

The sweeping social and economic reforms in the united states between 1898 and 19...

[Countries](#), [United States](#)



Sweeping social and economic reforms that occur in any country at any time are always very significant. In relation to the United States of America (USA) during the period of 1898-1921, it is even more so. This period of time saw remarkable changes occurring both inside the USA, and in relation to the USA and the outside world as it became a global force.

After the Spanish-American War, led by President McKinley, American ideologies, basically ignorant, capitalist and isolationist at heart, seemed to shift and do a 180 degree turn. This can be said as being signified by the accession of the political dogma of Progressivism, advocated by the next President Theodore Roosevelt, who believed in a 'Dirigisme' style of government. With Roosevelt came swift economical and business reforms, the Roosevelt coined 'Square Deal' is an example of the reforms he implemented, and the advent of the 'muckrakers', with their campaigns against malpractice in the corporate world and big business monopolistic power.

William Howard Taft, the successor of Roosevelt, tried to follow this road with his attempts at reforming tariff protection, but inner party disagreements, and a split, in the Republican camp denied him the chance to do so. As the world, and America, edged closer to the First World War, we see that the United States had significantly revolutionised both socially and economically, especially assisted with the Democrat Woodrow Wilson as President, who reformed the country more than any other. However, as the Great War progressed and after its completion, we see a drastic reversal.

A new US stepped out of the war, one where its people wore blinkers for thinking caps. As the era of Communist take-over fears, suffrage for women, prohibition and the 'roaring 20's' neared, isolationism, restrictedimmigration, and social, civil, and racial unrest had come to the forefront of American society's priorities. This period ended with the introduction of 'laissez-faire' economics, a swift turn-around from usual government methods used in the last 20 years.

American society had once again done a 180-degree turn, back to 'normalcy', under the guidance of President Warren Harding. This original form of control and regulation in the country was a way in which the people repudiated all the years of hard work done by the progressives and others in the past in their attempts to make the USA a more friendly, safe, prosperous and free place to live in. Permeating through every area of American society, this new, isolated attitude to life, themselves and foreigners stuck with the American people for many years into the future.

The year 1898 started with a bang for the American people, literally. The battleship 'Maine', sent by the US Navy to Havana, Cuba, to protect US citizens and property there from Spanish violence, exploded in suspicious circumstances, taking 260 lives with it. This began an avalanche of action and a few months later, Spain, who was accused of destroying the ship and mistreating Cuban's, was at war with the USA. A war of liberation for the Cuban people from Spanish oppression was announced by President William McKinley.

After a swift and decisive naval victory for the Americans in the Philippines against the Spanish Fleet, and a surprise ground invasion into Cuba at the port of Santiago was hugely successful, Spain soon sued for peace. In the terms for surrender, Spain relinquished Cuba to the auspicious eyes of the US, and ceded to the United States the Philippine Islands, Guam, and Puerto Rico. Not only did the US gain control of these regions, but also during 1898, Hawaii was annexed by the US.

The USA had now become, as many called it, a 'world colonial power'. This new power is also demonstrated with the implementation of McKinley's "Open Door" policy with all the nations in China, which in essence was a diplomatic manoeuvre to gain the advantages of a new colony without the necessity of any conflict. With such foreign power and dominance, some Americans (mostly Democrats) saw these United States actions as 'imperialistic', and called for the country to renounce their colonial acquisitions.

But the majority of the American people supported McKinley's foreign policies, and when it came time to prove their support, they did, giving McKinley an overwhelming victory in his 1900 presidential campaign. His victory marked a new era in American politics, in terms of foreign affairs, one where the American people no longer saw themselves as 'outsiders' with their own lives to run, generally known as 'isolationism', but rather as a sort of new-age colonial power and as the champion of oppressed peoples (like the Cuban's), as such.

But in 1901, a year after his re-election, McKinley was assassinated by an anarchist, and Theodore Roosevelt, as his vice-president, became the 26th President of the USA. Roosevelt's accession to the Oval Office coincided with a new epoch in American political history also, but more in the areas of social and economic (domestic) affairs.

Roosevelt advocated a new school of political thought called 'Progressivism'. Progressivism was a sort of democratic crusade against big business and powerful corporations who were abusing the rights of workers, unfairly treating certain people or acting unjustly against society. Progressivist's aimed for greater democracy and social justice, less corrupt governments, more effective regulation of businesses, and a revived commitment to public service.

With progressive ideals to guide him, Roosevelt whole-heartedly took it upon himself to reform his country, and even in his first address to Congress he outlined his demands for more federal supervision and regulation of all interstate corporations, for amendments to be made to various laws which were either stagnant or unjust, and for the Government to have more control in social and economic matters. This new form of Government control is known as 'Dirigisme'.

Dirigisme refers to a policy of State direction and control in economic and social matters. This was a revolutionary step for a President and for the Republican Party to take, and it signifies the air of reform that permeated every aspect of American society at the time.

Thrust into his face a short time after his becoming President, Roosevelt had the problem to face of labour, their unions, and the reforms that were essential to assure both fairness and efficiency in the workforce. In 1902, a strike of 140, 000 plus United Mine workers at an anthracite coalmine, which lasted for nearly half a year, was stopped when Roosevelt called both sides of the conflict to the White House.

There, he created a special commission to investigate the miner's grievances and to decide which demands should be met. The following year the commission's report led to the adoption for the United Mine workers of a nine-hour day, a 10-percent increase in pay, and a new, mediation style process for negotiating disputes within the mining industry.

For the first time, a President had gotten involved in a union action, and instead of crushing it; he arbitrated it, bringing to close a crippling strike. This was one of the most important aspects of Roosevelt's self-proclaimed 'Square Deal'. The Square Deal was a general promise to revive the environment, to improve working conditions for some workers, and to eliminate the power of monopolistic 'trusts'. Roosevelt did revive the environment with various conservation laws, he did improve workers conditions for example, by assisting Supreme Court decisions in certain cases that abolished the business acts of limiting working hours, but most importantly, he strived to bring under control the power of trusts.

Trusts were types of business combinations that formed for the purpose of reducing competition and controlling prices. In his endeavour to reign back

the numerous trusts which were advent in every industry, Roosevelt had his attorney general Philander C. Knox, file lawsuits against various companies who operated as trusts, notably the railroad dominator, the Northern Securities Co. Knox accused the (merged) companies (of Northern Securities Co) of breaking the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890, which prohibited such mergers, and was successful in breaking up its price and service controlling powers.

This new attempt to reduce monopolies and oligopolies went well with the public, and the American people supported his attempts at reform, signifying that Roosevelt's dirigisme method of government rule was just what the doctors, or the progressives, ordered.

Besides Roosevelt and Congress, one of the stalwarts of the progressive movement was the media. Through the media, progressives were able to get their point of view across, make their activities known, and most importantly, attack those who were taking advantage of the ordinary American. Here is where the 'muckrakers' came to prominence.

Muckrakers were ordinary journalists who were sick of reporting the news that was given to them, and instead began to investigate and hunt stories for themselves. They targeted political unfairness and corruption, social injustice and inequality, and most usually, the misgivings and illegal operations of big businesses. With Roosevelt as President, who some believed was a kind of muckraker himself; the muckrakers were able to expose the dastardly ways

of major corporations and instigate the creation of revolutionary new laws to stop them.

An example of this, Upton Sinclair, a previously relatively minor journalist, wrote a book entitled 'The Jungle, which graphically detailed the gross misconduct and illegal methods of business and food preparation used by the meatpacking industry. With Sinclair's book awakening the people's interest, Roosevelt was able to pass through the Pure Food and Drug Act, which put a stamp on all such illegal activities in the food industry.

Many more instances such as these occurred, for example as with Ida Tarbell and her six-year researched expose on the corrupt Standard Oil Company which ended in the Supreme Court heavily cracking down on the companies operations). This signified just how influential the muckrakers really were in changing the ways in which businesses ran and the processes in which products were created.

After over 7 years of muckraking, social reforms and leading his country to prosperity, Roosevelt did not run for re-election in 1908, deciding instead to let his Secretary of War, William Howard Taft, take his spot as candidate for the Presidency. Taft won the election easily, riding on the back of Roosevelt's, and the Republican Party's, public favour. Taft looked more towards economic reforms than social ones, and he aimed his presidential stick at the issue of lowering and downsizing 'the tariff', which had been slowly dividing the Republican Party over the recent years.

The tariff in place when Taft came to power was excessively high and was pushing up the prices of housing goods and commodities, tightening the noose around the already struggling lower classes and the workers. Big businesses were in favour of the high tariff, and whenever proposals were made to reduce it for the benefit of the lower income bracket, their cries of disdain and un-support quickly dampened any attempts at tariff reform.

Nonetheless, in 1909, the Payne-Aldrich Tariff Act was passed through Congress, but it did not really lower the levels of the tariff at all. This inaction from Taft to do as promised and lower tariff levels was due to the sizable conflict occurring inside the Republican Party. On one side of the argument were the conservatives, known as the 'standpatters', who disagreed with tariff reform and who did not want to continue reforming the country in the ways Roosevelt had done previously.

On the other side of the debate were the 'insurgents', later known as the progressives, who sided with Roosevelt's views, wanting to instigate tariff reform and lower tariffs, and who were angry at the non-fulfilment of the promises of reform made in the Republican Party platform of 1908. By 1912, the party schism had come to a head, with Roosevelt leading the insurgents and forming the Progressive Party, facing off Taft and the standpatters who kept control of the remnants of the Republican Party.

In the 1912 presidential election, Roosevelt ran for re-election (going for a third term) as leader of the Progressives, Taft as leader of the Republican Party, and Woodrow Wilson as leader of the Democratic Party. With the war

waging in the Republican ranks, Wilson won the election easily, assisted by a myriad of general public disappointment and vexation in the Republicans and the Progressives, ending both the run of victories for the Republican Party and the many continuous years of Republican dominance.

Wilson, just like Roosevelt, also believed in a strict dirigisme and reformative style of government rule, and so began his term as President with one of the most ambitious legislative programs in American history. He promised to do so much that many doubted his sincerity. However, after a few years, only total confidence and respect could Wilson command from his people, as one after the other, Wilson did as he planned, reforming the country both socially and economically on an unprecedented scale. His first move was against the tariff, and after some debate, the Underwood Tariff was implemented during October 1913.

The new tariff slashed protective levels from nearly every imported item, and although the tariff did still have protective substance, it was a genuine attempt to lower the cost of living. Secondly, he targeted the banking system, and with the Federal Reserve Act created in December 1913, he was able to unite the banking system and then divide it into 12 sections with a Federal Reserve board in each.

This new regulation was successful in its attempts to stop banks from over-lending and extending their cash reserves, which had caused momentary public panic in the past. Thirdly, Wilson took a leaf out of Roosevelt's book and challenged the trusts. By passing the Clayton Antitrust Act, Wilson

forbade many corporate practices that had previously escaped condemnation, so assuring that unfair competition practices were limited, or no longer done at all.

In addition, the enacting of the law was a victory for labour, as it exempted unions from anti-trust laws, and it made strikes, picketing, and boycotting legal. Fourthly, farmers, workers and labourers were assisted. The Seamen's Act of 1915, the Federal Workingman's Compensation Act of 1916 and the Adamson Act of 1916, gave farmers more credit at lower interest rates, authorized allowances to injured civil service employees, and established a 8-hour day for railroad labour, in a respective order. With these reforms, and more, Wilson completely changed the way people lived their lives and the way companies did business within a few years of his being voted into office.

Nevertheless, for all of Wilson's achievements, he will go down in history not for his amazing reforms, but for his scorecard during one of the biggest events in the world's history, the First World War. When the war started in 1914, Wilson, representing the desires of his people at the time, declared neutrality, not becoming a belligerent in the horrors that were unfolding. This neutrality standing was strained by both Great Britain and, (but mostly) Germany, who continuously violated US rights and privileges regarding the usage of the seas and free passage for trade.

The US government and US businesses were making ludicrous amounts of money from the war, and they did not want any side of the war hindering munitions/ration sales i. e. from going to the other side. Farmers were

prospering, workers were now more important to the country as munition production went into full swing, women were gaining more rights, businesses were making copiously more amounts of money than ever, so and so forth, and the people didn't really want to risk the chance of losing all that to go to War. Wilson kept firm with his neutral stance, and when the 1916 presidential elections began, Wilson's campaign used the slogan, " he kept us out of war". With this fact in tow, and with the majority of the public behind him, he won the election easily.

But during January 1917, Germany once again announced 'unrestricted submarine warfare', threatening to destroy any ship, neutral or enemy, that entered into a specific target area. The US replied by breaking off relations with Germany. Indignation in America against Germany and Germans (even German-Americans) was reaching fever-pitch level, and after neutral ships were sunk, and a plan to unite Mexico and Germany to fight the US (the Zimmerman Telegram) was discovered, Wilson, during April 1917, declared war against Germany and later, her allies.

No longer neutral, the country united in mind, body and spirit to fight for a common cause against a common enemy; the fight against imperialism and autocratic rule, represented by the 'Huns', the Germans. Yet the US, with all its territorial holdings, was a sort of imperialistic nation itself, and it is this hypocritical nature of the American people that would affect their thinking a year and a bit later.

Here, as the US entered the War, all ideas of progressivism died out in both the social and political arena. From now on politics would take a new face and the ideals of the American people would be carved on a much harder stone.

As the war wound down late 1918, with Germany and her allies defeated, the time came for negotiating and to finalise war punishments and reparations and such. Wilson, with his 14-points, a special set of rules chartering what the result of the war should be in relation to the belligerents and countries previously under imperial rule for example, went to the negotiating table in France confident that his ideals of peace would win the day.

Sadly, he was wrong, as the anger and need for revenge felt by the Allies, France especially, against Germany overrode any proposals for a fair and just peace. The settlements signed by Germany and the Allies, the subsequently named Versailles Treaty, went against everything Wilson had hoped for, as Germany was severely punished both emotionally and economically, and huge chunks of land was stripped from her. Wilson was deeply disappointed, and ashamed in that the cause he fought so passionately for could be so callous in deciding how the war ended. The Allies were apathetic to Wilson's 'idealism' or the German peoples suffering.

But the final nail in the coffin for Wilson came from his own people. The fourteenth point in his 14-points called for the creation of a League of Nations, an association of nations, which would oversee territorial claims,

and conflict's between countries and mediate on them in a peaceful and pacifist way, so ending the need for violence and war.

The only problem was, the American people, and Congress especially, did not want to join such a foreign League and ratification from Congress was non-forthcoming. Wilson returned home from Paris, and during 1919, while valiantly trying to convince his people and Congress to change their minds in a nationwide tour and campaign, he suffered a crippling stroke. Still, the Senate rejected both the Versailles Treaty and the League Covenant, so in a way shoving all of Wilson's efforts back into his face.

With the US not joined to the League, it was destined to failure. The American people's ignorance is significant in that they floundered the chance for more global peace by rejecting the League. The subsequently weak League could do nothing in any grossly important situation, and so could not stop such things as Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia, and Hitler and the forthcoming Second World War many years later.

Post-World War One America was a totally different place to the one that existed some 2 years earlier, before they entered. It became a melting pot of isolationism, xenophobia, civil/racial unrest and social revolutions based on 'normal' and 'classic' idiosyncrasies. The attitudes, beliefs, and morals of American society had shockingly gone against what it so vehemently stood for during the early 20th century.

The USA was, and known to its people, the most powerful nation on Earth. Instead of seeing themselves as having a responsibility to aid and watch over

war-torn Europe, American's decided to shun the rest of the world and to only take care of their own problems. An example of this was the rejection of joining the League. This newfound isolationism became entrenched deep into the roots of American culture and would last for many years into the future.

In the years after the War, the American Constitution was amended twice, changing the life of every person in the country. To properly explain just how much American society changed after the war, the advents of Prohibition, woman's suffrage, the reinstatement of Republican rule, laissez-faire economics, immigration restriction laws and the revived Ku Klux Klan must be better elucidated.

After years of complaints and calls for change from the more conservative groups in the country, the 18th Amendment was passed. This amendment instigated the Volstead Act, and both of these combined began one of the most profoundly idiotic campaigns of the 20th century, to rid alcohol from all areas of society. The era of Prohibition had begun in 1919, and instead of turning people away from the illegal liquor, it made it more lucrative and desirable.

Normally law-abiding citizens saw it as an injustice and a flagrant disregard for their rights, and they fought back by purposely breaking the law. Towns formed 'speakeasies' where alcohol was readily available, and new gangs and groups began to sprout from the criminal underworld, "bootlegging" their way to fortune, taking advantage of the people's necessity for alcohol, and the possibilities of extremely higher levels of prices. Crime increased,

instead of decreasing with Prohibitions implementation, as monitoring and policing the sale of liquor and alcohol was nigh impossible. Prohibition, or the 'noble experiment' as it was called, was not stopped until 1933.

The 19th Amendment was a bit more beneficial for the general populace. It finally gave to the woman of America what they had been fighting for for decades, total suffrage. As a reward for their efforts during the War, women now had the right to vote, a basic right that had been denied to them since the idea of voting was established. Women in American society were becoming more independent, more social, and most noticeably, more important.

They occupied more non-menial jobs than ever, and were earning higher wages. Society had finally become more accepting to women, and this was represented in their increased stance in society and their right to pass judgment on politicians in the ballot box. As receiving the right to vote in the year 1920, they were able to vote in the 1920 presidential elections. The battle between the Democratic nominee James M. Cox, who followed from Wilson, and the Republican Warren G. Harding, was a one sided one from the start.

The country had turned on the Democrats and its ideas of 'Wilsonism' and began to run back in flocks to the re-joined and stronger than ever Republican Party. To understand why the Republicans came back to power so effortlessly, one must think as a person of the time, and take into account all the proper factors, so noticing that only the peoples desire for any

profound change to government, not the best change, was the utmost reason for their being swept into power.

Harding caught the eyes of the American people by using an unusual slogan in his election campaign, that a vote for Harding was a vote for: " A Return to Normalcy." This slogan perfectly details the mentality of the American people at the time. The American people were sick of the radical ways in which the country had been run for the last 20 years and they wanted a change. Instead of desiring government intervention in the economy, they wanted the opposite, government non-intervention.

This was after the First World War, where the government led by Wilson had, with a mandate from the people, taken control of nearly every aspect of the day to day running of American society so as to better gear it towards war. With Harding and the Republics in office, here is where the era of laissez-faire economics came into status. Laissez-faire, government abstention from interference with individual action in commerce, meant that the American economy relied not on the decisions of parliaments and politicians as well as other factors, but solely on the vicious economic and business cycles, with there boom's and bust's.

People, politicians and businesses wanted a system that equated to an extreme free-market enterprise approach, and that is what they got. Harding typified his and his party's views with a now famous quote, that in the US there should be: " less government in business and more business in government." The corporate and industrial (manufacturing especially) sector

of the country loved this situation, and their profits skyrocketed during the control-free 'roaring 20's'.

At first, for over 9 years, the economy upturned and fluctuated then boomed to unprecedented levels, but with government ignorance of intervention, the inevitable (as is in all capitalist/cycle based economies) was always going to happen. The bust, named the Great Depression for its American as well as world-wide ferocity, began in 1929 and went beyond it, shaking the nation to its core for many years, completely wiping out prices of shares on the stock market, forcing the closure of business and making bankrupt millions upon millions of lower and middle class investors/workers whose lives depended on wages and dividends.

The American people also changed their views on foreigners during and after the war. During 1900-1915, more than 13 million people migrated to the US. But Americans, around 1919, now saw foreigners as dissidents, troublesome, job stealers and non-American. This fear was also caused by the Russian Revolution in 1917, in which a 'Red Scare' deluged the minds of the people. Dearth of reason, the American people believed that a Communist takeover was a real possibility, and they feared for their democratic freedoms as well as their lives.

An example of the repercussions of this on society was the forced removal of many radicals from the country in 1919, exiling them forever. As another example, several severe strikes had begun in 1919, as workers found that their wages were not increasing with company profits, then, they found that

their wages were decreasing as the economy slumped. In fear that a Communist upstart or surge could occur because of this, as Communism always stems from grass-roots levels where worker dissatisfaction becomes endemic, the strikes were brutally oppressed. No major strikes occurred after that precedent was set.

Subsequently, with the colour red making them see red, the American people, especially after hearing propaganda tales and soldiers stories of the horrors and hatreds of war, began to cry out for restriction and a culling of the 'subtle foreign invasion' (the mass exodus into the country). The American people did not know the realities of war in how it affected a country and its peoples, its innocent victims, since US soil was untouched, and they were apathetic to the miserable plight of the Europeans. The first step taken to limit migration was to introduce a literacy-test for prospective immigrants in 1917.

But this was not close to enough to sate the hungry masses. When the Republicans returned to power in 1920, they set about tapping the flood of migrants entering the country. With a prosperous US and a war-torn Europe to choose from, many citizens of the world wanted to enter 'the land of the free'.

But in 1921, laws began to be implemented in America, which non-discriminatorily restricted immigration into the country. The National Origins Act is an example of this, which established a quota system and limited immigration to only 3 per cent. Migration levels, to the relief of the people

but to the chagrin of desperate foreigners, subsequently dropped dramatically over the following years.

Later into the 1920's, more laws were introduced and immigration levels were restricted even further.

This new fear or disdain of foreigners, or xenophobic thought, translated into racial and civil unrest inside the country. Now, people who were not born in America, weren't white, or weren't Protestant, became outcasts, and in some instances, the enemy. The most extroverted and passionate haters of such people joined the new Ku Klux Klan. This revived Ku Klux Klan, the second one created since the early 19th century, called for "100% Americanism." Just the fact that the clan was revived after non-existence for so many years signifies a sharp change in social mentalities.

The second Klan redefined its enemies and its targets and gained more members than ever from the North and Midwest of the USA, all eager to step up their already horrifying campaigns of fear and death that began sweeping the country, especially in the South, where hangings and murders of blacks occurred on a shocking scale. Race riots broke out all over the country as tensions fuelled both blacks and whites to choose conflict over peace, spreading the already profound xenophobic cloud over more of the country than previously ever thought possible.

From an unpopulated, insignificant backwater, the USA became the most powerful nation in the world by the close of the period of 1898-1921, militarily and economically, but in the end it enclosed itself in a protective

shell, encompassing a country filled with class inequality, xenophobic thought, poverty and civil/racial unrest.

When a country as populated, self-sufficient and powerful as the USA reforms both socially and economically on the scale it did between the many tumultuous years of 1898-1921, its significance cannot be denied or played down. After the Spanish-American war of 1898, led by President McKinley, the US became an understanding, courageous and sturdy nation that opened its doors to the world and put nations close to it under its 'non-imperialistic' cloak of protection.

From these new ideals followed by the people sprouted Progressivism and its reform based impetus. The 8-year term of Theodore Roosevelt followed this, and with him came such things as the reform-based Square Deal, the sprouting of the muckrakers and their invaluable help to the progressive cause, and the acceptance of a new 'Dirigisme', or interventionist, style of government control. William Howard Taft, who succeeded Roosevelt as President, was unable to reform the areas of the economy that he planned to, due to the timely division in the Republican Party, which had been long looming for many years.

With dissention and conflict rocking the Republicans and the newly formed but weak Progressive Party, led by a rejuvenated Roosevelt, the Democrats were comfortably swept into power in 1912 on the wings of Woodrow Wilson's ambitious party program. Promising to reform the country like none before him, he did as planned, changing the way people lived their lives, the

way businesses did business and the way in which government ran things, right up to the American entry into the First World War.

Choosing to stay neutral for three years of the war up to 1917, it is the US's entry into the war which changed everything. Coming into the war, and at his completion, with hopes of leading the world to peace and universal fraternity, Wilson watched as the victorious Allies, and his people, took the other road, with one wanting revenge and punishment for the beaten Germans, and the other wanting nothing to do with the upcoming new world order, respectively.

After they rebuffed the League of Nations and the Versailles Treaty, Wilson watched as his people sulked into an endemic isolationism. In a vain attempt to win back support, Wilson toured the country, but suffered a stroke, and in the next elections, of 1920, he observed his democrat candidate lose to the republican William G. Harding, who offered a **♣** return to normalcy to the people.

The beginning of the 1920 **♣**s, starting with Harding's success and the post-war years were the time of a new America, one which fervently supported such questionable issues as Prohibition, woman's suffrage, restricted immigration, and the new race violence erupting all over the country. This new America took it upon itself to live a responsibility free life, one where **♣** laissez-faire (non-interventionist) economics monitored the country, where foreigners were the enemy, and where conflict, lawlessness and poverty seemed to be the daily facts of life.

The US went from being an aegis of fairness and duty at the start of the 20th Century to a stalwart of the business cycle and xenophobia as a way of life at the commencement of the "roaring 20s". This signifies just how much it changed in only 23 calendar years.