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Gilded Age The quarter century between the end of Reconstruction and Theodore Roosevelt 's accession to the presidency in 1901 obtained its name from an 1873 novel by Charles Dudley Warner and Mark Twain, *The Gilded Age*. The book's satirical, critical tone shaped the way historians viewed the period until the late twentieth century. The only distinct era in American history to have a pejorative title, the Gilded Age came to be remembered as a time of corrupt and issueless politics, corporate domination, and oppressive treatment of the less fortunate. Because public officials in the late nineteenth century failed to anticipate the expansion of government power and social programs of the century that followed it, historians deemed the era one when the United States failed to achieve minimal social advances for its population.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, historical research revised the inherited stereotypical picture of the Gilded Age. Judging the period more on its own terms than from the perspective of the New Deal Era and the Great Society, historians reappraised the record of the post- Civil War political and industrial system to produce a more nuanced assessment. They described the era's constructive accomplishments as well as its inequities and excesses. The decades from Rutherford Hayes to William McKinley appear not just as a flawed forerunner of the Progressive Era but an equally important time with its own unique problems and achievements.

# Corporate Expansion, Social Inequities, and Urban Growth.

The growth of big business represented the dominant economic fact of the era. An expanding railroad network brought the nation together and created a national market. In the process, the railroads emerged as the nation's first big business. They employed thousands of people, created bureaucratic structures to carry on their operations, and posed large policy issues for the political system. The iron and steel, petroleum, and electrical industries all loomed large in the economy. Consumers used processed foods in tin cans, ready-made clothing, and telephones. Farm machinery spurred productivity in the agrarian sector. The skill and labor of workers and farmers helped drive down costs. Consolidation of industry and new forms of mass production and mass distribution lowered price levels. Deflation and falling prices defined economic life between the Panic of 1873 and its counterpart two decades later in 1893, a worldwide reality that gave birth to the terms "economic depression" and "unemployment."

With economic growth came social inequities. Many workers toiled sixty-hour work weeks without pensions, compensation for on-the-job injuries, or insurance against periodic layoffs. Businesses competed ruthlessly, sometimes unethically, and corrupted the political system through bribes, kickbacks, and illegal rebates. Despite the growth of the American Federation of Labor , unions represented only a minority of workers. The mass of the industrial workforce remained unorganized. Major strikes at Andrew Carnegie 's Homestead steel mill in 1892 and at George Pullman's railroad works in 1894 brought swift repression by employers and a government that sympathized with management. Economic downturns left poorer Americans at the mercy of the business cycle .

Yet society sought to regulate industrialism in ways that seemed acceptable to a generation suspicious of governmental power. Congress through the Interstate Commerce Act (1887) created a regulatory agency to oversee corporate behavior without eliminating private enterprise. The Sherman Antitrust Act, passed by Congress in 1890 in response to popular fear of big business, sought to restrain the spread of monopoly. By the end of the 1890s, citizens` demands for more state and federal regulation anticipated what would become a major domestic issue of the next century.

Urbanization represented another important aspect of the Gilded Age. Large cities such as New York City, Chicago, and Boston spread outward along the lines of the electric railway systems. Suburbs developed as rapid transit offered affluent city dwellers the benefits of country living with proximity to their jobs. The remaining urban inhabitants, often poor and of immigrant backgrounds, lived in dense neighborhoods, often called ethnic ghettos. Within the central city, vibrant communities emerged that mirrored the nation's growing cultural diversity. Urban political machines courted the votes of immigrants and their families through the provision of rudimentary social services. Middle-class residents, however, launched reform movements to curb the power of the machine bosses and shift political influence away from the urban masses.

## Social and Cultural Developments.

Gilded Age America exhibited the prejudices and biases of a society in which racial, religious, and ethnic bigotry commanded support from some quarters of the dominant white Protestant culture. In the South, African Americans saw the political and economic gains of Reconstruction slip away. White southerners imposed a system of institutionalized racial segregation and disfranchised African Americans through literacy tests, poll taxes, and other means. Lynching and political violence provided more direct means of coercing and subjugating blacks. Native Americans found armed resistance futile after 1876, as the 1890 Wounded Knee Tragedy of the Sioux demonstrated. Public policy restricted the pacified tribes to reservations in the West where corruption and discrimination left the Indians impoverished and marginalized. Mexican Americans in the Southwest experienced hostility and segregation as well. Religious tensions also pervaded society. The anti-Catholic movement flared in the 1890s in the shape of the American Protective Association. Anti-Semitism emerged among some protesting farmers in the West and South and especially within the upper-class bastions of the Northeast.

For white, middle-class American women, the Gilded Age brought economic and political gains, though women still lacked the vote except in a few smaller western states. Women organized such voluntary associations as the General Federation of Women's Clubs (1890) and the Daughters of the American Revolution (1890). Other women, most notably Jane Addams, set up settlement houses in the slums of Chicago, New York, and other cities that sought to bridge the widening divisions of the immigrant city. In small towns and medium-sized cities, women in garden clubs and nature groups provided indispensable volunteers for the emerging conservation movement.

Culturally, the Gilded Age was a period of notable literary and artistic achievement. While the novels of Horatio Alger gained a wide readership for their depiction of energetic young capitalists pursuing middle-class respectability, the novels and poetry of Emily Dickinson , Mark Twain ( Samuel L. Clemens ), William Dean Howells , and Henry James proved more important and enduring. Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* ( 1884 ), the most significant novel of the period, depicted life on the Mississippi River . Huck's rejection of social convention and his moral dilemma over slavery influenced generations of writers.

Religion dominated the lives of many citizens. Revivals led by such evangelical preachers as Dwight L. Moody and J. Wilbur Chapman (1859 - 1918) tapped into deep convictions about the need for Christian faith while also addressing the challenges of the so-called higher criticism of the Bible and Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. To meet the ethical and human challenges of industrialism, liberal clergymen such as Walter Rauschenbusch and Washington Gladden proclaimed a "Social Gospel" that took Protestantism into society to achieve economic and social justice. Roman Catholicism and Judaism experienced similar impulses to improve society.

Gilded Age popular culture offered many attractions. Americans attended professional baseball games and watched as college football, first played in the late 1860s, grew in popularity. Dime novels recounted the western exploits of William ("Buffalo Bill") Cody and the outlaw Billy the Kid (William Bonney). In the growing cities, music halls and the vaudeville stage offered a dazzling variety of comedy, songs, and novelty acts. Museums flourished in the major cities, and symphony orchestras became the hallmark of culturally ambitious population centers. In many respects, the Gilded Age produced the conditions for mass entertainment that would reach maturity in the twentieth century.

### Party Politics and Protest Movements.

Political life in the Gilded Age remained largely a white male preserve in voting and officeholding, but the rate of participation among these men reached heights unmatched in the twentieth century. A highly partisan and well-mobilized electorate voted in presidential and congressional contests at rates that often exceeded 70 percent in the North. Ethnocultural and religious issues shaped the outcome of elections as much as economic questions. Newspapers covered politics in lavish detail that often reflected the owner's ideological allegiance. Voters and their families, women included, attended campaign rallies in great numbers and listened to speeches on such issues as the protective tariff or the free silver movement that could last several hours. The Gilded Age was the last great period of American oratory.

The two major parties contended for supremacy using such issues as the protective tariff, the civil service, and free silver. The more nationalistic Republican party championed protection for American industry; the use of governmental power to stimulate the economy; and, with diminishing intensity, the rights of African Americans in the South. The Democratic party embraced limited government, states` rights , and white rule in the South.

Elections were closely contested, and neither major party established a clear claim to the allegiance of a majority of the electorate. Republicans controlled the White House except for Grover Cleveland 's eight years; Democrats held the upper hand in the House of Representatives, while the Senate, to which men were chosen by state legislatures, usually went Republican. Given the absence of a ruling party, legislators often deadlocked over significant issues.

By the end of the 1880s, however, gridlock gave way. The Republicans won control of both houses of Congress and the presidency in 1888. Their resulting legislative activism produced a reaction in favor of the Democrats in 1890 and 1892 that brought Grover Cleveland back to the White House with Democratic control of Congress. The Panic of 1893 and the hard times that followed created a voter backlash against the Democrats in the 1894 congressional elections.

Meanwhile, low prices and rising debt in the rural South and West led to the emergence of the People's or Populist party during the early 1890s. The Populists` call for government aid to agriculture evoked more opposition than support from the major parties. The Populists did well in the election of 1890 and ran a presidential campaign two years later that alarmed the political establishment. For a time, the agrarians and their allies seemed poised to become a major alternative to the existing parties.

Ultimately, however, the political revolution of the mid-1890s benefited the Republicans, who made substantial gains in the 1894 midterm election, positioning them as the majority party for a generation. The victory of William McKinley over William Jennings Bryan two years later confirmed the political shift. The return of economic prosperity during McKinley's presidency solidified the Republican hold on voters outside the South for another decade at the presidential level.

As the 1890s ended, foreign-policy issues loomed large. The Spanish-American War and its aftermath, including U.S. acquisition of the Philippines, testified to the emergence of the United States as a world power.

#### Assessing the Era.

The late nineteenth century was not a golden time in which Americans resolved all of the issues that confronted them. The answers that Gilded Age citizens devised for racial tensions, social inequities, and corporate power would seem inadequate to later generations. Yet their achievements were substantial. They industrialized the economy, created a national market, built the great modern cities, and established a durable two-party system that would govern the nation for the century that followed. The inventions of the Gilded Age, including the automobile, the telephone, and motion pictures, would profoundly influence American life in the century that followed.

A twentieth century of war, genocide, and suffering would make the optimism and confidence of the Gilded Age seem remote and quaint. Yet these qualities enabled post-Civil War Americans to create a solid foundation for the world leadership and economic growth of the century that followed. Indeed, the Gilded Age involved far more than gilt, tawdriness, and corruption. On balance, the era's material, political, and cultural accomplishments far overshadow its deficiencies and faults.

See also Agriculture: 1770s to 1890; Agriculture: The "Golden Age" (1890s-1920); Antitrust Legislation; Automotive Industry; Business Cycle; Depressions, Economic; Economic Regulation; Foreign Relations; Homestead Lockout; Indian History and Culture: From 1800 to 1900; Industrialization; Labor Movements; Literature: Civil War to World War I; Mass Marketing; Music: Classical Music; Music: Popular Music; Municipal and County Governments; Populist Era; Pullman Strike and Boycott; Racism; Tariffs; Women's Club Movement.

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Lewis L. Gould