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The Development of a Truly Progressive Era

The Progressive Era is a period defined by great change that spread from political to social reform. It consisted of a time period when reformers wanted to improve American life in the areas of rights of the individual, social justice, equality, public safety, and government corruption. The Progressive Era is a period of great change that spread from political to social reform. One definition states, the Progressive Era in the U. S. was a period of social activism and reform that flourished from the 1890s to the 1920s. One main goal of the progressive movement was purification of government, as progressives tried to eliminate corruption by exposing and undercutting political machines and bosses.[[1]](#footnote-1) This era relied heavily on Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson to enact the changes that were obviously needed, one definition includes that is was a period characterized by dynamic political leaders (Roosevelt/Wilson).[[2]](#footnote-2)

In almost all definitions concerning the Progressive Era you will find the word reform somewhere in its description. In my personal opinion this is the best way to define the Progressive Era. Although a definition consisting of one word is simple in the case of the Progressive Era it is not. Americans the idea of reform in almost all aspects of life during the late 1800’s -1920’s. This need for reform came around the mid-way point of what is known as the “Gilded Age”.

The time known as the Gilded Age is marked as the time period of 1877-1900. Understanding the Gilded Age and its ideals is essential to the acceptance of the emergence of the Progressive Era. The Gilded Age earned its name from literary genius Mark Twain. This time is described as a period of amazing achievements. However, these achievements are seen as a thin gold layer covering the many unresolved social problems they left in their wake. This time period is seen publically as one where greed ran rampant in many domains. Greed in the Gilded Age is not only exemplified in its typical fashion of involving money and power but spreads into other domains such as race and gender. In the Gilded Age many businesses and politicians sought overwhelming control over society through industrial corporations and many individuals sought control over others through race and gender discrimination. All forms of this control were motivated by greed, greed to be the in charge and have dominating power. The intense problem of corruption during the Gilded Age is what sparked the Progressive Era’s ideas of reform.

The main elements of the Progressive Era in a broad spectrum were political, business, media, race, gender, and culture reform. Political reform was seen necessary in order to achieve the major changes necessary to undercut all of the corruption. During the Gilded Age many politicians relied on “Boss Rule” which allowed them to manipulate the votes of immigrants by providing jobs and other services. These politicians were part of the political machine which was a powerful urban political organization that mobilized large blocs of the working class and immigrant voters. They often engaged in corrupt and illegal activity. However, once McKinley was assassinated and Theodore Roosevelt took office in 1901 he sought to big business control and reestablish the power of the Presidency. Although Roosevelt recognized the corruption of big businesses he saw how they were necessary to the capitalistic structure. However, he wanted to remind them that the nation’s economy lied in the hands of the President and the other branches of government not in theirs. He did this by expanding the power of the Executive Branch. To make his point clear in 1902 Theodore Roosevelt and the national government sued the Northern Securities Company under the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. When Northern Securities was found guilty they were ordered to dissolve by the Supreme Court. Later under Roosevelt the Standard Oil Company controlled by John D. Rockefeller was found to be violating the Sherman Anti-Trust Act as well and is also ordered by the Supreme Court to dissolve. These measures taken by Roosevelt earned him a reputation of being a trust buster. Also during Roosevelt’s time in office congress passed the Pure Food and Drug Act, the Elkins Act, and the Hepburn Act.

In business many corporations were known for violating the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. As stated before John D. Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Company was one of the most notable. The Standard Oil Company controlled the refining, transport, production, and marketing of petroleum products in the United States. The Standard Oil Company had control of almost all of the oil refineries in the United States, and continued to grow and gain power even after repeated attempts to break it apart by President Theodore Roosevelt. The Standard Oil Company is one of Americas most notable Trusts and major controlling monopoly. The dissolving of this company under Roosevelt is seen as milestone in the reform of competitive business in the United States

Another major reform of business during the Progressive Era would occur after the Triangle Shirtwaist fire in 1911. On March 25th, 1911 a fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company broke out on the eighth floor 146 young women were killed in the fire. The fire was sparked in a waste bin, from what is thought to have been a cigarette. Many women rushed to fire escapes and elevators, however after the fire escaped collapsed and the elevator shafts were taken over by fire many women were unable to escape through the stair wells because of locked hallway doors. At this time doors were locked to make sure women were doing work and not slacking while on the clock. Because so many women were trapped they jumped out the 8th and 9th story windows to escape being burned to death. This horrific event would change the regulation by government of business, before the fire government had mostly stayed away from business feeling it had no power to legislate it. After the fire government could not avoid instituting laws to protect the workers. Once the New York legislature enacted safety laws, other states in the US followed suit.[[3]](#footnote-3)

During the Progressive Era media also saw a major change. Media during the time of the Progressive Era were essential in bringing the issues of corruption into the homes of Americans. They wanted to expose what was underneath that golden layer that Gilded Age and supplied. To achieve this many journalists subscribed to the new idea of what is called muckraking. Muckraking is the idea of investigative journalism and exposing the misconduct in areas of public life. One of the most notable publications to enact this practice of muckraking was McClure’s Magazine. The magazine was established by Samuel McClure and would grow to become a very popular publication. The magazine is most famous for publishing the nineteen article series about the John D. Rockefeller and the Standard Oil Company written by Miss. Ida B. Tarbell. In these articles Tarbell exposed how Rockefeller used unethical tactics to get ahead in his business, stating that capitalists, “had never played fair, and that ruined their greatness for me,”[[4]](#footnote-4).Although many are aware of Miss. Tarbell’s articles because of the light she shined on corruption in big business, she also acknowledged how Mr. Rockefeller was very business savvy.

Jacob Riis and Upton Sinclair also played pivotal roles in reform through their writings. Jacob Riis was a journalist and photographer who was also considered a muckraker. He used his talents to help the poor people of New York City who dwelled in tenement housing. He published and 18 page article titled *How the Other Half Lives* in 1889 to show the terrible conditions for those who lived in these tenement houses. His photographs would brought the tenement issues to the eyes of the public causing major reform in the sewer systems, garbage collection, and indoor plumbing of tenement houses. Upton Sinclair was another writer who subscribed to the idea of muckraking. Sinclair published the book *The Jungle* in 1906 which provided a detailed description of the atrocities that went on in the meat packing industry. The publication of this book opened the eyes of the public and caused such disgust that in that same year that the Pure Food and Drug Act as well as the Meat Inspection Act were passed.

During the years of the Progressive Era many peopled were involved in achieving the reform that was desperately needed. Typically what made someone a progressive was middle class people who were white and well educated; these people typically had strong sense of duty to help the poor. Not only did these individuals want to help the poor but they also sought the need to help women and people of other races. These individuals sought the need for change and used their education and social standing to achieve their goals. For example W.E.B. Dubois sought reform in the treatment of African Americans by establishing the *Crisis Newspaper* he was able to do this because of his education as well as want for the African American race to be treated equally. Other notable progressives included women such as Jane Adams who was a leader in the women’s suffrage movement as well as the founder of the Hull House in Chicago.

The Progressive era has provided a long lasting impact on our society today. Many of the laws that were passed during this period in time have shaped the society we live in. Laws involving work hours that were passed after atrocities such as the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire were used as stepping stones to help protect women and children in the workforce. This event in time that was a turning point for business regulation in the Progressive Era is something we still recognize and commemorate today. Also the women’s suffrage movement is probably one of the most notable events of the Progressive Era. This movement led to the passing of the 19th amendment which allows all women the right to vote changing politics forever. Other last impacts include Theodore Roosevelt’s passing of five national parks into legislation as well as the Antiquities Act is acts of law that we still value and uphold today. However, most importantly all of the elements I mentioned earlier that shaped the Progressive Era as a whole are all examples of long lasting impacts. Each one of them in their own respect helped to shape and change America forever by bringing to light the corruption and greed America was experiencing at this time. Most importantly these reforms that were made during the Progressive Era helped to better the lives of individuals as well as America as a nation.

1. Quizlet, “The Progressive Era definitions”. Quizlet LLC. 2012. <http://quizlet.com/dictionary/progressive-era/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Leap for Life, Leap of Death”. <http://www.csun.edu/~ghy7463/mw2.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. PBS. “The Rockefeller’s”. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/rockefellers/peopleevents/p_tarbell.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)