

A Brief History of the United States

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Unit Six

1877-1890 Closing the Frontier-Gilded Age

After the Civil War, many people traveled west for a fresh start. The transcontinental railroad tied the nation together. It became a curse, however, to farmers who were overcharged to ship their crops to market. Native Americans fought with the government to maintain their identity. Ultimately, they failed and were consigned to live their lives on reservations and to become assimilated into white society. The Gilded Age was a time period in which big business was allowed unregulated growth. In this age the wellbeing of the working class and the environment were ignored while the business owners reaped huge profits.

Land was abundant and, thanks to the **Homestead Act**, it was cheap. With the completion of the **Transcontinental Railroad** in 1869, settlers now had a fast and reliable way to get there.

The main problem in moving west was that settlers encountered hostile Native Americans. The U.S. government had pushed them westward with the promise of not being bothered again. Starting with the close of the Civil War in 1865, however, United States soldiers began moving them to small plots of land called **reservations**. The natives had one major battle at **Little Bighorn** in 1876 that they won. The U.S. government then began to aggressively shove the natives to the reservations. In Florida, the army fought the Seminole Indians, eventually capturing and moving many of them. The survivors escaped to the Everglades. By 1890, most Indians were living on reservations in squalid conditions. A movement called the **ghost dance** swept through the reservations. It called to the spirits to bring back the buffalo that the army had purposely destroyed and eliminate all white people. Some of the Natives left the **reservations** and were pursued by the cavalry to **Wounded Knee** where they were slaughtered. Congress passed the **Dawes Severalty Act** in 1887 which tried to whiten up the Natives. This policy, known as **assimilation**, would remain official government policy until the 1930's. Among the various groups of western settlers were cowboys. They herded thousands of cattle at a time to railroad heads. This **open range** time ended with the introduction of **barbed wire** in 1874.

The **Gilded Age** (a phrase sarcastically coined by Mark Twain) is the time period between reconstruction and the **Progressive Era** (1877-1890). It is a time when big business and the rich businessmen ran the country. The presidents were a bland, bearded bunch who let millionaire businessmen do what they wanted with very little government interference. Corrupt politicians ran the big cities and most states. These politicians openly took bribes to ensure that the government would not interfere with business making money at the people's expense. The business practices of the time such as the exploitation of the workers forcing them to labor for ridiculously long hours and low pay (which forced them to put all family members including small children to work), and the damage done to the environment would be considered illegal today. But, in the age of **rapid industrialization**, these men were admired by many for their ability to make enormous sums of wealth. An invention of major importance was the light bulb, which allowed people to work twenty-four hours a day.

The millionaires roll call included: **Andrew Carnegie**, who controlled U.S. Steel, Carnegie used **vertical integration** to dominate the steel industry. **John D. Rockefeller** ran the monopoly of Standard Oil as a **horizontal consolidation** he used cut throat business practices to put small companies out of business then purchased them at a deep discount. **Cornelius Vanderbilt** made his fortune in railroads. **J.P. Morgan** was a banker who was so wealthy that he actually loaned the United States money during the **Panic of 1893**.

The railroads were growing very fast. It was also the only way for farmers to get their crops to market. The railroads took advantage of the farmers by overcharging them for shipping and storing the crops. The disgruntled farmers organized into a group called the **Grange**, aka the Patrons of Husbandry. They pushed congress to regulate the railroads. The **Farmer's Alliance** later took up the call and put more pressure on the government to stop the railroads from taking advantage of farmers. Eventually, the **Interstate Commerce Commission** was set up to regulate the railroads. It was the first time the government regulated an industry.

The discontented farmers eventually formed a third national political party called the **Populist Party**. They ran **William Jennings Bryan** for president in 1892 and 1896. They wanted a **direct election of senators**, a **graduated income tax**, and public ownership of the railroads. The biggest issue they pushed was the use of

silver for currency exchange in addition to gold. This would lower interest rates and help the cash strapped, in debt farmers.

The cities of this time period were dominated by political machines. This was an organization who would buy votes to remain in power. Once in power, they would steal as much money as possible from the government. The most notorious **city boss** was from New York named **William "Boss" Tweed**, who controlled Tammany Hall. Political machines would also hand out jobs to supporters in a practice known as **patronage**. This practice extended all the way to the White House. President Garfield was assassinated by a crazed, disgruntled office seeker. The U.S. government finally passed the **Pendleton Civil Service Act**. It made people who wanted a federal government job take a test. It then based hiring on qualifications, rather than who you knew.

A **third wave of immigration** occurred from 1890-1915. These new immigrants arrived from southern and eastern Europe. They were looked down upon by the more established English, German, and Irish immigrants. The new immigrants were usually poor and possessed limited skills. They typically went to work in factories where they were treated poorly, working long hours for very low pay. This situation led to them putting their entire family to work just to survive. Unfortunately, the children didn't get an education which would doom them to a life of working in factories themselves with out a chance for improvement.

Outraged workers began to organize into **unions** to increase their rights and benefits at work. [Examples were: **National Labor Union, Knights of Labor, & AF of L**. The big businessmen violently crushed any labor movement because they didn't want to pay workers more due to the fact that it would cut into their profits. Any **strike** by labor would be broken up by night stick wielding policemen who were usually paid by the businessmen. The newspapers didn't help the unions by painting the strikers as **socialists** and **anarchists**, bent on destroying society. One of the most successful unions was the **American Federation of Labor** or the **AFL**. It was composed of skilled workers who couldn't be easily replaced by **scab labor**. They pushed for tangible benefits such as shorter work hours and better pay.

Two groups in society faced special discrimination. The Chinese out west were constantly harassed. In 1882, the **Chinese Exclusion Act** was passed that outlawed Chinese immigration for ten years, later extended to twenty years. African Americans were treated little better than during slavery. They faced a time of **legal or de jure segregation** called **Jim Crow**. A Supreme Court case called **Plessy vs. Ferguson (1896)** ruled that **separate but equal** facilities in the south were fine. This was the law until the 1954 case of **Brown vs. Board**, which overturned the **separate but equal doctrine** and began the Civil Rights Movement. During the 1890's there were two prominent African Americans who became spokesman for their race. **Booker T. Washington**, who founded the **Tuskegee Institute**, was more conciliatory toward white society and wanted African Americans to get an education before demanding equal rights. **W.E.B. DuBois**, a Harvard graduate, wanted the top ten percent of African Americans to be given total equality with whites. He advocated for a more progressive and more aggressive form of civil rights.



"You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns; you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold."
The "Cross of Gold" Speech,
William J. Bryan (1896)

