Chapter 20

**[THE BIG IDEA] In the Progressive Era, how and why did reformers seek to address the problems of industrial America? To what extent did they succeed?**

Historians often divide the years between the Civil War and World War I into two distinct periods. In the 1880s and 1890s, they claim, America endured a *Gilded Age* of corruption, apathy, and political stagnation. Then, after Theodore Roosevelt became president in 1901, the United States entered a *Progressive Era* of energetic political reform.

This story shows, among other things, the influence of Theodore Roosevelt in shaping how we understand the events of his lifetime. In Chapter 20 I offer a different interpretation. Some recent scholarship suggests, instead, that the whole period between 1880 and 1917 was one of political upheaval, wrought by industrialization and fierce debates over the scope of government power. This whole period was also marked by major grassroots reform efforts. As you’ve seen in earlier chapters, labor unions and radical farmers’ groups, such as the Populists, took the lead in the early decades. So did women, in groups such as the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union. After 1900, more elite and middle-class Americans engaged in reform work. Their political goals were generally more modest, but they had the financial and social clout to get things done.

“Progressives,” then, were not a single, unified group but a range of different activists who often disagreed with one another. Many, however, focused on the era’s hallmark concerns: cleaning up politics, limiting the power of big business, alleviating poverty, protecting the environment, and creating a fairer social and economic order.

You may not agree with the interpretation in this chapter. In fact, after you read it, I invite you and your classmates to stage a debate. How do other history books portray politics in these decades? Which individuals, groups, and themes does each author emphasize? What evidence suggests that the United States experienced a *Gilded Age*, followed afterward by a *Progressive Era*? What evidence suggests, on the other hand, that progressive reform movements emerged earlier, or that the years after 1900 were not as ground-breaking as Theodore Roosevelt claimed?

There is no one right answer to these questions. If you learn to weigh different points of view and make up your own mind, based on your engagement with the evidence, then you’re on your way to becoming a good historian yourself.