

# WAVES OF REFORM

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class Period: \_\_\_\_\_ Due Date: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

## Purpose:

This Crossroads Essay is an enrichment activity providing additional insight into the era. Many essential themes, concepts, and events are outlined in the essay; it serves as a valuable review tool before exams. Annotations will be assessed, and the activity will serve as a resource on an in-class activity/quiz. Do NOT divide and conquer. This activity is worth the time!

**Key Concept 6.3:** The Gilded Age produced new cultural and intellectual movements, public reform efforts, and political debates over economic and social policies.

**Key Concept 7.1:** Growth expanded opportunity, while economic instability led to new efforts to reform U.S. society and its economic system.

**Key Concept 7.3:** Participation in a series of global conflicts propelled the United States into a position of international power while renewing domestic debates over the nation's proper role in the world.

## Directions:

Print this article and complete by hand using a highlighter and ink. As you read the article **annotate in the spaces provided**. Think **CRITICALLY... go beyond simple/respective notes when analyzing themes**.

Annotate by:

- Highlighting the main ideas/arguments,
- identifying major themes (MAGPIES)
- identifying and explaining historical context and/or historiography
- defining terms you may not know.



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|---|--|
| M | igration and Settlement                |
| A | merica in the World                    |
| G | eography and the Environment           |
| P | olitics and Power                      |
| I | dentify; American and National         |
| E | conomy; Work, Exchange, and Technology |
| S | ociety and Culture                     |

This essay examines the two great waves of reform -- **Populism and Progressivism** -- that swept over American society and government in the years between the end of Reconstruction and the end of the First World War. It also examines the effects of domestic reform on the nation's place in the world, and vice versa.

## **I. The Context**

In the years following **Reconstruction**, as the forces of urbanization, industrialization, and immigration reshaped American society, many Americans were disturbed by the social and economic changes that these forces brought in their wake. At the same time, many Americans distrusted demands for further sweeping reforms to curb the abuses of industry, the corruption of federal, state, and local governments, and the frightful living and working conditions experienced by the urban poor. The reflexive response of these Americans was to lump such demands for change with even more "threatening" demands for racial and sexual equality and socialism or even communism. The majority of white Americans (male and female) regularly cited these "extreme" demands as threats to the extant stable relations between men and women, parents and children, or families and the larger society. But even those Americans who were content to accept society as it was found themselves once more under siege in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, and eventually they were forced to acknowledge what they long knew but could not bring themselves to admit -- that the new shape of American society was at least as threatening to the values they cherished as were the so-called extremists they feared.

*Remember to think CRITICALLY and FOLLOW DIRECTIONS!*

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## II. Who Were the Populists

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The first great wave of reform is known as the Populist movement, from its heterogeneous advocates' insistence on the rights and interests of the great body of the people. Populism traced its roots to the farmers' **Granger movements** of the 1870s, which campaigned for regulation of interstate railroad shipping rates and other reforms to keep farmers from being overwhelmed by larger and more powerful economic forces. But the Populists had a broader agenda and a more insistent manner of advancing it.

Historians seeking to understand the **Populists** have split into two camps:

- The older approach, whose greatest advocate was Richard Hofstadter, regards the Populist movement with suspicion and hostility. These historians emphasize the **irrational parochialism** of the Populists -- their distrust of immigration and cities, their virulent prejudice against Jews, Catholics, African-Americans, and Asian-Americans; their penchant for quick-fix schemes such as "free silver" (the demand for unlimited, inflationary coinage of silver to achieve the rate of \$16 in silver for every gold dollar in circulation); and their tendency to view any large and complex economic or social development as a conspiracy by eastern money-men against the people as a whole. These historians occasionally concede that the Populists had a few good ideas -- such as women's suffrage, the direct election of Senators by the people, and a constitutional amendment authorizing a federal income tax -- and that their campaigns against monopoly power and the trusts had value in alerting the American people to the abuses of great economic actors in an unregulated economy. But, they conclude, these good ideas and sound policies had to await the rise of a new, more realistic reform movement -- the Progressives (section III below) -- who would salvage the good in Populism and put it into effect. The prize exhibit cited by these historians is **William Jennings Bryan** (Democrat-Nebraska); they trace a direct line from the Bryan who in the 1890s championed the interests of the common man and combatted the forces of reaction and centralized power to the Bryan who in the 1920s defended Tennessee's anti-evolution statute in the now-notorious **Scopes trial**.
- A newer approach to Populism accentuates the positive. The forerunner here was Norman Pollack, whose 1960 book *The Populist Response to Industrial America* was a slashing and often personally unfair attack on the Hofstadter view but which nonetheless compelled historians to rethink their understanding of the Populists. While these historians concede that Populists occasionally harbored prejudice against immigrants, people of different races, and the cities, they point out that most of these prejudices were common throughout the "political population" (Henry Adams's phrase for those Americans who actually voted, held office, and were otherwise politically active). These historians insist on emphasizing the Populists' sound diagnosis of American ills, the merits of their attacks on moneyed interests and corrupt, unresponsive government, and the value of their proposed reforms. They even seek to rehabilitate the Populists' "free silver" campaign as an attack on the entrenched forces of the "money power." Finally, they maintain, whatever successes the Progressives achieved would have been impossible without the groundwork that the Populists laid.
- Modern historians such as Alan Dawley adopt a stance between these extremes, recognizing the Populists' accomplishments and shortcomings in a more evenhanded manner than either the Hofstadter school (the case for the prosecution) or the Pollack school (the speech for the defense).

### III. Who Were the Progressives? (ca. 1890s-1910s)

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Even more energetic a sphere of historical controversy than that over the Populists is the historians' argument over the Progressive movement. The Progressives were a heterogeneous collection of reformers. Active chiefly in the nation's cities and the urban mass media (and in the legislatures of such states as Wisconsin and New York), the Progressives carried out efforts to reform American society and governance on all fronts. They numbered among their ranks social Progressives (such as Jane Addams, the founder of the **Hull House** settlement movement), economic Progressives (such as Richard Ely, the noted Wisconsin economist who emphasized the need to prevent great concentrations of economic power), legal Progressives (such as Louis D. Brandeis, the noted Massachusetts attorney and U.S. Supreme Court Justice, and his protégé, Harvard Law School professor Felix Frankfurter), cultural Progressives (including novelists such as Frank Norris and **Upton Sinclair** and such muckraking journalists as **Ida M. Tarbell**), and of course the great Progressive politicians, themselves making up a remarkable spectrum of Progressive variations.

Occupying the poles of the Progressive political spectrum were **Theodore Roosevelt** and **Woodrow Wilson**, each of whom developed his own brand of political Progressive theory and policy.

- **Roosevelt's New Nationalism** emphasized giving a vigorous national government the power to regulate and mediate among large, clashing economic and social actors. "Mere bigness" was no sin if these powerful institutions and organizations could be brought into a stable, cooperative relationship with one another through the medium of government.
- **Wilson's New Freedom** emphasized using government power to knock the large economic and social forces down to size and keeping government, business, labor, and society at a human scale. Rather than concentrating on using the federal government to solve national problems, **Wilsonian Progressives** believed in using state and local governments as laboratories of reform. Recognizing the diversity of the American nation, they argued for the need to tailor government responses to problems to the specific political, social, and economic contexts in which they would have to operate.

What held these heterogeneous and quarrelsome Progressives together as a movement was their **shared perceptions**, first, that the nation was in serious trouble and, second, that *new thinking* was desperately needed in order to craft responses to the nation's problems. This new thinking took various forms -- **including the use of local, state, and national government to protect workers from unsafe working conditions, to guard consumers against unsafe products, and to bring order and system to the growing, ever more complex economic system.** As noted above, however, a division emerged between **nationalist Progressives** led by **Theodore Roosevelt**, who conceived the nation as a fully integrated economic, social, and political unit requiring national solutions to national problems, and **localist Progressives** led by **Woodrow Wilson** and Louis D. Brandeis, who believed that mere bigness was itself a dangerous threat to American liberty, and that solutions to the problems of American life were best given effect by state and local government.

**Progressives** built on some of the ideas of the **Populists**, advocating greater democracy and accountability at all levels of government. Progressive initiatives and inventions in government included such devices as the **referendum** (by which the electorate would decide directly on major public questions), the **initiative** (by which the electorate could instruct their elected representatives to consider legislative measures), and the **recall** (by which the electorate could topple officials, for malfeasance or faithithlessness to the interests of those they represented, before their terms of office were up). The Progressives also united to amend the Constitution to authorize Congress to levy an income tax (**Amendment XVI**, 1913), transferring the responsibility for funding the American government directly to the individual taxpaying citizen); to require that Senators be elected by the people of each state rather than by the legislature of each state (**Amendment XVII**, 1913); to empower the federal government to prohibit intoxicating liquors from interstate commerce (**Amendment XVIII**, 1919); and to require an end to discrimination against women's right to vote (**Amendment XIX**, 1920).

Yet another strand of Progressive thought focused on improving the mental, physical, cultural, and moral lot of the great body of Americans. Progressives favored expanding and reforming the nation's **educational system**, developing a "science" of **eugenics** to produce a genetically improved people, and teaching the citizenry to become moral, sober, and industrious by adopting and enforcing the **Prohibition Amendment** and legislation (the notorious **Volstead Act**) putting it into effect.

The historians' debate on Progressivism divides between "**backward-looking**" and "**forward-looking**" interpreters. Richard Hofstadter, the founder and still the leading exponent of the "backward-looking" school, saw Progressives as middle-class Americans, small businessmen and tradesman and professionals, who yearned to restore the idealized America of their youth. Of course, Hofstadter noted in passing, this idealized America never existed, confronting the Progressives with a paradox rich in irony and poignancy. In trying to revive something that was, at best, an inspiring myth, they actually helped to transform the nature of American society, economy, and politics. By contrast, the "forward-looking" school, whose first great advocate was Robert H. Wiebe, maintained that the Progressives confronted head-on the challenges of the emerging "modern" American economy and society. Wiebe's Progressives emphasized efficiency, predictability, and rationality in propounding their public policy and their critiques of society's ills.

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#### IV. America as Imperial Power and International Beacon: The United States in the World, 1890s-1921

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While the Populist and Progressive waves of reform swept over domestic politics, the United States either was drawn into world politics (older historians' view) or aggressively asserted itself in world politics (in the newer, more critical historical interpretation). Whichever is the case, beginning in the 1890s and continuing with ever-increasing vigor and insistence, the United States established itself as a world power.

For the most part, the United States held itself **aloof** from major international disputes, except as they affected the Western Hemisphere. There, however, the nation conducted itself as a new, assertive, and vigorous power with imperial ambitions. Defining the Western Hemisphere to extend into the Pacific Ocean, Americans targeted such Pacific Islands as **Hawaii and Guam** as appropriate venues for American expansion and development. Between 1893 and 1898, an American-led coup toppled the independent Hawaiian constitutional monarchy and led to annexation of Hawaii by the United States.

American pressure on the arteriosclerotic Spanish Empire culminated in the **Spanish-American War** -- a war sought and vigorously prosecuted by the United States against a hopelessly outclassed and overmatched adversary who did not want war in the first place. The American defeat of Spain in **Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines** won for the United States an empire of its own -- though the United States permitted Cuba to go its way as an independent country. Further American exertions of power and influence won the independence of **Panama** from Colombia, followed by a coerced treaty between the United States and Panama that gave the United States territory on the Panamanian isthmus and, ultimately, the **Panama Canal**. The Panamanian episode was only the most flagrant of a series of American exercises of power and supervisory authority over the fragile, independent, and (ultimately) resentful republics of Latin America.

The American imperial experience was a mixed one. Although the native residents of such American possessions as **Puerto Rico** and the **Philippines** were freer than they had been under Spanish rule, they nonetheless yearned to govern themselves and chafed at American rule (and its subdued though constant accompaniment, American racism). And yet most Americans looked upon the nation's democratic empire with complacency, believing, as the late President **William McKinley** believed, that God had dictated that the United States should rule these territories and civilize their peoples (though, again like McKinley, they probably did not know at first where these territories were.)

Beginning in the 1900s, the United States determined to expand its presence on the world scene beyond the confines of the Western Hemisphere and the **Monroe Doctrine** and play an active role in world affairs. President Theodore Roosevelt's vigorous mediation of the **Russo-Japanese War of 1905** (which won him the Nobel Peace Prize) sent this message to the rest of the world, and President **Woodrow Wilson** confirmed it in his evolving approach to the problems posed by the outbreak of the **First World War** and by the peace that would follow the war's end.

Wilson strove to keep the United States out of what he knew would be a destructive and futile European conflict. In 1916, he narrowly won re-election on the slogan, "He Kept Us Out of War." It was, at first, easy to keep the United States neutral; no American interests were directly implicated, except for American ships' right to travel the high seas unimpeded by European **belligerents**. However, in April 1917, that right was threatened when Germany announced its intentions to resume **unrestricted submarine warfare**. Wilson reluctantly acknowledged the need to commit the United States to a European war, and the decision marked a watershed in American foreign policy.

Wilson sought to define American war aims to preserve the moral high ground for the United States. In his notable "**Fourteen Points**" speech of 1918, he tried to articulate the war aims not just of his own nation, but for all the Allies. He declared that the United States sought no material rewards from the conflict, but rather that the nation hoped to lead the world into an era in which war would be unthinkable and impossible. Although the speech was welcomed at home and abroad, it did not become the international beacon that Wilson hoped or imagined it would.

The war effort had a wide range of consequences for American society. Just as had occurred during the **Civil War** more than half a century earlier, the nation drew on its remarkable technological and administrative ingenuity to coordinate the American war effort. American production and resource conservation demonstrated the capacity of government to grapple with huge problems on a national, even international scale -- and the administrator of war relief, **Herbert Hoover**, carried this work forward on a global scale, making both himself and the nation a beacon of hope to the peoples of the world.

On a less cheerful note, the American people's response to war -- spurred by the nation's most sophisticated use of **propaganda** up to that time -- carried with it a vengeful and near-hysterical fear of the enemy, whether that enemy was defined as Germany and people of German descent or as people on the far left of the political spectrum. During the war, anti-German sentiment swept virtually the whole society (except the northern Midwest, where Americans of German ancestry who had German sympathies were either a majority or too large and well-connected a minority to be intimidated into silence). At war's end, and during the negotiation of the peace, nervous government officials used the full powers of government in time of war to censor left-wing critics of the war, the peace, and American society. This power even extended to mass deportations of known or suspected radicals, often with no basis other than officials' fear of the deportees' views.

President Wilson's attempts to shape the peace in 1918-1919 were less successful, both abroad and at home, than his wartime leadership -- though it is a moot question whether these failures are traceable solely to Wilson's failing health and inability to compromise or to the larger problem whether the quest for a just world on American terms was an outbreak of American hubris. Some (including the President himself) saw Wilson's efforts abroad as the international counterpart of the Progressive reforms that had swept through American life at home. Others mocked Wilson as an egocentric, over-idealistic schoolmaster whose hopes were either naive dreams of a perfect world or the product of delusions of grandeur. In the negotiation of the **Treaty of Versailles**, Wilson was forced to give up point after point, accepting the tradition that victorious nations could strip defeated nations of spoils of all sorts, including monetary reparations and territorial concessions. Desperate to protect his brainchild, the **League of Nations**, from the old world-politics-as-usual of competitive rivalry among nation-states, Wilson felt that the League was the price of his own concessions on the war aims he had articulated so eloquently during the war.

The fight over the **Treaty of Versailles** was the single most turbulent treaty dispute in American domestic politics since the struggle, in 1795, over the **Jay Treaty** with Great Britain. Wilson now faced domestic-politics-as-usual, attempting to secure the ratification of a treaty that recognized a broader and more sweeping set of American responsibilities to the rest of the world than the majority of Americans were willing to accept. Most Americans, disappointed that their President had not succeeded in reshaping the arena of international politics, wanted nothing more than to turn their backs on the rest of the world and take shelter behind the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Republican politicians both resented Wilson's decision to exclude them from helping to negotiate the Treaty and were deeply suspicious of the Treaty's real and apparent inroads on American sovereignty (independent and ultimate political power); they fought the Treaty on that basis, rallying behind the **Lodge Reservations** prepared by **Henry Cabot Lodge** (Republican-Massachusetts), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The contest between supporters and opponents of the Treaty ended in a catastrophic defeat for the President, one that cost him his health and political authority. The United States was the only great power that refused to ratify the Treaty and remained outside the League of Nations.

**In the 1920s, most Americans hoped, the world would go to hell as it saw fit, and the United States would watch or ignore the spectacle, as it saw fit. Nonetheless, the Americans' role in the war and the peace taught the rest of the world that American power and policies would, hereafter, be integral components of world politics, whether Americans wanted this state of affairs or not.**