

# *A Brief History of the United States*

By Adam McGarry

Edited by John Braithwaite

## Unit Seven (A)

### *1890-1920 Imperialism, Progressivism-World War I*

The idea of globalization was a reality in the 1890's. **Telegraph** wires connected the world since 1867 and steamships offered fast, reliable worldwide travel. The United States was now competing for markets and resources with all countries. The country had healed its Civil War wounds and had begun to look outward, in a **new version of Manifest Destiny**. The result of the way industrialization treated the working class caused a backlash against business owners and an indifferent society. The **Progressive Movement** was an attempt to improve society, business, and government. It had many diverse goals including women's rights, better working conditions, eradicating child labor, improving efficiency in businesses and government, helping the incoming immigrants become acclimated to society, and abolishing alcohol. The United States attempted to avoid involvement in World War I by adhering to George Washington's strict policy of neutrality. Eventually, due to **unrestricted submarine warfare** and the **Zimmerman note**, the United States became embroiled in Europe's conflict.

**Imperialism**, the belief that a country should expand to other lands for economic, cultural, and political reasons, took root in the late 1880's. Admiral **Alfred T. Mahan** wrote a book called **The Influence of Sea Power in History**. It argued that without a powerful navy, a country would be shut out of the lucrative world trade markets and natural resources. During the 1890's the United States embarked on carving out an empire for itself. The reasons were economic (new markets and resources), as well as political (to spread democracy) and cultural (to spread Christianity).

The island of **Hawaii** was America's first foray into **Imperialism**. Hawaii was ideally situated for a naval coaling station. American planters took the government over. It languished from 1893 until it was finally **annexed** to the United States in 1898.

**Cuba**, ninety miles to the south, was the next Imperialistic move. The Cubans had been fighting for their freedom from Spain for years. The press (most notably **Hearst & Pulitzer**) would exaggerate stories of Spanish atrocities in order to increase newspaper circulation and increase their profits. This **yellow journalism** whipped the American people into a **jingostic** fever bent on going to war with Spain to spread democracy to Cuba. The explosion of the U.S.S. Maine in Havana harbor began the **Spanish American War** or the **War of 1898**. It was called the "splendid little war" because the U.S. thrashed the hapless Spanish within three months. The **Treaty of Paris 1898** gave the United States Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines. Cuba became an **American protectorate** until it could self-rule. The Philippines began a **guerilla war** against the United States that took more lives than the war. The Philippines were given their independence in 1946.

China was very weak by this time and many countries were carving out **spheres of influence**, in which they essentially controlled parts of the country. The U.S. didn't have one and sent the **Open Door Notes** proclaiming that **China** should be able to rule its own country, free from interference from other countries, and that all nations should have the right to trade with China.

Upon the assassination of President McKinley, **Theodore Roosevelt** became president. T.R. was a larger-than-life personality who wanted to see the United States become a world power. He introduced the **Roosevelt Corollary** to the **Monroe Doctrine**. This stated that the U.S. can intervene in the affairs of Latin American countries if we see they are governing their country improperly. The most prominent use of the **Roosevelt Corollary** came when T.R. helped Panama get its independence from Columbia. This enabled the United States to build the Panama Canal, which shortened the trip from the east coast to the west coast by nearly two months. As he stated, "I took the canal". T.R.'s foreign policy philosophy was "speak softly and carry a big stick." This became known as **Big Stick Diplomacy**.

**Progressivism**, or the belief that government should help fix society's problems, was a period from 1889-1917, when the US entered WWI. There are many different types of reforms that progressives wanted to employ. They ranged from a more efficient and less corrupt government, to improving conditions for immigrants, food safety, child labor laws, and regulating big business to compete fairly. Leading the

**Progressive Movement** was a group of crusading journalists known as **muckrakers** (so called by T.R.). These journalists uncovered societal problems and exposed the corrupt and dirty side of society.

The most influential book of the time was **The Jungle** by **Upton Sinclair**. It exposed the meat packing industry and caused Congress to pass the **Meat Inspection Act**, set up the **Food and Drug Administration** or **FDA**, and passed the **Pure Food and Drug Act**. The fire at the **Triangle Shirtwaist Company** that caused the deaths of nearly 150 young garment workers galvanized the labor movement into seeking more protection on the job such as sprinklers.

The **Sherman Anti-Trust Act** of 1890 made monopolies in business illegal. The law was scarcely enforced, except to curb labor unions, until “trust-busting Teddy” Roosevelt became president. He broke up trusts that harmed the public economically. With World War I looming, Americans turned their attention away from improving society to getting ready for war and the Progressive Era came to a close.

World War I started in 1914 in Europe. There was a very strong **isolationist** sentiment in the United States. Indeed, since George Washington’s warning against foreign entanglements, the United States had kept to itself. The fundamental causes of the war were: **nationalism, imperialism, militarism, fanaticism, & a celebrated cause**. The combatants began using a new weapons, the u-boat or **submarine** against allied shipping, **the tank**, and **the airplane** as weapons of war! They sank some vessels with American passengers, most notably the **Lusitania**, which enraged Americans. It wasn’t until Germany sent the **Zimmerman Note**, a secret telegram to Mexico that encouraged them to attack the United States in return for the land that they lost in the Mexican War, that we finally entered the war in April 1917.

The government began a large propaganda campaign, headed by **George Creel**, to encourage popular support for the war and make Germans look evil. The **Selective Service Act** was the first draft since the Civil War, sixty years earlier. The **Espionage Act** made spying illegal, and the **Sedition Act** made it illegal to speak out against the war. Scores of Americans were jailed for violating the Sedition Act which the Supreme Court ruled was legal during war.

The war ended with a cease fire on November 11, 1918. The **Treaty of Versailles (1919)** imposed a harsh peace on the defeated Germans. They were forced to pay **war reparations** which ruined their economy, and allowed **Hitler** to rise to power as a savior. The terms of the treaty laid the seeds for World War II. The farthest reaching peace provision was the **League of Nations**. This organization, the brainchild of **President Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points for peace**, was the forerunner of the United Nations. Unfortunately, the **isolationist**-minded Senators, led by **Henry Cabot Lodge**, opposed it. The fight between the Senate **reservationists** and President Wilson killed any United States involvement in the League of Nations.

During the war, **the Soviet Union** was formed (as a result of the Bolshevik Revolution) and became a **communist** country. In the U.S., this caused a fear of communism called the **(First) Red Scare**. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer led the **Palmer Raids** on suspected communist organizations after a series of mail bombings terrified the country.

Socially, the last two achievements of the Progressive Era occurred with the passage of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Amendments. The **18<sup>th</sup> Amendment, prohibition**, was passed in 1920 and made alcohol illegal in the United States. It was later repealed with the **21<sup>st</sup> amendment** in 1933. The **19<sup>th</sup> Amendment** passed in 1920, after much lobbying by **Alice Paul** and the **National Women’s Party**, gave women the right to vote.



theodore roosevelt and his Big Stick in the Caribbean, 1904 Roosevelt's policies seemed to be turning the Caribbean into a Yankee pond. (The Granger Collection.)

