for the spiritual wealth of us all, as well as for the material wealth of some.” Conservationists, in turn, dismissed the wilderness advocates as hopeless romantics.

By temperament Theodore Roosevelt was a preservationist. In 1903 he spent a blissful few days camping in Yosemite National Park with John Muir. He once compared “the destruction of a species” to the loss of “all the works of some great writer.” But TR the politician backed the conservationists’ call for planned development. He supported the National Reclamation Act of 1902 that designated the money from public-land sales for water management in arid western regions, and set up the Reclamation Service to plan and construct dams and irrigation projects.

As historian William Cronon notes, this measure (also known as the Newlands Act for its sponsor, a Nevada congressman) ranks in importance with the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 for promoting the development of a vast continental region. Under director Frederick Newell, the Reclamation Service undertook projects that sped settlement and productivity between the Rockies and the Pacific. The Roosevelt Dam in Arizona spurred the growth of Phoenix, and a complex of dams and waterways in the Snake River valley watered thousands of barren acres in Idaho, stimulating the production of potatoes and other commodities. The law required farmers who benefited from these projects to repay the construction costs, creating a revolving federal fund for further projects. The Newlands Act and other measures of these years helped transform the West from a series of isolated “island settlements” into a thriving, interconnected region.
The competition for scarce water resources in the West sometimes led to bitter political battles. The Los Angeles basin, for example, with 40 percent of California's population in 1900, found itself with only 2 percent of the state's available surface water. In 1907 the city derailed a Reclamation Service project intended for the farmers of California's Owens Valley, more than 230 miles to the north, and diverted the precious water to Los Angeles.

Meanwhile, President Roosevelt, embracing Pinchot's multiple-use land-management program, set aside 200 million acres of public land (85 million of them in Alaska) as national forests, mineral reserves, and water-power sites. But this, too, provoked opposition in the West, and in 1907 Congress revoked the president's authority to create national forests in six timber-rich western states. Roosevelt signed the bill, but only after he had designated 16 million acres in the six states as national forests.

With Roosevelt's blessing, Pinchot organized a White House conservation conference for the nation's governors in 1908. There experts discussed the utilitarian benefits of resource management. John Muir and other wilderness preservationists were not invited. But the struggle between wilderness purists and multiple-use advocates went on (see A Place in Time: Hetch Hetchy Valley, California). Rallying support through magazine articles, preservationists won key victories. For example, campaigns by private groups, including women's organizations, saved a large grove of California's giant redwoods and a lovely stretch of the Maine coastline from logging.

While expanding the national forests, TR also created fifty-three wildlife reserves, sixteen national monuments, and five new national parks. As the parks drew more visitors, Congress created the National Park Service in 1916 to manage them. Earlier, the Antiquities Act (1906) had protected archaeological sites, especially in the Southwest, some of which eventually became national parks.

**Taft in the White House, 1909-1913**

Roosevelt had pledged not to run for a third term, and to the sorrow of millions, he kept his promise as the 1908 election approached. The Republican party's most conservative elements easily regained party control. They nominated TR's choice, Secretary of War William Howard Taft, for president but chose a conservative vice-presidential nominee. The party platform, influenced by the National Association of Manufacturers, was deeply conservative. The Democrats, meanwhile, nominated William Jennings Bryan for a third and final time. The Democratic platform called for a lower tariff, denounced the trusts, and embraced the cause of labor.

With Roosevelt's endorsement, Taft coasted to victory. But the Democrats made gains—Bryan bested Alton B. Parker's 1904 vote total by 1.3 million—and progressive Republican state candidates outran the national ticket. Overall, the outcome suggested a lull in the reform movement, not its end.

Republican conservatives, increasingly unhappy with Roosevelt's policies, were delighted when he departed to hunt big game in Africa. Quipped Senator Aldrich, "Let every lion do its duty." But even with TR an ocean away, his presence remained vivid. "When I am addressed as 'Mr. President,' " Taft wrote him, "I turn to see whether you are not at my elbow."

Taft, from an old political family in Cincinnati, was no Roosevelt. Whereas TR kept in fighting trim, the sedentary Taft was obese. Roosevelt had set up a boxing ring in the White House; Taft preferred golf. TR loved speechmaking and battling the forces of evil; Taft disliked controversy. His happiest days would come later, as chief justice of the United States.

Pledged to carry on TR's program, Taft supported the Mann-Elkins Act (1910), which beefed up the Interstate Commerce Commission's rate-setting powers and extended its regulatory authority to telephone and telegraph companies. The Taft administration actually prosecuted more antitrust cases than had Roosevelt. But Taft characteristically proceeded without much publicity; and to the public TR remained the mighty trustbuster.

The reform spotlight, meanwhile, shifted from the White House to Congress. During the Roosevelt administration, a small group of reform-minded Republicans nicknamed the Insurgents, who included Senators La Follette and Albert Beveridge of Indiana and Congressman George Norris of Nebraska, had challenged their party's conservative congressional leadership. In 1909 the Insurgents turned against President Taft after a bruising battle over the tariff.

Taft at first backed the Insurgents' call for a lower tariff. But in 1909, when high-tariff advocates in Congress pushed through the Payne-Aldrich Tariff, raising duties on hundreds of items, Taft not only signed it but praised it extravagantly. The battle between conservative and progressive Republicans was on.
A major Insurgent target was Speaker of the House Joseph G. Cannon of Illinois. Wielding near-absolute power, the arch-conservative Cannon kept most reform bills from even reaching a vote. In March 1910 the Insurgents joined with the Democrats to remove Cannon from the pivotal Rules Committee. This was a direct slap at Taft, who supported Cannon.

The so-called Ballinger-Pinchot affair widened the rift between Taft and the progressive Republicans. Taft's interior secretary, Richard Ballinger, was a Seattle lawyer who disliked federal controls and favored the private development of natural resources. In one of several decisions galling to conservationists, Ballinger approved the sale of several million acres of public lands in Alaska containing coal deposits to a group of Seattle businessmen in 1909. They in turn sold the land to a consortium of New York bankers including J. P. Morgan. When a Department of the Interior official protested, he was fired. In true muckraking style, he immediately published an article in Collier's blasting Ballinger's actions. When Gifford Pinchot of the Forestry Service publicly criticized Ballinger, he too got the ax. TR's supporters seethed.

Upon Roosevelt's return to America in June 1910, Pinchot met the boat. In the 1910 midterm election, Roosevelt campaigned for Insurgent candidates. In a speech that alarmed conservatives, he attacked judges who struck down progressive laws and endorsed the radical idea of reversing judicial rulings by popular vote.

The Democrats captured the House in 1910, and a coalition of Democrats and Insurgent Republicans controlled the Senate. As the reform tide rose, TR sounded more and more like a presidential candidate.

**The Four-Way Election of 1912**

In February 1912 Roosevelt announced his candidacy for the Republican nomination, openly opposing Taft. But Taft wanted a second term, and a Republican battle loomed. For a time, Senator Robert La Follette's candidacy attracted reform-minded Republicans, but when TR entered the race, La Follette's support collapsed.

In a series of Republican state primaries and conventions, Roosevelt generally walloped Taft. But Taft controlled the party machinery, and the Republican convention in Chicago disqualified many of Roosevelt's hard-won delegates. Outraged, TR's backers bolted the convention and reassembled to form the Progressive party. What had been a general term for a broad reform movement became the official name of a political organization.

"I feel fit as a bull moose," Roosevelt trumpeted, thereby giving his organization its nickname, the Bull Moose party. Riding an emotional high, the cheering delegates nominated their hero and designated California senator Hiram Johnson as his running mate. The convention platform endorsed practically every reform cause of the day, including tariff reduction, woman suffrage, business regulation, the abolition of child labor, the eight-hour workday, workers' compensation, the direct primary, and the popular election of senators. The new party attracted a highly diverse following, united in admiration for the charismatic Roosevelt.

Meanwhile, the reform spirit had also infused the Democratic party at the local and state levels. In New Jersey in 1910, voters had elected a political novice, Woodrow Wilson, as governor. A "Wilson for President" boom soon arose, and when the Democrats assembled in Baltimore in June 1912, Wilson won the nomination, defeating several established party leaders.

In the campaign, Taft more or less gave up, happy to have kept his party safe for conservatism. The Socialist party candidate Eugene Debs proposed an end to
In 1900 one of the loveliest spots in California was Hetch Hetchy Valley, where glaciers and the Tuolumne River had carved deep, sharp-edged gorges of spectacular beauty. The Indian name referred to the Valley’s grassy meadows. But when officials of San Francisco, 150 miles away, visited Hetch Hetchy, they saw a solution to their city’s water problems. A dam at the valley’s mouth would create a vast reservoir that could supply water for San Francisco and pay for itself as a hydroelectric power source.

Because Hetch Hetchy was in Yosemite National Park, the secretary of the interior at first rejected San Francisco’s application to dam the Tuolumne. But the city applied again in 1908, two years after an earthquake and fire had devastated San Francisco, and this time the secretary approved. The application needed congressional approval as well, and opponents of the plan confidently geared up to defeat it.

The Sierra Club and its president, John Muir, led the opposition. Muir and his associates alerted wilderness groups across the nation and published magazine articles describing the beauty of the valley that would be forever hidden under the waters of the reservoir.

Muir compared flooding Hetch Hetchy to the willful destruction of a great cathedral. Amid rampant urban growth, he argued, Americans needed wilderness for their spiritual well-being. He wrote bitterly, “These temple destroyers, devotees of ravaging commercialism, seem to have a perfect contempt for Nature, and instead of lifting their eyes to the God of the Mountains, lift them to the Almighty Dollar.”

But the project had attracted powerful backers, including Gifford Pinchot, head of the U.S. Forest Service, who advocated a multiple-use approach to national forests and wilderness areas. San Francisco authorities also pushed hard for the plan. The reservoir, they argued, could support a variety of recreational activities. The San Francisco Chronicle called the dam’s critics “hoggish and mushy esthetes.” San Francisco’s chief engineer ridiculed them as “short-haired women and long-haired men.”

At first President Theodore Roosevelt endorsed the plan. As opposition grew he vacillated. In the national parks, he said in 1908, “all wild things should be protected and the scenery kept wholly unmarred.”

The battle culminated in 1913 with hearings before the Public Lands Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives. Opponents rallied public opinion through more magazine articles; backers lobbied members of Congress. Pinchot, testifying in support of the application, offered his own utilitarian definition of conservation: “The fundamental principle . . . is that of use,
to take every part of the land and its resources and put it to that use . . . which . . . will serve the most people." A California congressman pointed out that the “old barren rocks” of Hetch Hetchy Valley had a market value of only about three hundred thousand dollars, whereas the proposed dam would be worth many times that amount. Another legislator posed the issue in dramatic terms, “We all love the sound of whispering winds amid the trees,” he said, but “the wail of a hungry baby will make us forget it.”

Late in 1913, both houses of Congress passed the Hetch Hetchy dam bill by large margins. Within a year John Muir was dead of pneumonia. Some said he had died of a broken heart.

The dam project proceeded slowly, at twice the estimated cost. The first water reached San Francisco in 1934. The vision of Hetch Hetchy reservoir as a vacation paradise remained unfulfilled. Writes environmental historian Stephen Fox, “As the water level rose and fell with the changing seasons the shoreline was marred by slimy mud and decaying vegetation. Nothing could grow at the edge of the artificial lake. Under moonlight, with tree trunks scattered around like so many bodies, it resembled a battlefield one day after the fight: a wasteland bearing stark testimony to man’s befuddled ingenuity.”

Although the dam’s opponents lost this battle, historians point out that the struggle had a larger meaning. For the first time, over a five-year period, the American public debated the aesthetic implications of a major public-works project. In the nineteenth century such a debate would have been unthinkable. Hetch Hetchy helped put wilderness preservation on the public agenda.

The battle also underscored tensions in Progressive Era environmental thought. Both sides considered themselves progressives, but while one group fought for wilderness preservation, the other advocated the “wise use” of natural resources for human purposes.

Hetch Hetchy retains its power to stir emotions. In 1987 Secretary of the Interior Donald Hodel proposed draining the reservoir and restoring the valley to its natural state. This, Hodel said, would relieve overcrowding in nearby Yosemite Valley. While environmentalists expressed interest, San Francisco officials reacted with the same outrage their predecessors had shown seventy-five years before. Meanwhile, Hetch Hetchy Valley lies under three hundred feet of water, submerged but not forgotten.
capitalism and a socialized economic order. Roosevelt and Wilson offered less radical prescriptions. TR preached his New Nationalism. The new corporate order was here to stay, he acknowledged, but big business must be strictly regulated in the public interest. The welfare of workers and consumers should be safeguarded, and the environment protected.

Wilson, by contrast, called his political vision the “New Freedom.” Warning that the new corporate order was choking off opportunity for ordinary Americans, he nostalgically evoked an era of small government, small businesses, and free competition. “The history of liberty,” he said, “is the history of the limitation of governmental power, not the increase of it.”

Roosevelt garnered 630,000 more votes than Taft, but the divided Republicans proved no match for the united Democrats (see Map 21.2). Wilson won the presidency, and the Democrats also took both houses of Congress. More than 900,000 voters opted for Debs and socialism.

The 1912 election linked the Democrats firmly with reform (except on the issue of race)—a link on which Franklin D. Roosevelt would build in the 1930s. The breakaway Progressive party demonstrated the strength of the reform impulse among grass-roots Republicans while leaving the national party itself in the grip of conservatives.

**National Progressivism**

**Phase II: Woodrow Wilson, 1913-1917**

The son and grandson of Presbyterian ministers, Wilson grew up in southern towns in a churchly atmosphere that shaped his oratorical style and moral outlook. Although slow in school (probably because of the learning disorder dyslexia), Wilson graduated from Princeton and earned a Ph.D. in political science from Johns Hopkins. He taught at Princeton and became its president in 1902. He lost support because of an unwillingness to compromise, and in 1910 left the academic world to enter politics. Three years later he was president of the United States.

Impressive in bearing, with piercing gray eyes, Wilson was an eloquent orator. But the idealism that inspired people could also alienate them. At his best, he excelled at political dealmaking. “He can walk on dead leaves and make no more noise than a tiger,” declared one awed politician. But he could also retreat into a fortress of absolute certitude that tolerated no opposition. During his years as president, all these facets of his personality would come into play.

In his first term, Wilson played a key leadership role as Congress enacted an array of reform measures. Despite the nostalgia for simpler times evoked in some of his campaign speeches, he proved ready to use government to address the problems of the new corporate order. Under Wilson, the national progressive movement gained powerful new momentum (see Table 21.2).

**Tariff and Banking Reform**

Tariff reform—long a goal of southern and agrarian Democrats—headed Wilson’s agenda. Breaking a precedent dating from Thomas Jefferson’s presidency, on April 8, 1913, Wilson appeared before Congress in person to read his tariff message. A low-tariff bill quickly passed the House but bogged down in the Senate. Showing his flair for drama, Wilson denounced the tariff lobbyists flooding into Washington. His censure led to a Senate investigation of lobbyists and of senators who profited from high tariffs. Stung by the publicity, the Senate slashed tariff rates even more than the House had done. The Underwood-Simmons Tariff reduced rates an average of 15 percent.

In June 1913 Wilson addressed Congress again, this time to call for banking and currency reform. The
nation’s banking system clearly needed overhauling. Totally decentralized, it lacked a strong central institution, a “lender of last resort” to help banks survive fiscal crises. The Panic of 1907, when many banks had failed, remained a vivid memory.

But no consensus existed on specifics. Many reformers wanted a publicly controlled central banking system. But the nation’s bankers, whose Senate spokesman was Nelson Aldrich, favored a privately controlled central bank similar to the Bank of England. The large banks of New York City advocated a strong central bank, preferably privately owned, so they could better compete with London banks in international finance. Others, including influential Virginia congressman Carter Glass, opposed any central banking authority, public or private.

| Table 21.2: Progressive Era Legislation, Court Rulings, and Constitutional Amendments |
| :--- | :--- |
| **Legislation** |  |
| **Act** | **Provisions** |
| 1902 National Reclamation Act | Funded dams and irrigation projects in the West. |
| 1906 Hepburn Act | Regulates railroad rates and other practices. |
| Pure Food and Drug Act | Imposes strict labeling requirements for food processors and pharmaceutical companies. |
| Meat Inspection Act | Requires federal inspection of packinghouses. |
| Antiquities Act | Protects archeological sites in Southwest. |
| 1909 Payne-Aldrich Tariff | Raises tariffs, deepens Republican split. |
| 1910 Mann Act | Antiprostitution measure; prohibits transporting a woman across state lines for “immoral purposes.” |
| Mann-Elkins Act | Strengthens powers of Interstate Commerce Commission. |
| 1913 Underwood-Simmons Tariff | Lowers tariff rates; Wilson plays key role. |
| Federal Reserve Act | Restructures U.S. money and banking system. |
| 1914 Federal Trade Commission Act | Creates FTC as federal watchdog agency over corporations. |
| Clayton Antitrust Act | Specifies illegal business practices. |
| Narcotics Act | Forbids distribution of addictive drugs except by physicians and pharmacists. |
| 1916 Federal Farm Loan Act | Enables farmers to secure low-interest federal loans. |
| Keating-Owen Act | Bans products manufactured by child labor from interstate commerce. |
| Adamson Act | Establishes eight-hour workday for interstate railway workers. |
| Workmen’s Compensation Act | Provides accident and injury projection for federal workers. |
| **Court Rulings** |  |
| **Court Case** | **Significance** |
| 1904 Northern Securities case | Supreme Court upholds antitrust suit against Northern Securities Company, a railroad conglomerate. |
| 1906 Lochner v. New York | Supreme Court overturns New York law setting maximum working hours for bakery workers. |
| 1908 Muller v. Oregon | Supreme Court upholds Oregon law setting maximum working hours for female laundry workers. |
| 1911 Standard Oil Co. v. U.S. | Supreme Court orders dissolution of Standard Oil. |
| 1927 Buck v. Bell | Supreme Court upholds Virginia sterilization law. |
| **Constitutional Amendments** |  |
| **Amendment** | **Provisions** |
| 1913 Sixteenth Amendment | Gives Congress authority to impose income tax. |
| Seventeenth Amendment | Requires the direct election of U.S. senators by voters. |
| 1919 Eighteenth Amendment | Prohibits the manufacture and sale of intoxicating liquors. |
| 1920 Nineteenth Amendment | Grants women the vote. |
No banking expert, Wilson listened to all sides. He did insist that the monetary system ultimately be publicly controlled. As the bargaining went on, Wilson played a crucial behind-the-scenes role. The result was the Federal Reserve Act of December 1913. A compromise measure, this law created twelve regional Federal Reserve banks under mixed public and private control. Each regional bank could issue U.S. dollars, called Federal Reserve notes, to the banks in its district to make loans to corporations and individual borrowers. Overall control of the system was assigned to the heads of the twelve regional banks and a Washington-based Federal Reserve Board (FRB), whose members were appointed by the president for fourteen-year-terms. (The secretary of the Treasury and the comptroller of the currency were made ex officio members.)

The Federal Reserve Act stands as Wilson’s greatest legislative achievement. Initially, the Federal Reserve’s authority was diffuse, but eventually the FRB, nicknamed “the Fed,” grew into the strong central monetary institution it remains today, adopting fiscal policies to prevent financial panics, promote economic growth, and dampen inflationary pressures.

### Regulating Business; Aiding Workers and Farmers

In 1914 Wilson and Congress turned to that perennial progressive cause, business regulation. Two key laws were the result: the Federal Trade Commission Act and the Clayton Antitrust Act. Though both sought a common goal, they embodied significantly different approaches.

The Federal Trade Commission Act took an administrative approach. This law created a new “watchdog” agency, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), with power to investigate suspected violations of federal regulations, require regular reports from corporations, and issue cease-and-desist orders (subject to judicial review) when it found unfair methods of competition.

The Clayton Antitrust Act, by contrast, took a legal approach. It listed specific corporate activities that could lead to federal lawsuits. The Sherman Act of 1890, although outlawing business practices in restraint of trade, had been vague about details. The Clayton Act spelled out a series of illegal practices, such as selling at a loss to undercut competitors.

Because some of the watchdogs Wilson appointed to the FTC were conservatives with big-business links, this agency proved ineffective. But under the Clayton Act, the Wilson administration filed antitrust suits against nearly a hundred corporations.

Leading a party historically identified with workers, Wilson supported the American Federation of Labor and defended workers’ right to organize. He also endorsed a Clayton Act clause exempting strikes, boycotts, and picketing from the antitrust laws’ prohibition of actions in restraint of trade.

In 1916 (a campaign year) Wilson and congressional Democrats enacted three important worker-protection laws. The Keating-Owen Act barred from interstate commerce products manufactured by child labor. (This law was declared unconstitutional in 1918, as was a similar law enacted in 1919.) The Adamson Act established an eight-hour day for interstate railway workers. The Workmen’s Compensation Act provided accident and injury protection to federal workers.

Other 1916 laws helped farmers. The Federal Farm Loan Act and the Federal Warehouse Act enabled farmers, using land or crops as security, to get low-interest federal loans. The Federal Highway Act, providing matching funds for state highway programs, benefited not only the new automobile industry but also farmers plagued by bad roads.

Like many progressives, Wilson’s sympathies for the underdog stopped at the color line. A Virginia native reared in Georgia, he displayed a patronizing attitude toward blacks, praised the racist movie *The Birth of a Nation*, and allowed southerners in his cabinet and in Congress (some of them powerful committee chairmen) to impose rigid segregation on all levels of the government.

### Progressivism and the Constitution

The probusiness bias of the courts in the late nineteenth century softened a bit in the Progressive Era. Evidence of the changing judicial climate came in *Muller v. Oregon* (1908), in which the Supreme Court upheld an Oregon ten-hour law for women laundry workers. Defending the constitutionality of the Oregon law was Boston attorney Louis Brandeis, who offered economic, medical, and sociological evidence of how long hours harmed women workers. Rejecting a legal claim long made by business, the high court held that such worker-protection laws did not violate employers’ rights under the due-process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. *Muller v. Oregon* marked a breakthrough in making the legal system more responsive to new social realities.

In 1916 Woodrow Wilson nominated Brandeis to the Supreme Court. Disapproving of Brandeis’s innovative
approach to the law, the conservative American Bar Association protested, as did the New York Times, the president of Harvard, and Republican leaders in Congress. Anti-Semites opposed Brandeis because he was a Jew. But Wilson stood by his nominee, and after a fierce battle, the Senate confirmed him.

These years also produced four amendments to the Constitution, the first since 1870. The Sixteenth (ratified in 1913) granted Congress the authority to tax income, thus ending a long legal battle. A Civil War income tax had been phased out in 1872. Congress had authorized an income tax in an 1894 tariff act, but in *Pollock v. Farmers’ Loan and Trust* (1895) the Supreme Court had not only ruled this measure unconstitutional, but also blasted it as “communistic.” This ruling, denounced by populists and then by progressives, had spurred the campaign for a constitutional amendment. Quickly exercising its new authority, in 1913 Congress imposed a graduated federal income tax with a maximum rate of 7 percent on incomes in excess of five hundred thousand dollars. Income-tax revenues helped the government pay for the expanded regulatory activities assigned to it by various progressive reform measures.

The Seventeenth Amendment (1913) mandated the direct election of U.S. senators by the voters, rather than their selection by state legislatures as provided by Article I of the Constitution. This amendment brought to fruition a reform first advocated by the Populists as a way of making the Senate less subject to corporate influence and more responsive to the popular will.

The next two amendments, although coming after World War I, culminated reform campaigns that we have already examined. The Eighteenth (1919) established nationwide prohibition of the manufacture, sale, or importation of “intoxicating liquors.” The Nineteenth (1920) granted women the vote. This remarkable wave of amendments underscored how profoundly the progressive impulse had transformed the political landscape.

**1916: Wilson Edges Out Hughes**

Wilson easily won renomination in 1916. The Republicans turned to Charles Evans Hughes, a Supreme Court justice and former New York governor. The Progressive party again courted Theodore Roosevelt, but TR’s reform interests had given way to an obsession with drawing the United States into the war that had broken out in Europe in 1914 (see Chapter 22). At his urging, the Progressives endorsed Hughes and effectively committed political suicide.

With the Republicans now more or less reunited, the election was extremely close. War-related issues loomed large. Wilson won the popular vote, but the electoral college outcome remained in doubt for several weeks as the California tally seesawed back and forth. Ultimately, Wilson carried the state by fewer than four thousand votes and, with it, the election.

Following the flurry of worker-protection laws in 1916, the progressive movement lost momentum as the nation’s attention turned from reform to war. A few reform measures enacted in the 1920s and a 1924 presidential campaign by an aging Senator La Follette under a revived Progressive party banner offered reminders of the progressive agenda. But the movement’s zest and drive clearly waned with the coming of World War I.

**Conclusion**

Progressivism in its many facets left a remarkable legacy not only in specific laws but also in a changed view of government. To be sure, this altered perspective had ideological roots in the American past, including Jeffersonian optimism about human perfectibility, Jacksonian opposition to special privilege, and the rising status of science and social research that had come with advances in higher education and in such academic disciplines as economics, sociology, and statistics.

But the progressives combined these diverse ingredients in creative new ways. By 1916 the consensus was that government should properly play a central social and economic role. The progressive movement expanded the meaning of democracy and challenged the cynical view that government was nothing but a tool of the rich. Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, together with governors like Robert La Follette, mayors like Tom Johnson, and scores of organizations pursuing many different reform agendas, vastly enlarged the role of government in American life.

Progressives did not seek “big government” for its own sake. Rather, they recognized that in an era of gargantuan industries, sprawling cities, and concentrated corporate power, government’s role had to grow correspondingly to serve the public interest, ensure a decent common life, and protect society’s more vulnerable members.

Unquestionably, this ideal often faltered in practice. Reform laws and regulatory agencies inspired by moral indignation and a vision of social justice often fell short of their purpose as emotional fervor gave way to bureaucratic routine. Indeed, reforms that the progressives...
envisioned as serving the larger society sometimes mainly benefited special interests. Corporations that initially fought regulation proved remarkably adept at manipulating the new regulatory state to their own advantage. Unquestionably, too, progressivism had its illiberal and coercive dimensions; on the issue of racial justice, its record was generally dismal. After all this has been acknowledged, however, the Progressive Era stands as a time when American politics seriously confronted the social upheavals wrought by industrialization. It was also a time when Americans learned to think of their government neither as remote and irrelevant nor as a plaything of the powerful, but rather as an arena of possibility where public issues and social problems could be thrashed out. Twenty years later, another great reform movement, the New Deal, would draw heavily on progressivism’s legacy.

## For Further Reference

### Readings


## Chronology; 1900–1917

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>Anti-Saloon League founded.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) founded.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Socialist Party of America organized.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theodore Dreiser, <em>Sister Carrie.</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Carrie Chapman Catt becomes president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA).</td>
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<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>Assassination of McKinley; Theodore Roosevelt becomes president.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>J. P. Morgan forms United States Steel Company.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Frank Norris, <em>The Octopus.</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1902</td>
<td>Roosevelt mediates coal strike.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jane Addams, <em>Democracy and Social Ethics.</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Great Train Robbery</em> (movie).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Wright Brothers’ flight.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>Roosevelt elected president.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lincoln Steffens, <em>The Shame of the Cities.</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) organized.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Niagara Movement established by W. E. B. Du Bois and others.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Gifford Pinchot appointed head of U.S. Forest Service.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>Upton Sinclair, <em>The Jungle</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>William James, <em>Pragmatism.</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>William Howard Taft elected president.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Model T Ford introduced.</td>
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<td>1909</td>
<td>Ballinger-Pinchot controversy.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) founded.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Herbert Croly, <em>The Promise of American Life.</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Daniel Burnham, <em>Plan of Chicago.</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>Jane Addams, <em>Twenty Years at Hull House.</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Insurgents curb power of House Speaker Joseph Cannon.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Frederick W. Taylor, <em>Scientific Management.</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>Republican party split; Progressive (Bull Moose) party founded.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Woodrow Wilson elected president.</td>
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<td>International Opium Treaty.</td>
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<td>1913</td>
<td>Thirty thousand march for woman suffrage in New York.</td>
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<td>1914</td>
<td>American Social Hygiene Association founded.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mary Ware Dennett founded National Birth Control League.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>Wilson reelected.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>John Dewey, <em>Democracy and Education.</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Margaret Sanger opens nation’s first birth-control clinic in Brooklyn, New York.</td>
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<td>National Park Service created.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Louis Brandeis appointed to Supreme Court.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


**WEBSITES**

**Muckrakers**
http://www.acusd.edu/~freeman/
A brief history, with links to writings by Ida Tarbell, Upton Sinclair, and other Progressive Era journalists.

**The 1912 Election**
http://1912.history.ohio-state.edu/
A well-designed site including details of the campaign, the candidates, and the issues.

**The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, March 25, 1911**
http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/
Extensive collection of primary documents, including newspaper stories and firsthand accounts.

**Woman Suffrage and the 19th Amendment: Primary Sources, Activities, and Links to Related Web Sites for Educators and Students**
National Archives and Records Administration
http://www.nara.gov/education/teaching/woman/home.html
Rich array of sources and useful links.

For additional works, please consult the Bibliography at the end of the book.