

## **Era 7: The Emergence of Modern America (1890-1930)**

### **Overview**

The study of how the modern United States emerged begins with the Progressive era. It deserves careful study because, among other things, it included the nation's most vibrant set of reform ideas and campaigns since the 1830s-40s. Progressives were a diverse lot with various agendas that sometimes jostled uneasily, but all reformers focused on a set of corrosive problems arising from rapid industrialization, urbanization, waves of immigration, and business and political corruption. Students can be inspired by how fervently the Progressives applied themselves to the renewal of American democracy. They can also profit from understanding the distinctively female reform culture that contributed powerfully to the movement. Two of the problems confronted by Progressives are still central today. First, the Progressives faced the dilemma of how to maintain the material benefits flowing from the industrial revolution while bringing the powerful forces creating those benefits under democratic control and while enlarging economic opportunity. Second, Progressives faced the knotted issue of how to maintain democracy and national identity amid an increasingly diverse influx of immigrants and amid widespread political corruption and the concentration of political power. Of all the waves of reformism in American history, Progressivism is notable for its nearly all-encompassing agenda. As its name implies, it stood for progress, and that put it squarely in the American belief in the perfectible society.

Students cannot fully understand the Progressive movement without considering its limitations, particularly its antagonism to radical labor movements and indifference to the plight of African Americans and other minorities. As in so many aspects of American history, it behooves students to understand different perspectives. Progressivism brought fusion in some areas of reform, but it also created fissures. Among those was the ongoing, heated controversy about female equality, particularly in the area of economic protectionism.

All issues of American foreign policy in the 20th century have their origins in the emergence of the United States as a major world power in the Spanish-American War at the end of the 19th century and in the involvement of the United States in World War I. The American intervention in World War I cast the die for the United States as a world power for the remainder of the century. Students can learn much about the complexities of foreign policy today by studying the difficulties of maintaining neutrality in World War I while acquiring the role of an economic giant with global interests and while fervently wishing to export democracy around the world.

In the postwar period the prosperity of the 1920s and the domination of big business and Republican politics are also important to study. The 1920s displayed dramatically the American urge to build, innovate, and explore--poignantly captured in Lindbergh's solo flight across the Atlantic in 1927, which excited more enthusiasm than any single event to that time. The cultural and social realms also contain lessons from history that have resonance today. First, students should study the women's struggle for equality, which had political, economic, and cultural dimensions. Second, students should understand how radical labor movements and radical ideologies provoked widespread fear and even hysteria. Third, they need to study the recurring racial tension that led to Black Nationalism, the Harlem Renaissance, and the first great northward migration of African Americans on the one hand and the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan on the other hand. Fourth, they need to understand the powerful movement to Americanize a generation of immigrants and the momentous closing of the nation's gates through severe retrenchment of open-door immigration policies. Lastly, they should examine the continuing tension among Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, most dramatically exemplified in the resurgence of Protestant fundamentalism.