

## Progressivism: Where Will You Put Your Million Dollars?

On January 1, 1900, the United States had reason for optimism. Cities were bustling. Industry was booming. One factory owner, Andrew Carnegie, was about to sell his steel company and become the richest man in the world. Not bad for a weaver's son from Scotland. And if Carnegie could make it, why not anyone! With victory in the Spanish-American War just behind, and a fresh new century lying before, it was a good time to be an American.

However, if you peeled back the excitement and looked carefully, there was an **underside**. Not everyone in America was making it. In fact, in the absence of clear rules, not everyone in America had a chance of making it. Consider this:

1. Average earnings for American workers were less than \$500 a year. In the South, the average for unskilled workers was closer to \$300. And this was at a time when the poverty line for a family of six was \$600.
2. Hours were long. In 1900, the average work week was 60 hours. In the garment industry of New York City it was 70 hours.
3. Child labor was widespread. In 1900, 26% of boys between ten and fifteen years old were in the work force. For young girls the figure was 10%.

Added to this, more than half of adult Americans were denied the right to vote. Women had never had the right, and most black men had lost the vote in the years after Reconstruction. Clearly, America had some work to do.

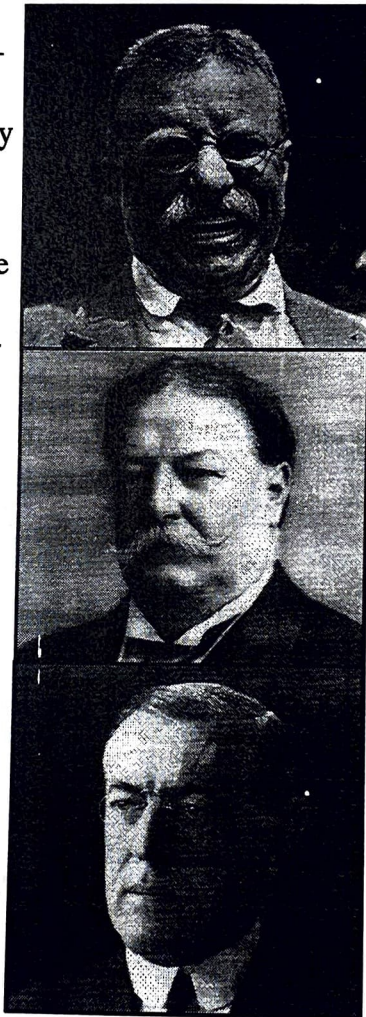
Fortunately, some people spoke out. A group of writers known as **muckrakers** looked into the problems and voiced their concerns. Ministers, professors, social workers, and many elected officials listened and joined in. A movement developed that was called **Progressivism**.

The reform effort included both major political parties. It lasted about twenty years and influenced the thinking of three presidents – Teddy Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and Woodrow Wilson.

To be sure, Progressivism had its limits. For example, almost nothing was done to rid the nation of racial segregation, and labor unions were given little encouragement. However, there were other areas where important reforms were made.

Here is your task. It is a cold February day in 1913. Your great Aunt Bessie, whom you love greatly, calls you to her side. Aunt Bessie is old and not long for this world. She tells you she is giving you \$1,000,000, her entire life savings. Her wish is that you give the money to three Progressive reforms. You are to

pick the causes. For reasons known only to Aunt Bessie, she wants the money distributed in a specific way: \$600,000 to the most needy cause, \$300,000 to the next most needy cause, and \$100,000 to the third most needy cause. Choose your three causes from the documents that follow. Then write a letter to Aunt Bessie explaining your reasons for how you will give her money away. In other words, *where will you put your million dollars?*



## Background Essay Questions

1. When was the Progressive Period?
2. What was the poverty level in dollars for a family of six in 1900?
3. What was the average earnings of an American worker in 1900?
4. What three Presidents served during the Progressive Period?
5. What were two areas where Progressivism made little or no change?
6. Define each of the following:

underside

muckraker

Progressivism

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### Timeline

- 1890** – Sequoia National Park is created in California.
- 1893** – Colorado grants women the right to vote.
- 1905** – First World Series
- 1906** – Pure Food and Drug Act passed.
- 1912** – Titanic sinks. 1,501 people die.
- 1913** – First peacetime income tax
- 1920** – Women's Suffrage Amendment is ratified by states.