

A brief summery of the gilded age

Business



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As the United States settled itself into its new role as both an economic power and safe-haven for immigrants looking for both wealth and acceptance, industrialization developed at rapid pace. The effects of industrialization are long-lasting and helped America develop into a successful nation.

This time period of development is nicknamed “ The Gilded Age”- title adopted from Mark Twain’s *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*- and refers to the idea that the superficial beauty of American culture was in reality covering up for a time period in which politics was constantly shifting at the hands of men with little substance to add to history, large business in the form of railroads and oil conglomerates ran the American economy, and the newly emerging changes within labor forces. Within The Gilded Age, America was introduced to five presidents- four of which were not elected to second terms. These presidents: Rutherford B. Hayes, James Garfield, Chester A. Arthur, Grover Cleveland (who was elected to a second term, albeit not consecutively), and Benjamin Harrison; are coined as ‘ forgotten’ presidents due to their little impact upon America’s future.

Three of the presidents help to exemplify the Gilded Age’s corrupt image. Hayes, Garfield, and Arthur are all associated with the practice of party patronage, or handing out government jobs to faithful supporters. This way of government was clearly crooked and did little for the betterment of America. Supporters of this practice, Stalwarts and their rivals Halfbreeds, are generally considered the low point in American politics. With the hard fought and dirty election of Grover Cleveland, Americans had hoped a better government would emerge.

Cleveland signed into law several acts that attempted to better economics (Interstate Commerce Act of 1881) and to help Native Americans (Dawes Act). Discontent grew as differentiating opinions on money began to dominate politics. In an argument that almost directly relates to the Gilded Age nickname, farmers demanded more greenbacks (paper money) to be put into circulation (assuming more money would come to their pockets) than was supported by gold in the national reserve. The idea of quantity over quality parallels both the time period name and the events. In a Republican led Congress, Harrison ran America's first billion dollar Congress, which quickly put into act several laws that varied from tariffs to increasing Civil War pensions, to African American voting rights. Perhaps most significant about the unimpressive period of politics that ruled the Gilded Age was the rise of the McKinley administration at the end of the age.

This administration had long lasting effects that led to the rise of the USA as international power and revolutionized the way political campaigns were run. As the American economy grew and shifted, large private own and public corporations established themselves as power players in American society. These large businesses included rail roads, steel corporations, and oil trusts and succeeded in both making a lot of people very wealthy, but also contributing to corruption and scandal. Monopolies were set up in certain industries, systematically eliminating competition through vertical and horizontal integration. The ' beauty' of men such as oil mogul John D.

Rockefeller, a young business man who built and empire, faded in the harsh business tactics- forcing rival companies to sell out, buying out those companies and bringing them into his control- employed for his personal

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wealth and gain. This juxtaposition of image verses reality demonstrated the overall image of the Gilded Age. Railroads as well led to widespread corruption the handing out of federal land grants promoted shady business deals and construction. As middle-class America expanded and the division of the 'haves' versus the 'have nots' became clear within society, families often relied on the earnings of labor workers. These laborers often worked in factories for wages gained after working ten to twelve hour days. For the first time, woman also began to work in these labor jobs for wages just as the men did.

Though the work women tended to turn to were often seen as extensions of a home, it was a large step for women out of the designated wife role. As immigration increased and flooded the workforce with cheap and always in demand workers, discontent grew. Industrialization proved difficult to adapt to and conditions in factories were dismal. Strikes were attempted by the factory workers, but the excess of labor from the immigrants foiled the attempts. Eventually the discontent lead to violence, as seen in the Great Railroad Strike of 1877.

A national movement, the strike garnered the attention of the president who sent federal troops to crush the rebellion. While for some railroads, the uprising was successful, for many others it was not. Eventually attempts to organize national unions formed several unsuccessful unions that lead to more violence or little change. The Gilded Age proves that the view on the surface does not always reflect the true happenings inside of a system. While America was portrayed to other countries as 'paved with gold and

opportunity', both immigrants and the American people quickly learned that this was not always so.

Because of the dismal political factions that did little for America, the large businesses that bullied and manipulated the corporate world, and the labor dissatisfaction it is clear that America's nickname for this time period is well deserved.