

America's postwar divide



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The end of the Civil War brought opportunities and disadvantages for many Americans depending on one's race, ethnicity and abilities. Chapters seventeen through twenty of "The American Nation" explains the changes which occurred in American society post civil war due to industrialism. The following essay examines the barriers created by an inefficient government causing discrimination of the poor in the mid-to-late 1800s. Severe discrimination of minorities and the poor led to a corrupt American government working only to benefit themselves and important wealthy voters.

Congress used bribery to ensure their financial needs were met while those of American citizens were ignored. Many tactics were used to ensure Congress remained Republican, such as criticizing Democrats as rebels and using the "bloody shirt" as a reminder of the violence and untrusting nature of Democrats during the Civil War (449). Many Americans were distrustful of Congress, and with good reason. An example of such distrust was seen in Americans' desire for American currency to be changed from paper money back to bullion because they feared government would print as much money as necessary to cover an increase or decrease in taxes (450).

Civil service reform was a concern during the post Civil War era but the barriers were immense (450). There were many factors contributing to the need for civil service reform. There was a long list of ineffective presidents and the hiring of unqualified lieutenants by politicians because of their involvement in the Civil War. In order to keep their congressional status, politicians needed loyal employees and by celebrating America's patriots, they were adding on votes to ensure their success.

As the author wrote in "The American Nation", "patronage was the lifeblood of politics" (451); basically politicians bribed soldiers with high paying jobs and preferential treatment in return for their votes. Reformers wanted nonpartisan professional civil service and both democratic and republican politicians made a mockery of them (451). Although the Reconstruction era looked promising for America's black men and women, it quickly became a failure. Minorities were treated very poorly postwar.

One ineffective president, President Hayes, could have made a difference in the lives of black Americans, but when President Hayes realized his hopes were useless, he did not pursue the problem further (451). Poll taxes created an "economic barrier" to blacks and poor whites and the Fifth Amendment was not upheld for blacks (451). The literacy tests for the right to vote were rigged for illiterate whites and not for illiterate blacks; giving white votes the majority. Because blacks were treated as stupid and inferior, white law makers felt it was okay to restrict their rights.

Rather than improving American society by addressing equal rights and liberties, congress spent their time making sure the rich and the white succeeded by restricting the rights of others who could get in the way. The Civil Rights Cases (1883) and Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) gave way to legalized segregation laws in schools, prisons, hospitals and anywhere public services were available. The only way blacks found success was through separatism, where they established communities of their own, and financially supporting the community through black business ownership (453).

Blacks were forced to make "the choice between confrontation and accommodation" (454). Immigrants suffered as well, they were seen as a

drain on society and were accused of taking the jobs of other Americans because of their cheap labor (454). Immigrants rushed to America with the rise of industry and manufacturing, yet they could only afford the slums where disease and violence were abundant. This gave them a bad reputation and therefore Americans demanded laws be made to protect their jobs and money from immigrants.

The Plains Indians were removed from their land and many violent attacks caused the death of thousands of Indians. White influence threatened to take culture away from the Indians, as Indians began buying new technologies from Americans. White man wanted to civilize the Indians by passing the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887 which was a promise of education and some land which resulted in the Indians loss of culture and tax increases on land resulting in a loss of land (462). American greed such as seen during the gold rush, trampled on the lives of the Indians.

Rich, powerful industrial leaders took away land for railroad development, killing of the tribes' food source and killing off most of the Indians (462). Wealth rose among the business tycoons but not for the average American citizen. It was a kill or be killed society. As population increase, food and transport demand also increased, bringing wealth to industry giants (472). Government was so ineffective in creating regulations for businesses that many business owners took it upon themselves to fix things, such as seen with the oversupply of cows.

However, the ranchers for the most part destroyed their businesses by unintentionally killing their cows with barbed wire fences (473). The exploitation of natural resources brought expansion to American

manufacturing, farmers were getting replaced and they lost their respect of many Americans and the government did nothing to help (477). The rise of new and competing technologies made businesses and their products quickly become obsolete (487). Lowering product prices to in order to compete with similar companies caused job loss and other problems in society.

Mergers took place without any government regulations and peoples' jobs were very unstable. The government tried to get their act together by creating business regulations, such as the Sherman Act, which were essentially ineffective (495). Labor unions caused more strikes and violence than actual assistance for workers. Employees were in constant distress from more skilled workers taking over jobs, employers who could throw them out at any time and union opportunities met with employer disapproval (498). Wealth was unevenly distributing to only a few and the few became smaller with every year (500).

The wealthy business owners held ordinary citizens fates in their hands because their money controlled the government and the court systems (500). The middle class society benefited from big businesses and lived well and extremely wasteful (505). New technologies caused many workers the inability to keep up with the needed skills and once new schools and colleges were opened many college grads got the jobs while both male and female unskilled industrial workers suffered low wages and could not live decently (505).

The uneven balance of society's wealth can be demonstrated through the type of work women maintained. Although all women were paid less; middle

class women worked as nurses teachers and lower class as sales and cashier clerks (505). Stability was a problem; middle class workers saved money if their jobs were not stable where stable workers would spend their money (507). Social culture was important to the rich and middle class but the poor were discriminated against enjoying such privileges (516). Even the church discriminated against the poor.

Protestants were the only ones to take a step in the right direction and help the poor improve their lives, not with charity but with reform (524). Socialist ideals became popular towards the turn of the century likely because of government's inability to help all Americans and not just themselves and other wealthy citizens. Society wanted to see welfare, unemployment benefits, nationalizing industries, public housing and many other beneficial programs for the needy and equal opportunities for all Americans (524).