

United States History II Summer Assignment
America In the 19th Century

The Post Civil War era, encompassing Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, which spanned the final three decades of the 19th century, was one of the most dynamic, contentious, and volatile periods in American history. In Reconstruction, the United States pursued some of its noblest values and committed some of its darkest betrayals. Black freedmen discovered that freedom didn't mean citizenship, and angry Southern whites pushed back against federal power. America's industrial economy exploded, generating unprecedented opportunities for individuals to build great fortunes but also leaving many farmers and workers struggling merely for survival. Overall national wealth increased more than fivefold, a staggering increase, but one that was accompanied by what many saw as an equally staggering disparity between rich and poor. Eventually the pervasive insecurity of the original Gilded Age inspired a major period of reform known as the Progressive Era. Many of the solutions earlier advanced by workers and farmers were adopted by middle class activists and reform minded leaders within business and government, all of them anxious to correct what they saw as troubling inequalities in America's economic and political order.

In the first unit, we will be addressing the following question: **Did the benefits achieved at the turn of the 20th century outweigh the costs incurred?**

For your summer assignment, you will be examining these two periods in American history.

Create a Google Document, and title it "USII Summer Assignment - Your Name". Your responses to the two portions of the assignment will be recorded in this document and submitted electronically on the first day of class.

Part A - The Reconstruction Era

Read the article summarizing Reconstruction, its goals, and failures, which begins on page 2 of this packet. Alternatively, You may wish to watch the following video clips from the PBS documentary *Reconstruction: America After the Civil War*, hosted by historian Henry Louis Gates, Jr. The documentary first aired in 2019, and contains numerous images, writings, and documents of the era. The documentary clips are linked below.

- [Introduction to Reconstruction](#)
- [Congressional Reconstruction](#)
- [The Lost Cause](#)
- [Resistance](#)
- [Reasons for Failure - Democrats Gain Power](#)
- [Reasons for Failure - The Supreme Court](#)
- [Reasons for Failure - The Wrong Impression](#)
- [Compromise of 1877](#)

Once you have read the article and reviewed the video clips, use what you have read to write a properly formatted paragraph responding to the question:

Why was Reconstruction unable to effectively and permanently achieve its goals and objectives?

Your paragraph must consist of a topic sentence which responds to the question, and at least four points of specific evidence from the article or videos that support your argument. These specific pieces of evidence **MUST BE PARAPHRASED**.

Part B: The Gilded Age

Read the article that provides an overview of the Gilded Age and discusses important areas of American life during this era. As you read, identify and explain 10 important characteristics of this era.

All students should read the introduction, which begins on page 6 of this packet. Students should then read the subsection that corresponds to the letter of their last name:

- A to D - Economy (page 7)
- E to H - Politics (page 11)
- I to M - Labor (page 15)
- N to R - Ideology (page 20)
- S to Z - Social (page 25)

As you read, identify and explain 10 important characteristics of your assigned aspect of the Gilded Age.

Example:

- Native Americans were moved onto reservations, cutting them off from their culture and forcing them to live in poverty.

This should be part of the same document as your summary paragraph on Reconstruction.

This is a graded assignment. This document containing both your Reconstruction paragraph and your 10 characteristics of the Gilded Age will be digitally submitted on the first day of class. You must have it accessible at that time.

Reconstruction - A Summary

Even though the Confederacy lost the Civil War, it succeeded, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in winning the ideological war that determined how Americans viewed the Civil War era. For much of the 20th century, the dominant view of Reconstruction, repeated in many high school and college textbooks, was that it was a period of "bayonet rule," during which vindictive northern carpetbaggers and their white and black puppets engaged in an orgy of corruption and misrule. According to this view, a courageous President Johnson, seeking to carry out Lincoln's policy of reconciliation, was confronted by a hostile Congress trying to punish the defeated South.

In recent years, this interpretation of Reconstruction has been thoroughly dismantled. It is now clear that Reconstruction was a failed, but admirable, attempt to adjust to the realities of emancipation: To

guarantee the civil and political rights of former slaves and forge a more just society out of the ruins of slavery. President Johnson's reconstruction policy, far from being a continuation of Lincoln's, was steadfastly opposed to protecting the rights of African Americans.

Reconstruction was the most daring experiment in American history. It represented an attempt to transform the institutions and patterns of social relations of the Old South. It gave black Americans in the South their first taste of political power. Out of Reconstruction came constitutional amendments that extended citizenship and voting rights to African Americans. This era also witnessed the federal government's first efforts to create social welfare programs.

In the end, Reconstruction failed to establish a less racially divided society. Its failure left the entire country with the unfinished task of achieving full economic and political equality for the descendants of slaves.

Ex-slaves expressed their newly-won freedom in diverse ways. Many couples, forbidden to marry during slavery, took the opportunity to formalize their unions. Others, who had lived apart from their families on separate plantations, were finally free to reside with their spouses and children. As an expression of their freedom, many freedmen dropped their slave names, adopted new surnames, and insisted on being addressed as "mister" or misses." Many ex-slaves left farms or plantations for towns or cities "where freedom was free-er." Shocked at seeing former slaves transformed into free women and men, many southern whites complained of "betrayal" and "ingratitude" when freedmen left their plantations. In many parts of the South, the end of the war was followed by outbursts of white rage. White mobs whipped, clubbed, and murdered ex-slaves.

Immediately following the war, all-white southern legislatures enacted "black codes," designed to force ex-slaves to work on plantations, where they would be put to work in gangs. These codes denied African Americans the right to purchase or even rent land. Vagrancy laws allowed authorities to arrest blacks "in idleness" (including many children) and assign them to a chain gang or auction them off to a planter for as long as a year. The more stringent black codes also barred ex-slaves from owning weapons, marrying whites, and assembling after sunset. Other statutes required blacks to have written proof of employment and barred them from leaving plantations.

During Reconstruction, former slaves--and many small white farmers--became trapped in a new system of economic exploitation known as sharecropping. Lacking capital and land of their own, former slaves were forced to work for large landowners. Initially, planters, with the support of the Freedmen's Bureau, sought to restore gang labor under the supervision of white overseers. But the freedmen, who wanted autonomy and independence, refused. Ultimately, sharecropping emerged as a sort of compromise.

Instead of cultivating land in gangs supervised by overseers, landowners divided plantations into 20 to 50 acre plots suitable for farming by a single family. In exchange for land, a cabin, and supplies, sharecroppers agreed to raise a cash crop (usually cotton) and to give half the crop to their landlord. The high interest rates landlords and sharecroppers charged for goods bought on credit (sometimes

as high as 70 percent a year) transformed sharecropping into a system of economic dependency and poverty.

The failure of Reconstruction was not inevitable. There were moments of possibility when it seemed imaginable that former slaves might achieve genuine freedom. In early 1866, Congressional Republicans, appalled by mass killing of ex-slaves and adoption of restrictive black codes, seized control of Reconstruction from President Johnson. Congress denied representatives from the former Confederate states their Congressional seats, passed the Civil Rights Act of 1866, and wrote the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, extending citizenship rights to African Americans and guaranteeing them equal protection of the laws. The 14th Amendment also reduced representation in Congress of any southern state that deprived African Americans of the vote.

In 1867, Congress overrode a presidential veto in order to pass an act that divided the South into military districts that placed the former Confederate states under martial law pending their adoption of constitutions guaranteeing civil liberties to former slaves. The Reconstruction Act of 1867 gave African American men in the South the right to vote three years before ratification of the 15th Amendment. With the vote came representation. Freedmen served in state legislatures and Hiram Revels became the first African American to sit in the U.S. Senate. In 1870, the country went even further by ratifying the 15th Amendment, which forbade restricting voting rights on the basis of race.

The Republican governments were seen as extravagant and expensive, but they gave the South its first public school systems, asylums, and roads. Southern Republicans sought to modernize the South by building railroads and providing free public education and other social services. The Reconstruction governments drew up democratic state constitutions, expanded women's rights, provided debt relief, and established the South's first state-funded schools. Meanwhile, the first institutions of higher education for blacks were established in the South. Black colleges founded during Reconstruction included Fisk University in Nashville in 1866, Howard University in Washington in 1867, and Virginia's Hampton Institute in 1868.

Reconstruction was overthrown by a political movement known as Redemption, which reestablished white supremacy in the South. The main strategy used to overthrow Reconstruction was economic intimidation and physical violence. Secret organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, founded in Tennessee in 1866, and the Knights of the White Camellia were dedicated to ending Republican rule and preventing blacks from voting. Members of these organizations included judges, lawyers, and clergymen as well as farmers and poor whites. In 1870 and 1871, Congress passed the Force Act and the Ku Klux Klan Act which gave the president the power to use federal troops to prevent the denial of voting rights. Activities of groups like the Ku Klux Klan declined, but the campaign of intimidation was successful in keeping many African Americans from the polls. By 1876, Republican governments had been toppled in all but three states.

On average, the South's bi-racial Republican state governments lasted just four-and-a-half years. During the 1870s, internal divisions within the Republican Party, white terror, and northern apathy allowed southern white Democrats to return to power. As early as 1872, many former abolitionists believed that their aims had been achieved. Slavery had been abolished and citizenship and voting

rights had been established by Constitutional Amendment. The financial panic of 1873 and the subsequent economic depression helped bring Reconstruction to its eventual end. Bank failures, corporate collapses, and rising unemployment helped Democrats regain a majority in the House of Representative in 1874. No further money would be spent on Reconstruction, and Northern attention turned away from Reconstruction efforts to their own economic struggles.

The Election of 1876, between Democrat Samuel Tilden and Republican Rutherford B. Hayes, was plagued by accusations of voter fraud, intimidation, and competing sets of results from several southern states. A government committee voted on party lines, 8-7, to certify Hayes' electoral votes and give him the election. Despite Democratic outrage and threats of a filibuster, a deal was struck at a meeting in February 1877. Democratic leaders accepted Hayes's election in exchange for Republican promises to withdraw federal troops from the South, provide federal funding for internal improvements in the South, and name a prominent Southerner to the president's cabinet. When the federal troops were withdrawn, the last remaining Republican governments in Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina collapsed, bringing Reconstruction to a final end.

Under the so-called Compromise of 1877, the national government would no longer intervene in southern affairs. This would permit the imposition of racial segregation and the disfranchisement of black voters.

In many ways, the years of Reconstruction failed to deliver on the promises it offered. Despite a four year civil war that had freed four million slaves and destroyed half the South's farm implements and livestock, ratification of constitutional amendments abolishing slavery, guaranteeing equal rights, and extending the vote to African Americans, much would appear unchanged. Southern representatives had returned to Congress, and they were similar to those who had served before the war. Many had served in the army and government of the Confederacy. In each of the southern states, the Democratic Party was securely in control. The overwhelming majority of African Americans would still be living in the South, working as farm laborers on land that they did not own.

Fundamental changes had taken place. Chattel slavery had been defeated. The gang system of labor, enforced by the whip, was dead. Incredibly, about 20 percent of African Americans in the South managed to acquire land by 1880. And through the 1880s, sizable numbers of African American men in the South would continue to vote. Real gains had been won, even though full equality remained an unfulfilled promise.

Like an earthquake, Reconstruction shook southern society's foundations then subsided. But it left the national landscape forever changed. The first black institutions of higher learning were founded. Equally important, it was during Reconstruction that the institutional foundations of the modern black community in the South were laid, including independent black churches and a growing number of black landowners, businessmen, clergymen, and teachers. With the passage of the 14th Amendment, mandating equal rights for all citizens, and the 15th Amendment, forbidding states to deny the right to vote because of race, the possibilities for later attacks on discrimination had been established.

Reconstruction's failure also carried long-term negative consequences. Racism became more deeply embedded in American society. An increasing number of Southerners were reduced to tenant farming. One political party, the Democratic Party, monopolized political power. Violence kept immigrants from migrating to the region. The roots of half a century of southern poverty had been planted.

By 1877, northerners were tired of Reconstruction; weary of battling southern elites, scandal, and radicalism; and had largely lost interest in supporting black civil rights. Theoretically, North and South reached a compromise: black civil liberties and racial equality would be set aside in order to put the Union back together. Historian Eric Foner noted, "What remains certain is that Reconstruction failed, and that for blacks its failure was a disaster whose magnitude cannot be obscured by the genuine accomplishments that did endure." As it turned out, blacks would not regain the support of the federal government until the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

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## THE GILDED AGE INTRODUCTION & ANALYSIS

### Key Points

- Rapid economic growth generated vast wealth during the Gilded Age
- New products and technologies improved middle-class quality of life
- Industrial workers and farmers did not share in the new prosperity, working long hours in dangerous conditions for low pay
- Gilded Age politicians were largely corrupt and ineffective
- Most Americans during the Gilded Age wanted political and social reforms, but they disagreed strongly on what kind of reform

### The "Gilded Age"

Mark Twain called the late 19th century the "Gilded Age." By this, he meant that the period was glittering on the surface but corrupt underneath. In the popular view, the late 19th century was a period of greed and guile: of rapacious Robber Barons, unscrupulous speculators, and corporate buccaneers, of shady business practices, scandal-plagued politics, and vulgar display.

It is easy to caricature the Gilded Age as an era of corruption, conspicuous consumption, and unfettered capitalism. But it is more useful to think of this as modern America's formative period, when an agrarian society of small producers were transformed into an urban society dominated by industrial corporations.

The late 19th century saw the creation of a modern industrial economy. A national transportation and communication network was created, the corporation became the dominant form of business organization, and a managerial revolution transformed business operations.

An era of intense partisanship, the Gilded Age was also an era of reform. The Civil Service Act sought to curb government corruption by requiring applicants for certain governmental jobs to take a competitive examination. The Interstate Commerce Act sought to end discrimination by railroads against small shippers and the Sherman Antitrust Act outlawed business monopolies.

These were turbulent years that saw labor violence, rising racial tension, militancy among farmers, and discontent among the unemployed. Burdened by heavy debts and falling farm prices, many farmers joined the Populist Party, which called for an increase in the amount of money in circulation, government assistance to help farmers repay loans, tariff reductions, and a graduated income tax.

## ECONOMY IN THE GILDED AGE

### Understanding the Gilded Age Economy

Many argue that America's extraordinary economic development during the Gilded Age can be summarized by a handful of statistics. In 1860, the nation's total wealth was \$16 billion; by 1900, it was \$88 billion. This translated into a per capita increase from \$500 to \$1100. Driving this growth was an explosion in American manufacturing—in 1869, the manufacturing sector of the economy generated \$3 billion, a figure which rose to \$13 billion by 1900. This was accompanied by an increase in America's labor force from 13 million to 19 million people.

Similarly, many economic historians suggest that America's economic development can also be reduced to a rather simple formula—the convergence of a handful of critical ingredients.

For starters, there was an unprecedented explosion of new industrial and agricultural technology. On the farms, steam tractors and mechanical reapers, harvesters, and combines all greatly increased agricultural productivity. In the factories, the Bessemer blast furnace and the Siemens-Martin open hearth process radically changed steelmaking. In America's office buildings, cash registers, adding machines, and typewriters transformed the way people did business. Alexander Graham Bell's telephone, developed in 1876, revolutionized business communication, while Thomas Edison's work with electricity lit homes and powered factories.

Second, these growing industries generated goods for growing urban markets. During the Gilded Age, America's cities exploded. By 1900, America's 30 million city dwellers represented 40% of the American population—up from 20% in 1860. About half of these new urban residents were immigrants, the vast majority of them from Europe. During the 1880s, five million people came to America from overseas. During the 1890s, immigration slowed—but there was still a net arrival of 3.7 million people from abroad.

The other half of this new urban population migrated to the cities from America's rural areas. Contrary to the popular myth that the American West would provide a safety valve for America's overcrowded cities, migration actually flowed in the opposite direction, from the country to the city. The new residents came for a variety of reasons—some came for the jobs offered by the expanding manufacturing sector, while others came for the conveniences and excitement city life offered. The



68,000 African-Americans who moved to northern cities from the South during the 1870s came for their own more complex and distinctive reasons.

Third, America's expanding infrastructure brought new goods and a growing population together. America's railroad network grew from 35,000 miles of track in 1865 to 242,000 in 1900. In addition, Pullman Palace sleeper cars made travel more comfortable, and refrigerated boxcars enabled meat, vegetables, and fruits to be transported across the country.

And finally, new forms of business organization were devised that supported economic growth. Confronted by the ragged cycles of an immature industrial economy—volatile periods of boom and bust, overproduction and then contraction in individual industries—industrialists experimented with new forms of organization. They began by forming pools or cartels. In these loose associations, former competitors became informal partners and tried to smooth out the market through the adoption of "gentlemen's agreements" on production levels and prices. Soon these informal alliances evolved into more formal cooperative ventures among owners. By forming "trusts" and "holding companies," they avoided state laws forbidding monopolies while reaping the benefits of unified control over entire industries. In these associations, the stock certificates from several companies were exchanged for trust certificates, and then a board of trustees exercised governance over all of the theoretically independent companies within the trust.

Technology, markets, infrastructure, capital, organization—the unprecedented economic growth of the Gilded Age can be attributed to textbook ingredients for economic development, a series of large structural transformations in the economy.

### **The Importance of Culture**

Other economic historians, however, insist that this sort of analysis neglects equally critical ideological contributors to Gilded Age growth. For starters, economic development was facilitated by a supportive culture—one which placed confidence in industrialists and businessmen and refused to permit government to interfere in their efforts. Most Americans embraced the principles of laissez faire economics, which argued that economic forces should be allowed to work themselves out with maximum freedom and minimal government interference. Part of the logic was purely economic—it was believed that government involvement tended to hinder, or even prevent, economic development. But part of the argument was ethical. Laissez faire advocates argued that government interference distorted the natural and equitable forces of economic development. Laissez faire ideals enabled industrialists and entrepreneurs to operate with public support and without government interference.

### **John D. Rockefeller**

John D. Rockefeller, trained as a bookkeeper, built a monopoly over the oil business in less than a decade and brought order to a chaotic vital industry.

In 1868, when he formed Standard Oil, the company was just one of thirty oil refining companies in Cleveland, processing only 5% of the nation's total oil. Over the next decade, Rockefeller built his monopoly by cultivating preferential treatment from the railroads that hauled his product. He



negotiated secret contracts in which he leveraged his growing market share for lower transportation rates. These "rebates" enabled him to ship oil at a lower cost, allowing him to undercut his competitors by selling at a lower price. But rebates were just the first step in his scheme. As his share of the oil refining business grew even larger, he was able to demand "drawbacks" from the railroads that desperately wanted his business—that is, a percentage of the hauling fees paid to them by other refineries. In other words, Rockefeller made money off the shipment of other refineries' oil.

By the mid-1880s, Rockefeller refined 90% of the nation's oil. By controlling this vital bottleneck in the production process, he had established a virtual monopoly over the entire industry. With almost every drop of the country's oil flowing through his refineries, he was able to shape price structures and production decisions at every other phase of the process, from the oil wells to consumers' homes. His method of controlling one aspect of the production process—labeled horizontal integration—was soon imitated by other industrialists also anxious to eliminate their competitors and to bring a similar stability (and profitability) to their industries.

### **Andrew Carnegie**

Andrew Carnegie did for steel what Rockefeller did for oil. In the early 1870s, he realized that the steel rails being introduced in England were superior to the iron rails used in America, and that it was only a matter of time before American railroads imitated their English cousins. And so he set about investing in steel..

Carnegie could be as deliberate as Rockefeller in crushing his competitors—and more aggressive in crushing his workers' attempt to unionize. Carnegie used "vertical integration" to bring stability to the steel industry—he worked to control the entire production process, from the iron mines through steel production and distribution. By the time he retired, Carnegie's holdings were enormous; they included pig iron works, coke refineries, and a line of steamships, as well as steel works. But the public was more accepting of this sort of industrial monopoly than they were of Rockefeller's creation of a market bottleneck through horizontal integration; it seemed better to honor the spirit of market competition.

### **John Pierpont Morgan**

J. P. Morgan completed the triad of America's great Gilded Age industrial giants. He similarly pursued monopoly-like control over his sector of the economy—but he ultimately established a more varied set of holdings than either Rockefeller or Carnegie. As a result, by the end of the century, his assets included the South Atlantic, Reading, Erie, and Northern Pacific Railroads, and he held major stakes in the B&O, and the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroads as well. But not content with controlling just the railroads, Morgan also built General Electric into a great industrial conglomerate by merging the Edison General and Thompson-Houston Electric Companies. And in 1901, he forged a merger between Carnegie Steel and several other companies to form U.S. Steel. Morgan's financial moves built the great industrial corporations that would lead the American economy's charge into the twentieth century.

## What's Missing?

The same economy that gave Carnegie, Rockefeller, and Morgan the opportunity to amass the largest fortunes in the history of the world also required unskilled industrial laborers to work an average of 60 hours per week for 10 cents an hour. (Accounting for inflation, 10 cents in 1880 was worth about as much as \$2 today.)

A complete economic history of the Gilded Age thus requires an understanding of the nation's expanding underclass. But as these people left fewer records, historians have had to patch together the character of their existence by constructing a different sort of snapshot. Their lives were lived in America's growing urban slums, places most middle-class and wealthy Americans tried to avoid. More than a million people were crammed into New York's 32,000 infamous dumbbell tenements—overcrowded, poorly ventilated fire traps. Chicago's slums were three times more densely packed than Calcutta's.

In these living conditions, disease ran rampant—cholera, typhoid, tuberculosis, consumption. Nor did it help that city governments could not build water and sewage facilities fast enough to serve their rapidly swelling populations. In New Orleans, the census reported that pedestrians sank in the mud made by the "oozing of foul privy vaults." In Philadelphia, the city's water supply, the Delaware River, was replenished daily with 13,000 gallons of untreated sewage.

The economic history of the late nineteenth century thus cannot be too narrowly summarized. The period's label, "Gilded Age," comes close to capturing the juxtaposition of enormous wealth alongside crushing poverty. But even this only hints at the underside of America's booming economy.

## POLITICS IN THE GILDED AGE

### Political Corruption

The political history of the Gilded Age is usually reduced to a tale of corruption and scandal. And indeed there were plenty of both to go around, at all levels of public life. The administration of President Ulysses S. Grant was a cesspool of graft and abuse. Treasury Department officers demanded bribes from importers if they wanted their goods to be processed efficiently. The Naval Department awarded contracts on the basis of favoritism rather than competitive bidding. The Secretary of War accepted bribes from merchants interested in lucrative trading franchises on Indian lands. Even Grant's personal secretary conspired with whiskey distillers to avoid excise taxes.

At the municipal level, the corruption was just as great—and the headlines were just as sensational. The political machines that dominated urban politics distributed city jobs to loyal supporters regardless of ability, and they awarded city contracts for construction and services to those offering the largest bribes. As cities swelled with migrants moving from rural areas and immigrants arriving from Europe, roads had to be built, sewer and gas lines had to be laid, and police and fire departments had to be staffed. Political insiders grew rich meeting the needs of the rapidly expanding cities.

But the corruption that plagued American politics was only the most sensational shortcoming of American political life during these decades. More subtle, but just as problematic, was the general lethargy that crippled national government and the failure of either of the major parties to advance an agenda adequate to the needs of America's rapidly changing society. As America's industries expanded, as America's workers wrestled with the new demands of the industrial workplace, as industrialists devised new business structures to tame the market, as immigrants arrived in record numbers, and as America's cities swelled to the breaking point, the national government proved unable to do much more than argue about tariff rates and forms of currency.

### A Dynamic but Unambitious Democracy

On the surface, American politics appeared vital and dynamic. Voter participation rates were extraordinarily high. On average, 78% of the nation's eligible voters voted in the presidential elections between 1876 and 1896. And often these contests were decided by razor-thin margins—Presidents Garfield, Cleveland, and Harrison all won by less than 1% in the elections of 1880, 1884, and 1888. And while the Republican Party dominated the presidency during these years, the Democrats consistently controlled the House of Representatives.

Yet beneath this statistical portrait of an energetic and keenly contested political culture lay political parties that were largely indistinguishable from one another on most matters of policy and an electorate that chose sides more on the basis of ethnicity, religion, and culture than ideology or policy. In other words, American political life during these years was dynamic and participatory. But there was not much substance to it at all.

A handful of issues dominated the national agenda for decades—tariffs and currency reform and, to a lesser extent, civil service reform. And in the absence of more expansive visions, the two parties waged battle largely for the spoils of patronage that victory would bring. Voters, in similar fashion, marched in parades, attended rallies, and vehemently claimed party affiliation more as an exercise in identity formation than in an effort to chart public policy.

It is no wonder that the presidents elected during this era were largely forgettable figures (except for Grover Cleveland, who is memorable mainly for weighing more than 300 pounds). They were loyal party functionaries who came to office with relatively narrow policy ambitions but many favors to repay. Benjamin Harrison calculated that he spent four to five hours a day on questions regarding patronage. Even Cleveland, who gained national recognition as the reform mayor of Buffalo, discovered that "dreadful, damnable office seeking" demanded an extraordinary amount of his attention.

### **Explaining the Political Malaise**

Why American political life became so uninspired is hard to say. Several factors converged to make the Gilded Age—politically, the years between Presidents Grant and McKinley—so unimaginative and unambitious. For starters, the very competitiveness of politics during these years encouraged a sort of middling political strategy. With so many contests decided by such narrow margins, the parties aimed toward the center of the electorate and vied for the handful of swing voters that could turn an election their way. Moreover, in most presidential elections, sixteen states could be counted on to vote Republican, while fourteen reliably voted Democrat. That left just five swing states—California, Connecticut, Indiana, New York, and Nevada—whose middle-of-the-road voters had to be courted cautiously by the rival parties. This was not an electoral map that encouraged bold agendas.

In addition, there were certain philosophical factors inhibiting a more robust governmental response to the changes and challenges of the period. Most Americans embraced the laissez faire economic theories that served industrial leaders so well. According to these theories, government intervention into the economy would only gum up the wheels of progress. These economic ideas dovetailed nicely with the constitutional conservatism that dominated this period. Most Americans believed that the powers of the federal government were constitutionally severely limited. After almost a century of debate, policymakers agreed that the federal government could generate revenues through a [tariff](#), that had a certain narrow authority over interstate internal improvements such as railroads, and that the federal government was responsible for monitoring American currency. But beyond this, there was little agreement over specifics, and a general tendency to err on the side of caution in interpreting the constitution's allocation of governmental authority within the economy.

It was therefore the convergence of a series of demographic, historical, and philosophical factors that bred the lethargic political culture of the Gilded Age. It took the formation of a third party focusing on the needs of American farmers—the entrance into the political arena of a group of outsiders—to shake up the system and point American political development in a new direction.

### **The Farmers' Revolt**

America's farmers experienced a dramatic shift in fortunes over the course of the Gilded Age. In the years after the Civil War, growing urban markets and increased exports to Europe inspired agricultural expansion into the Midwest. Between 1860 and 1900, farmers placed 430 million new acres under cultivation. To assist them in their work, new technologies and new fertilizers rapidly increased productivity. And America's expanding network of railroads enabled Midwestern farmers to transport their crops to eastern markets and ports.

But by 1880, farmers' once lucrative markets had weakened. Increased production in Europe and South America, and European tariffs that blocked American exports, left American farmers facing increased competition and falling prices. In addition, farmers experienced the flip side of their new technology—increased productivity meant that market saturation could be achieved by fewer men. By 1900, one farmer could produce as much wheat as it had taken twenty to produce in 1860.

As domestic and foreign markets shrank, farmers' prospects dimmed, especially since many carried large debt burdens optimistically taken on during the preceding boom decades. But rather than go broke quietly, farmers attempted to adapt the organizational lessons of industry and labor to their own sector of the economy. They began to organize and experiment with the benefits of cooperation and size. The Grange (founded in 1867) and the Farmers' Alliance (founded in 1877) introduced marketing and equipment cooperatives, collectively owned mills, and even credit unions. But by 1890, farmers had decided that they needed to take their organizational efforts to the next level—so they formed their own political party. In July 1892, 1300 delegates gathered at Omaha, Nebraska to write a national platform and select a presidential nominee—The People's (or Populist) Party was born.

### **The Populist Platform**

United and given direction by their conspiratorial analysis of farmers' predicament, the Populist Party advanced an ambitious agenda that called for unprecedented levels of government involvement in the economy. Arguing that the Interstate Commerce Commission, created in 1877 to regulate the railroads, had proven completely inadequate to this task, they proposed that the government assume ownership of the railroads, as well as the telegraph lines. Complaining that the current network of national and state banks charged excessively high interest rates on rural borrowers, they recommended the creation of "postal savings banks" controlled by locally elected officials.

To address what they perceived as inequities in local and state tax systems, the Populists argued that property taxes should be replaced by a graduated income tax. After all, they argued, in an industrial economy acreage was a poor indicator of wealth. And to redress what they saw as inequities in land ownership, they proposed that the land reclaimed through the nationalization of the railroads be made available to agrarian settlers.

By the middle of the 1890s, the farmers had built a national political party with growing membership throughout the South and Midwest. And unlike the other major parties, they had advanced a creative and pragmatic solution for the farmers' problems. (What effect the farmers' solution would have had on the other sectors of the economy was another question entirely, of course.) Unlike the other parties, the Populists had managed to shake off many of the philosophical and historical inhibitions

that had limited the national government for the previous thirty years. And, for better or for worse, they had forced the other parties to take notice.

### **The Fate of Third Parties**

The Democrats were the hardest hit by the farmers' defections from their party to the Populists. They, far more than the Republicans, relied on southern and western votes. And so they did what America's major political parties usually do when facing a challenge from a third party—they co-opted one of their challengers' issues and stole most of their thunder. At the 1896 Democratic National Convention, Nebraska Congressman William Jennings Bryan delivered a thundering speech in which he railed against the economic inequities facing farmers.

The Populists were left in quandary. Many among the rank and file had earlier encouraged joining forces with the Democrats. Others felt that if they allowed themselves to be absorbed by the Democrats, their full agenda and the distinctive character of their movement would be lost. The People's Party followed the Democrats in naming Bryan its nominee.

The decision to embrace Bryan may have been the judicious course, but the Populist Party would never be the same. Much of the crusade-like enthusiasm that had animated the party's rank-and-file was lost in the decision to accept the candidate of the old, established party. And when Bryan was defeated by Republican William McKinley in the general election, many Populists lost confidence in political action altogether.

But while the Populist Party would never recover, the Populists' insurgency had produced a revolution of sorts in American politics. They had, at least for a moment, broken the stranglehold of the two traditional parties and produced a viable third alternative for American voters. They had articulated a creative and expansive platform that spoke to real issues left unaddressed by the other parties. And they had scared the Democrats and the Republicans to death. In the decades that followed, both parties would recognize the need not just to reach out to these disaffected voters, but to re-imagine the role of government in this new industrial era.

## LABOR IN THE GILDED AGE

### The Great Railroad Strike of 1877

The widespread labor violence that threatened, by 1890, to spin out of control had exploded onto the national scene in 1877 with a railroad strike that crippled transportation throughout the northeast. There had been strikes before in America—but nothing that matched the scope and violence of this one. In retrospect, it is not surprising that this period of tumultuous labor unrest began with the railroads. The competition and costs within the industry led to harsh labor practices—fifteen-hour days, low wages, and extremely hazardous work conditions—as companies struggled to gain any advantage in the market. The life of a railroad operator was so dangerous that life insurance companies routinely refused to provide coverage.

The railroads were thus a combustible industry. In 1877, when the owners of the Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) Railroad announced a pay cut—the fourth in as many years—workers walked off the job. They walked off first in Camden Junction, Maryland, but as word spread up and down the line, other B&O employees, workers from rival railroads, and even workers from entirely different industries abandoned their jobs in sympathy. Together, this growing mass of workers attacked railroad yards, burning trains and tearing up tracks. The violence was the worst in Pittsburgh, where a crowd of some 5000 workers fought 650 federal troops in a pitched battle. The workers laid waste to the railroad yard, burning more than 500 cars, 104 locomotives, and 39 buildings. The troops exacted a more deadly toll—25 people were killed when they fired into the rioting crowd. The entire bloody scene seemed to portend a bleak future of labor violence or even outright class warfare.

Military force eventually restored order along the nation's railroad lines, but not before strikers had destroyed more than \$10 million worth of property and terrified middle-class observers of the events. Throughout the northeast, the middle class had witnessed workers band together to confront industrialists and even federal troops. Local militia, moreover—supposedly the enforcers of law and order—had in many cases joined up with the strikers rather than fighting against them to protect railroad property. (Perhaps this shouldn't have been surprising; most militiamen were working people themselves, subject to the same low wages and dangerous conditions.) And the most sophisticated observers realized that this amazing outpouring of working-class anger had occurred spontaneously, without any sort of union organization coordinating the action. This had been a "wildcat" strike, a spontaneous explosion of worker discontent. And many realized that it spoke volumes about the depth of worker dissatisfaction—and an emerging collective awareness among workers that they shared a common plight in the new industrial economy.

### The Knights of Labor

But in the decade following the railroad strike, unions grew rapidly. The most ambitious of these was the Knights of Labor. Founded in 1869, the Knights sought to build a comprehensive organization uniting workers of all races, genders, ethnicities, and occupations.

During the 1880s, the Knights grew rapidly. By 1885, the organization claimed 100,000 members. And in that year it experienced its greatest success. When the Wabash Railroad, one of the railroads



within Jay Gould's Southwest System, tried to break a local union, the Knights walked out in sympathy. Within days, the entire Southwest System was paralyzed and the Wabash was forced to negotiate with its workers. Flush with victory, the Knights drew in thousands of new members; within a year, 750,000 workers were united under the comprehensive umbrella of the Knights of Labor.

But to a certain extent, the Knights' rapid success was also the cause of their downfall. In 1886, tens of thousands of newly-joined workers initiated labor actions—but only occasionally were the other members willing to walk out in support. Even more damaging, when an eight-hour-day rally in Chicago's Haymarket Square turned violent, all supporters of the eight-hour day were blamed. Who threw the bomb that killed six policemen at Haymarket has never been clearly established. A group of anarchists—unaffiliated with the Knights—was eventually tried and convicted for organizing the ill-fated rally. But all labor organizations were found guilty by association. The Knights of Labor, because of their size and visibility, were condemned the most vehemently. Within a year of the Haymarket riot, the Knights' membership had been cut in half; within a decade, the Knights were all but extinct.

### **Craft and Industrial Unions**

More enduring gains were made by unions that sought to organize only a particular craft or industry. The American Federation of Labor (AFL), led by Samuel Gompers, was the most successful of these. Less a single union than a federation of semi-independent craft associations, the AFL admitted only skilled, white men. Its objectives were also comparatively limited; the federation focused only on achieving higher wages and shorter workdays for its members, forsaking the larger social objectives that had motivated the Knights. But the AFL did grow—by 1892 it claimed more than a quarter million members.

### **What Industrialists Learned**

Factory pay was extremely low, and living conditions in urban slums were horrific. The rapid mechanization of American industries had transformed work and the role of work in people's lives. In the records left by workers, what jumps off the page are the complex reasons why workers were so unhappy with their lives in the factories. It was not just the pay, the hours, or the conditions; it was also the loss of satisfaction and status that they had formerly found through their work. One worker explained that he used to call himself a "mechanic"; he considered himself "above the average working man." But with the introduction of more machinery, and the subdivision of the manufacturing process in such a way that an individual worker understood only one tiny part of that process, this once proud "mechanic" had been reduced to a "laborer." He was no longer a skilled craftsman, in possession of a useful and respected body of knowledge, he was just an "ordinary laborer . . . the same as the others . . . no more and no less."

Other workers complained that their opportunities for advancement were diminishing, that fading prospects of improving their occupational or social status had left them "demoralized." The new manufacturing processes left them with no transportable skill; in fact, they often had no real skills at all. The work had been so thoroughly subdivided that a child could do it. In fact, one man described how a co-worker had been laid off and then replaced by his own young son at half the wage.

In the aftermath of the 1877 strike, most industrial leaders concluded only that they should close ranks and hunker down. Class conflict—perhaps violent class conflict—seemed inevitable. Therefore they refused to raise wages, shorten hours, or improve conditions; instead they developed private security forces, or hired agencies like the Pinkerton Guards, and prepared for future battles.

The stage was therefore set for the major labor conflicts of the 1890s. While most industrial workers were not members of unions, they had learned the potential value of organization and they had made some inroads in critical industries. Meanwhile, industry owners had come to believe that unions represented a mortal threat to their own interests, and resolved to organize themselves just as resolutely to take timely action to crush the workers' nascent organizational efforts before they altered the balance of power within America's industries.

### **Homestead Steel**

This background shaped events at Homestead, Pennsylvania, the site of one of Andrew Carnegie's steel plants, in 1892. The Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers had managed to establish a footing at Homestead. The union represented about one-fourth of the plant's workers and had successfully negotiated a pay scale that paid workers between 14 and 20 cents per hour. But Henry Frick, the man Carnegie had left in charge of his steel empire while he semi-retired to his native Scotland, believed that this union represented a costly and dangerous precedent. Therefore when the existing agreement between Carnegie Steel and the union expired in 1892, Frick announced pay cuts of 18 to 26 percent. When union leaders objected and called a strike, Frick shut down the plant, locking out the workers in an attempt to break their union.

In the weeks that followed, Homestead became an armed camp. Frick brought boatloads of armed Pinkerton Guards down the Monongahela River to defend the plant. But even though they arrived in the dead of night, sentries deployed by the strikers summoned workers from their sleep to prevent the guards from landing. The resulting pitched battle was horrifyingly intense. Striking workers hurled dynamite at the barges filled with Pinkertons and poured oil into the river, then set it on fire. By the next afternoon, the Pinkertons had surrendered—but three guards and nine workers were dead. And the battle only delayed the inevitable. Pennsylvania's governor quickly dispatched 8000 state militia, equipped with Gatling guns, to restore order while Frick brought in 1000 replacement workers to take the jobs of the strikers. Facing an overwhelming disadvantage in military muscle and financial resources, the vast majority of the strikers surrendered and returned to work on Frick's terms—lower wages and no union membership.

By 1892, Americans had witnessed fifteen years of labor violence. Their initial shock had given way to a different sort of fear—and a more complex assessment of blame. During the railroad strike of 1877, most newspaper editorials had blamed the workers (especially after they destroyed company property), primarily because most Americans in 1877 still retained a confidence in the ability of the economic system to allow upward mobility for those who sought it; in other words, they viewed poverty and occupational stagnation as personal failings, not failings of the system. But by 1892, the analysis offered in newspapers and Sunday sermons had grown more complex. Journalists and ministers still condemned all acts of violence, but they increasingly tended also to criticize the new industrial order's seemingly declining opportunities for mobility. And many began to see labor unions

less as radical and suspiciously foreign, and more as legitimate answers to the labor challenges of the new economic era. Within this new, more balanced assessment, Frick's decision to destroy the fledgling steelworkers' union seemed unwise. And his decision to lock out workers and use strikebreakers and Pinkerton Guards to deny men access to their livelihoods struck many as unnecessarily hard-hearted and provocative.

### **Pullman: Paradise or Prison**

It was with this growing sense of anxiety that middle-class observers greeted the efforts of George Pullman in Chicago. Pullman built railroad cars at a plant just outside the city. And, as he was equally worried about the direction of industrial labor conditions, he introduced a set of innovative practices labeled "industrial paternalism." Pullman argued that industry owners had an obligation to treat their workers fairly—and that well-treated workers would reward their employers with compliant hard work. Pullman therefore surrounded his factory with a company-owned community complete with houses, parks, schools, and churches.

To middle-class observers, Pullman Town represented an enlightened alternative to the bare-knuckle union-busting methods of Henry Frick. In Pullman's little village, they saw the end of labor violence and the dawning of a new era of harmonious social relations. But what they did not see was the discontent and exploitation that actually filled the community. Rents in the village were high, about 25% higher than comparable housing outside the village. Utility prices were also billed at above-market rates. Workers resented the high prices, especially since they were required to live in company housing if they wanted to work at Pullman's factory. But they were equally resentful of the social control that Pullman exercised over their lives outside work. Alcohol was expressly forbidden in the town. And company agents, not an elected town council, controlled everything from the books in the library to the shows performed at the community theater.

### **The Pullman Strike**

The limitations of Pullman's paternalism were revealed in 1894 when workers struck after Pullman reduced their wages. Pullman had defended the wage cuts as a necessity forced by the economic depression of 1893. But when employee negotiators demanded that Pullman also reduce the rents he charged for company housing, he fired them. And so on 11 May, the workers went on strike. Just like in 1877, news of the Pullman strike spread quickly up and down the nation's rail lines—and just like in 1877, railroad workers across the country walked off the job in droves.

But even though more effectively organized than the strike of 1877, the strike of 1894 eventually collapsed. Railroad owners brought in replacement workers from Canada and hired more than 3000 private guards. President Grover Cleveland dispatched federal troops to Chicago with predictably violent results—a three-day battle between soldiers and rioting strikers in early July left 30 people dead. The final blow to the strikers came when the federal government sued, arguing that the strike was interfering with the delivery of the United States mail. A federal court agreed, and declared illegal all efforts on the part of union leaders to discourage railroad workers from doing their jobs. When leaders refused to comply, they were arrested—and within weeks the strike collapsed.

## What Middle-Class Observers Finally Learned

For workers, the Pullman strike may have seemed just another major defeat. But for many in the general public, this latest crisis prompted a noticeable shift in opinion. As in the past, violence against private property was swiftly and almost universally condemned. But the failure of yet another approach to labor relations—Pullman's paternalism—led many to believe that some sort of higher intervention was necessary. Industrialists and workers had proven themselves completely incapable of preserving labor peace—their efforts had yielded only a seemingly endless string of violent, terrifying strikes. These strikes brought the economy to a standstill and seemed to threaten the fabric of society in more profound ways. Gun battles in the streets of Homestead, train yards in flames, government troops marching against American citizens on American soil—it was all too much.

By the end of the nineteenth century, America's large middle class had crystallized as the demographic center of the American populace and the critical mass that shaped American politics. By the end of the century, that critical mass had moved toward the belief that the federal government needed to play a more even-handed part in mediating the labor conflicts that plagued the nation. Up to this point, the federal government had always intervened on the side of the owners in breaking strikes—but the middle class began to question the justice of this approach.

## IDEOLOGY IN THE GILDED AGE

Is wealth a good thing?

Should the rich be allowed to keep all the money they earn? Or does the public have a right to a portion of that money?

Should businesses compete or cooperate? Are we better served by an economy made up of small competing businesses, or one dominated by a handful of large monopolies?

What should guide a voter when casting his or her ballot? Whose interests should an elected office holder serve?

For a long time, Americans thought they knew the answers to these questions. Informed primarily by the agrarian vision of thinkers like Thomas Jefferson, Americans valorized a nation of small, independent farmers and craftsmen. Wealth was suspect—it generated vice and it corrupted people and nations. Competition was valued as a source of innovation and efficiency. In addition, the hard-working small producers of this economic vision were thought to make ideal citizens. Uncorrupted by wealth, and rendered impervious to political pressure by their economic self-sufficiency, they were able, rationally and virtuously, to recognize and promote the communal interest that should lie at the center of public policy. Citizenship and patriotism were equated with self-sacrifice, the subordination of self-interest to the greater good of the nation.

But during the Gilded Age, this vision was challenged. The huge changes in the American economy forced a reconsideration of these long-held, but perhaps obsolete values. The emergence of much larger business enterprises, the generation of much greater individual fortunes, and the surfacing of a new type of politician forced Americans to reconsider the values defining American society and politics.

### Addressing the New Dimensions of the American Economy

The challenge to traditional American ideals began with the sheer size of America's new industries. In 1900, Andrew Carnegie operated eight steel mills and produced more than 4 million tons of steel annually. John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil operated dozens of refineries, controlled roughly 90% of the nation's oil, and generated \$57 million in profits in 1904. How did an industrial empire like Carnegie's fit into the old republican vision? How could Rockefeller's monopoly on oil refining, built by driving his competitors out of business, be squared with the old republican vision of a nation of small producers?

One answer was provided by Social Darwinism. Social theorists like William Sumner and Herbert Spencer applied Charles Darwin's theories of natural selection to the economy and argued that the ascendance of these industrial giants was "natural." Competition was nature's way of achieving progress. At times the process could be harsh; there were inevitable casualties. But competition ensured that the human race marched individually and collectively toward a better future.

Another, and in many ways quite different, answer was provided by John D. Rockefeller himself. Rather than celebrate the competition in which he had prevailed, he lamented the waste that had accompanied the contest. He looked forward not to further competition, but to the end of competition and the archaic vision of economic individualism of which it was a part. He argued that the age of the individual and the era of competition were dead. This was an age of consolidation and cooperation. The capital demands of the new industrial order were too great for the individual, and competition between businesses produced wasteful chaos. And indeed, Rockefeller's own experience in the oil fields seemed to bear this out. America's oil industry passed through periods of boom and bust in its infancy. Every new oil strike inspired waves of new fortune seekers and consequently rapid over-expansion. Invariably, oil markets were soon saturated, leading to collapsing prices and business failures.

It might be easy to dismiss Rockefeller's argument as a self-serving rationale for his own monopoly and the cutthroat methods he utilized in eliminating his competitors. But what is striking is that even those on the other side of the political spectrum shared a good deal of his vision. Daniel De Leon, editor of *The People* and a leader in the Socialist Labor Party, agreed with Rockefeller that the age of the individual was dead. The economy was too complex; the industrial order was too large. He further agreed that cutthroat competition was wasteful, and that the new economy required central management. But he believed that the government, not private industrialists like Rockefeller, should provide this direction.

De Leon, echoing the communist theorist Karl Marx, suggested that the economy was like an orchestra which had been performing without a conductor for too long. Those who believed that the various instruments of the orchestra could be harmoniously tied together by some invisible hand were deluding themselves. Without a "central directing authority," he argued, economies collapsed into chaos. Or even worse, they were dominated by the self-serving ambitions of people De Leon described as industrial tyrants—men like John D. Rockefeller. What was needed, concluded De Leon, was a central directing authority committed to the welfare of the greater community—by overseeing production, by managing the allocation and distribution of resources, the government would ensure more beautiful and more equitable economic music.

### **Reconciling Wealth and Republicanism**

While Rockefeller and De Leon debated the best way to manage the size of America's economic realities, others debated the meaning and the legitimacy of the new wealth that this economy generated. In Jefferson's vision, wealth was suspect—it bred luxury and vice, and it raised frightening visions of a European aristocracy. It softened people's moral fiber and undermined the virtue that was essential to good citizenship. But during the Gilded Age, Americans witnessed the growth of personal fortunes of unprecedented dimension. Homes of unprecedented size lined posh urban streets, and newspapers provided elaborate accounts of gaudy social events that violated traditional understandings of material moderation. Could America—a nation built on republican values of material restraint—absorb this sort of wealth and still retain its traditional virtue?

James Baird Weaver, a leader in the farmer's reform movement known as Populism, said no. He denounced the ostentatious displays of wealth alongside desperate urban poverty, and he summoned farmers and laborers to transform the political structures that supported this inequity.

Andrew Carnegie suggested, for starters, that wealth could play a useful role in America. Certain institutions like museums, colleges, and libraries required a level of capital investment that only wealthy industrialists could provide. History's great civilizations had always depended on the resources of the wealthy to promote the cultural achievements that future generations celebrated. But in order to fill this philanthropic role, America's industrial aristocracy needed to live frugal, modest lives. They must shun the ostentatious displays—the palatial houses, the indulgent amusements—and instead model moderation for all those beneath them on the social ladder. Most fundamentally, the wealthy should not view their wealth as their private possession, or even truly "their own." Instead they should view their money as "trust funds" that it was their "duty to administer" on behalf of the community.

There was much that was self-serving in Carnegie's formulation—he had employed cutthroat tactics in building his steel empire; his workers worked twelve-hour days and their attempts at union organizing had been brutally crushed in the Homestead Strike of 1892. For many workers, there seemed to be something condescending in a philosophy that preferred libraries over a living wage—a philosophy that suggested people were better served by a museum or a park than a higher standard of living. But there may have also been a great deal of truth in Carnegie's observation that republics, like the United States, depended on wealthy industrialists to build cultural monuments. With neither a traditional aristocracy nor an established church, America lacked the institutions that had sponsored Europe's great cultural achievements.

Moreover, Carnegie condemned those who died wealthy, and who failed to properly steward the wealth with which they had been entrusted. And he was equally critical of inherited wealth. Leaving a fortune to one's heirs was "most injudicious," he wrote. Quite often, the beneficiaries of this misguided generosity "become impoverished through their follies." To encourage the rich to dispose of their wealth judiciously during their lifetimes, he supported a much higher estate tax—that is, a higher tax on a person's wealth at the time of their death. "Of all the forms of taxation, this seems the wisest," he observed. It would ensure that the community received the share to which it was entitled."

### **Rethinking Citizenship**

Carnegie, Rockefeller, Weaver, and De Leon all challenged Americans to think about the character of their emerging economy. America's political ideology faced an equally dramatic and direct challenge during these years. No person more fully or more bluntly summed up this ideological challenge than George Washington Plunkitt.

Plunkitt was a member of Tammany Hall, the Democratic political machine that dominated New York politics through the second half of the nineteenth century. He held a few offices, but for the most part his political influence was wielded on the edges of the political system—as a party boss responsible for mobilizing the working-class voters, many of them immigrants, upon which the party relied to maintain its power.



In explaining his work to a reporter at the turn of the century, Plunkitt advanced an entirely new understanding of citizenship and political service. In his mind, self-interest and self-enrichment were legitimate parts of both roles. For example, as a member of the Tammany machine, he used insider information to grow rich. His political connections would feed him tips, such as where the new city park was to be built, and he would swoop in and buy up all the land before the city's news went public, driving up the land's value. He framed his behavior within the language of the American dream—"I seen my opportunities and I took 'em." But earlier generations would have summarily rejected his jaded take on this old adage as nothing more than corrupt selfishness.

Plunkitt similarly reconceived the political role of the common citizen. He described a citizen's vote as a "marketable commodity"—something a voter sold to the highest bidder, that is, the candidate who promised him the most for his vote. This was a far cry from Thomas Jefferson's call to disinterested public service, the surrender of self-interest to the welfare of the community. But in Plunkitt's view, citizenship, and even patriotism, were more about personal rewards than personal sacrifice.

The key to Plunkitt's power was the favor-seeking voters who did his bidding on Election Day. Plunkitt built a following from the ground up—and he offered their votes to politicians who promised him information from which he could profit and city jobs that he could distribute back to his followers. Consequently, Plunkitt's great nemesis was civil service reform. A batch of reform measures dating to the 1870s, civil service sought to remove public jobs from the control of politicians like Plunkitt. In cities where these reforms were implemented, job seekers had to take a test, and positions were awarded on the basis of performance. In effect, civil service reform was an attempt to restore the ideal that Jefferson had introduced. Civil service reform sought to identify those most fit for public bureaucracies through examinations. But for a politician like Plunkitt, these reforms were a curse—they threatened to undermine the entire system of entrepreneurial government that served him, and many of his followers, so well.

Plunkitt's ideas clashed sharply with traditional notion of political behavior; fortunately most Americans still find his views unsettlingly corrupt. But what is most striking, and most important, about Plunkitt's ideas is that he presented them to the public willingly. He made no attempts to hide his philosophy. He was not offering a soul-bearing confession. He was introducing a new political ideology—a new definition of citizenship and even patriotism. And his ability to succeed with this philosophy, and then lay it before the public, speaks to the dramatic transformation of America's social and political environment during the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Like Rockefeller, Carnegie, De Leon, and Weaver, Plunkitt was addressing the realities of the new order. And while Plunkitt's ideas may seem the most jarring to contemporary ears, Rockefeller's and De Leon's proclamation that the age of the individual was over was just as disturbing in their own time. And before we judge Plunkitt too harshly, we should remember that he succeeded as long as he did because a large number of New York's voters supported and benefitted from his methods. Plunkitt's pragmatic, service-exchanging approach to government, while deeply contrary to traditional notions of public service, offered something to New York's working-class immigrant population that no other public agency was willing to provide.

Eventually city, state, and federal government officials would embrace the idea that government should play a part in solving the public's small problems—that is, they would adopt that part of Plunkitt's philosophy that suggested that improving the daily lives of common people was one of government's responsibilities. Americans would similarly draw upon the ideas of Carnegie in reconciling traditional republican values with the new levels of personal wealth, just as they would borrow from the ideas of Rockefeller and De Leon in resolving the tension between the values of competition and benefits of consolidation and central management.

In other words, the Gilded Age changed both America and the ways we think about America. By the turn of the century, America looked much different than it did fifty years earlier, and Americans had begun to find new answers to old questions.

## **SOCIAL TENSIONS IN THE GILDED AGE**

The Gilded Age featured very close contests between the Republicans and Democrats (with occasional third-party political campaigns by farmers and labor unions), civil service reform, organized movements that enlisted many women working for prohibition and women's suffrage, the strengthening of big city machines, and the transition from party to modern interest-group politics. The dominant issues were cultural (especially regarding prohibition, education, and ethnic or racial groups), and economic (tariffs and money supply). With the rapid growth of cities, political machines increasingly took control of urban politics.

Socially, the period was marked by large-scale immigration from Germany and Scandinavia to the industrial centers and to western farmlands, the deepening of religious organizations, the rapid growth of high schools, and the emergence of a managerial and professional middle class. In terms of immigration, after 1880, the old immigration of Germans, British, Irish, and Scandinavians slackened. The United States was producing large numbers of new unskilled jobs every year, and to fill them came individuals from Italy, Poland, Austria, Hungary, Russia, Greece and other points in southern and central Europe, as well as from French Canada.

### **African Americans in the Gilded Age**

The "nadir of American race relations" is a phrase that refers to the period in U.S. history from the end of Reconstruction through the early twentieth century, when racism in the country is deemed to have been worse than in any other period after the American Civil War. During this period, African Americans lost many civil rights gained during Reconstruction. Anti-black violence, lynchings, segregation, legal racial discrimination, and expressions of white supremacy increased.

Conservative, white Democratic governments in the South passed Jim Crow legislation, creating a system of legal racial segregation in public and private facilities. The enacted poll taxes, which required voters to pay a fee in order to vote, something poor African Americans could scarcely afford. Some states required literacy tests, disqualifying black voters who were denied education opportunities. Grandfather clauses allowed people to vote as long as their ancestors had voted prior to 1866, something no southern black citizen could claim. As South Carolina Senator Benjamin Tillman put it, "We have done our level best. We have scratched our heads to find out how we could eliminate that last one of them [black voters]. We stuffed ballot boxes. We shot them."

These actions were upheld by the Supreme Court in 1896 in the ruling of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which established the doctrine of "separate but equal." Blacks were separated in schools and hospitals, and had to use separate sections in some restaurants and public transportation systems. They often were barred from certain stores, or forbidden to use lunchrooms, restrooms, and fitting rooms. Because they could not vote, they could not serve on juries, which meant they had little if any legal recourse in the system.

Some blacks succeeded in elevating themselves into a distinct middle class, managing to acquire property, build small businesses, or enter professions. However, those who were economically successful faced reprisals or sanctions. Through violence and legal restrictions, whites often prevented blacks from working as common laborers, much less as skilled artisans or in the professions. Under such conditions, even the most ambitious and talented black people found it extremely difficult to advance.

The 1890s saw a dramatic increase in white violence against blacks. On average, there were 187 lynchings each year, more than 80 percent of them in the South. Some lynchings were highly organized and publicized affairs, attracting large crowds. Most, however, were performed by small vigilante mobs composed of friends or relatives of the victim (or supposed victim) of a crime. These acts of violence were seen by some as not only a legitimate form of law enforcement but as a means to control the black population through terror and intimidation. Whatever the reasons or circumstances, the victims of lynch mobs were denied the protection of the laws and the opportunity to prove their innocence.

## **The Working Woman**

In 1870, women were 15 percent of the total workforce, primarily assuming roles as factory workers, teachers, dressmakers, milliners, and tailors.

The Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries changed the nature of work for women in Europe and other countries of the Western world. Working for a wage, and eventually a salary, became part of urban life.

The 1870 U.S. census was the first to count “females engaged in each occupation” and provides an intriguing snapshot of women’s history. It reveals that, contrary to popular belief, not all American women of the nineteenth century were either idle in their middle-class homes or working in sweatshops. Women were 15 percent of the total workforce (1.8 million out of 12.5). They made up one-third of factory “operatives,” but teaching and the occupations of dressmaking, millinery, and tailoring played a larger role. Two-thirds of teachers were women. Women defied the stereotypes of the time by working in iron and steel works, mines, sawmills, oil wells and refineries, gas works, and charcoal kilns. Some even held jobs as ship riggers, teamsters, turpentine laborers, brass founders/workers, shingle and lathe makers, stock-herders, gunsmiths and locksmiths, and hunters and trappers.

In nineteenth-century farm settings, children were an important part of their families’ agricultural livelihoods. As industrialization occurred and families shifted from rural agricultural settings to urban ones, the number of children per household also declined. Children became less of an economic benefit and more of a cost: Urban life necessitated educating children, which was costly. A study of women college graduates in the twentieth century concluded that those graduating between 1900 and 1920 had to make, “a distinct choice between family and career.”

## **Child Labor**

During the Industrial Revolution, children as young as four were employed in factories with dangerous, and often fatal, working conditions. Children also worked as errand boys, crossing sweepers, and shoe blacks, or they worked selling matches, flowers, and other cheap goods. Some children undertook work as apprentices to respectable trades such as building or as domestic servants. As the United States industrialized, factory owners hired young workers for a variety of tasks. Especially in textile mills, children were often hired together with their parents. Many families in mill towns depended on the children’s labor to make enough money for necessities.

Alongside the abolition of child labor, compulsory education laws also kept children out of abusive labor conditions. The school system remained largely private and unorganized until the 1840s. Public schools were always under local control, with no federal role, and a limited state role. However, by 1900, 34 states had compulsory schooling laws, 4 of which were in the South. 30 states with

compulsory schooling laws required attendance until age 14 (or older). As a result, by 1910, 72 percent of American children attended school. Half the nation's children attended one-room schools. In 1918, every state required students to complete elementary school.

## **The Transformation of the West**

The private profit motive dominated the movement westward, but the federal government played a supporting role in securing land. The federal government first acquired western territory from other nations or native tribes by treaty, and then it sent surveyors to map and document the land.

With the Civil War over, the federal government focused on improving the governance of the territories and its involvement there was considerable. In addition to direct subsidies, the federal government maintained military posts, provided safety from Indian attacks, bankrolled treaty obligations, conducted surveys and land sales, built roads, staffed land offices, made harbor improvements, and subsidized overland mail delivery. Territorial citizens came to both decry federal power and local corruption, and at the same time, lament that more federal dollars were not sent their way.

## **The Diversity of the West**

European immigrants and black freedmen moved to the western portion of America in search of new opportunities, while dispossessed Hispanics struggled to survive in their stolen homeland.

European immigrants to the United States in the 1800s often lived in communities in which individuals had similar religious and ethnic backgrounds. For example, many Finns went to Minnesota and Michigan, Swedes to South Dakota, Norwegians to North Dakota, Irish to Montana, Chinese to San Francisco, German Mennonites to Kansas, and German Jews to Portland, Oregon.

African Americans served in westward expeditions as fur traders, miners, cowboys, Indian fighters, scouts, woodsmen, farmhands, saloon workers, cooks, and outlaws. The famed Buffalo Soldiers were in the all-black regiments of the U.S. Army (with white officers). They served in numerous western forts. About 4,000 blacks came to California during the Gold Rush. To escape the Ku Klux Klan, the White League, and the Jim Crow laws, which continued to make them second-class citizens after Reconstruction, as many as 40,000 African Americans left the South to settle in Kansas, Oklahoma, and Colorado.

The California Gold Rush encouraged large migrations of Hispanic and Asian people, which continued after the Civil War. Chinese migrants, many of whom were impoverished peasants, provided the major part of the workforce for the building of the Central Pacific portion of the Transcontinental Railroad. Most of them went home by 1870 when the railroad was finished, but thousands stayed in America. Workers from China were the first group to be brought to the United States in large numbers; however, the federal government curtailed immigration from China with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. They also worked in mining, agriculture, and small businesses, many living in San Francisco. Significant numbers of Japanese also settled in Hawaii and California permanently.

Many Hispanics who had been living in the former territories of New Spain lost their land rights to fraud and governmental action when Texas, New Mexico, and California were formed. In some cases, Hispanics were simply driven off their land. In Texas, the situation was most acute, as the "Tejanos," who made up about 75 percent of the population, ended up as laborers employed by the large white ranches that took over their land. In New Mexico, only six percent of all claims by Hispanics were

confirmed by the Claims Court. As a result, many Hispanics became permanent migrant workers, seeking seasonal employment in farming, mining, ranching, and the railroads.

## **The American Indian Wars**

Relations between American migrants and Native Americans were generally peaceful in the pre-Civil War era. This began to change, when the Pikes Peak Gold Rush of 1859 introduced a substantial white population into the front range of the Rockies, supported by a trading lifeline that crossed the central Great Plains. Increasing settlement following the passage of the Homestead Act and the building of the transcontinental railways following the Civil War further destabilized the situation, placing white settlers into direct competition for the land and resources of the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountain West.

The series of conflicts in the western United States between Native Americans, American settlers, and the U.S. Army are generally known as the “American Indian Wars.” Many of the most well-known of these conflicts occurred during and after the Civil War, until the closing of the frontier in about 1890.

The Great Sioux War of 1876, also known as the “Black Hills War,” was a series of battles and negotiations that occurred between 1876 and 1877 involving the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne and the United States. Fought over control of the Black Hills, a region granted to the Sioux in the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, it remains one of America’s longest military conflicts.

Major battles for the Black Hills included the Battle of Little Bighorn, Slim Butte, and the Fort Robinson Massacre. However, the most renowned, as well as the most brutal of the battles over the Black Hills, is the massacre that took place at Wounded Knee. On the morning of December 29, troops went into a Lakota camp to disarm the population but during the process a scuffle broke out between a deaf tribesman and a soldier, leading to a shot being fired, resulting in the 7th Cavalry opening fire indiscriminately from all sides, killing men, women, and children, as well as some of their own fellow troops. The few Lakota warriors who still had weapons began shooting back at the attacking troops. The surviving Lakota fled, but the U.S. Cavalry pursued and killed many who were unarmed.

As settlers moved west, Native American tribes were coerced into signing treaties that gave away their land. In 1887, the U.S. Congress passed the Dawes Act, which is considered one of the earliest attempts aimed toward assimilation of native tribes. Under the Dawes Act, tribal lands were no longer under the control of tribal governments. Instead, the land was under the control of individual land owners. This period of allotment of tribal lands became known as the “Allotment and Assimilation Era” because the main goal of apportioning tribal land was to integrate native peoples into mainstream American society. Allowing native peoples to live their lives according to traditional practices and teachings on the reservation was forbidden.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs kept a commanding hold on all aspects of native life, with the goal of “civilizing” natives. The Allotment Era resulted in the loss of more than two-thirds of tribal entrusted lands, which went from 138 million acres in 1871 to 48 million acres in 1934. The loss of land was mainly due to leasing and the eventual sales of tribal lands to white settlers. Allotment did not work because it was not something with which Indians were familiar. They didn’t view the land as something to own; instead they viewed it as part of their extended family.