

# PIVOTAL DECADES

THE UNITED STATES, 1900–1920



JOHN MILTON COOPER, Jr.

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## Introduction

For the United States, the first two decades of the twentieth century marked a turning point. During these twenty years a political, economic, social, and cultural agenda was set that still dominates American life as we enter the century's final decade. To begin to grasp the pivotal character of this era, one need only recall certain salient facts about the United States in 1900. The airplane had not yet been invented, nor had radio, much less television. Automobiles were few and expensive, and there were no paved roads. In the development of nuclear energy, only the most basic discoveries had occurred and only the first tentative theories were being advanced. In 1900, women could vote in only four states. Throughout the entire period, black Americans suffered segregation, discrimination, disenfranchisement, racist political demagoguery, and racial violence that nearly always went unpunished and often won applause from whites. The United States Army in 1900 numbered fewer than 100,000 officers and enlisted men (and, except for nurses, who held separate and lower ranks, no women). The United States Navy in 1900, though modern in equipment, ranked far behind the navies of Great Britain and Germany in size and firepower.

Two decades later, the airplane had proven itself as a weapon of war and was about to be launched as a means of civilian transportation. As "wireless telegraphy," radio had long since become a major medium of communication and was now transmitting the sound of the human voice, making it a potential medium of information and entertainment as well. Automobile manufacturing had mushroomed into one of the nation's biggest businesses, and over a million cars and trucks traveled thousands of miles of asphalt and concrete roads through cities, towns, and even the countryside. Discoveries in electromagnetism and radia-

tion, and theoretical advances concerning the atomic system and relativity, were unlocking the basic secrets of matter and energy. By 1920, four new amendments had been added to the Constitution: one stipulating that United States senators be elected by popular vote; one authorizing the federal government to levy income taxes; one prohibiting the manufacture, sale, and consumption of alcoholic beverages; and one extending the vote to women throughout the nation. Black Americans still suffered from virulent discrimination, and racial violence temporarily escalated around 1920. At the same time, however, blacks and whites had formed civil rights organizations to fight racism, and they had embarked on what would be a long campaign of legal and constitutional challenges to segregation and disenfranchisement. By 1920 hundreds of thousands of blacks had left the South and resettled in Northern cities in a mass migration that would continue for years to come. The United States had just fought a major war in Europe, during which the army had swelled to over four million men (there were still no women except in the nursing corps). The navy was expanding to become the largest in the world.

Optimism was the dominant mood of Americans at the beginning and again at the end of these two decades, and progressivism came to be the banner appropriated by the period's many groups of political and social reformers. Yet between the peaks of optimism and within the calls for progressive reform, fear, social conflict, and hatred flourished as well. Progress in science and technology itself bred discontent. Religious Americans, especially conservative evangelical Protestants, bridled at the public rejection of their beliefs in the supernatural origins of life and the universe, and they fought back through a fundamentalist movement that not only amplified their beliefs but also sought to limit or prevent the teaching of non-religious scientific views. America's industrial development during this period brought with it the rise of economic behemoths, huge trusts that spread fears about the corruption of public life and the stifling of economic opportunity. The major domestic political issues of these decades came increasingly to revolve around how to control private economic power. Regulation and "trust-busting" became the main items on the political agenda at the federal, state, and municipal levels of government. Earlier debates over tariff rates and currency reform were now subsumed under the overriding public concern with the concentration of wealth.

Economic fears fed racial and ethnic resentments as this "nation of immigrants" attracted growing influxes of people from Europe and Asia, particularly to cities in the North and West. With industrial jobs

attracting blacks to the North at the same time, many whites felt besieged by the newcomers. Mob violence and movements to pass laws restricting immigration from abroad flourished between 1900 and 1920, while the conflict over the prohibition of alcohol assumed aspects of a clash among ethnic cultures. The labor movement absorbed these tensions as well, with conservative unions seeking to shut off immigration and the more radical unions becoming embroiled in violence and embracing socialist politics.

Gender relations altered significantly in this period as women sought new opportunities in politics, the workplace, the local community, and the world of arts and culture. Some middle-class women, frequently those with advanced educations, not only agitated for women's interests on the vote and other public issues, but also fought for women's interests in the private realm by organizing a movement for birth control. Other middle-class women broke into new fields of employment, such as office and sales work, while poorer women took jobs in the mills of the South and the factories of the North. Women reformers were prominent in the prohibition movement with its roiling social and cultural crosscurrents.

This turbulence inevitably forced its way into the political arena, most markedly at the state and local levels. At the federal level, the United States Supreme Court continued in the role of activist arbiter of economic and social issues that it had assumed earlier and has not yet relinquished. Beyond that the Court began to grapple with fundamental questions of civil rights—involving racial discrimination—and civil liberties—involving freedom of speech—that have likewise persisted as major public concerns. The presidency became the overweening branch of the federal government in these decades through the influence of forceful incumbents such as Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, as well as through the growth of bureaucracy and the prominence of national security issues. The two major political parties fortified their clearly opposing stands on economic issues, and the more ambiguous, overlapping positions on social issues, that they had begun to take just before 1900 and that they have retained with remarkable consistency since 1920. On issues of international activism or isolation for the United States, the parties began during these years to take the respective opposing stands that would largely separate them until the 1940s. With intervention in World War I in 1917, the nation moved to the center of the international stage and ambivalently assumed a role of world leadership.

In all, this was a second golden age of American politics—second



only to the generation of the founders of the American republic. Like that earlier golden age, this one sported great leaders, with Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson the most prominent among a group that included Jane Addams, William Jennings Bryan, Eugene V. Debs, W. E. B. Du Bois, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., Robert M. La Follette, Henry Cabot Lodge, Elihu Root, and William Howard Taft. This political golden age likewise featured great commentators and analysts of public questions, such as Louis Brandeis, Herbert Croly, Walter Lippmann, and John Reed. These figures debated great questions about the meaning of liberty and equality in this century, as well as the balance of public and private economic power, the extension of rights and opportunities to the excluded, the elements of a national culture, and the proper role for the United States in world affairs—all questions that are today subject to continued, if less forceful, debate. This age encompassed extraordinary events, from the building of the Panama Canal and the impassioned election of 1912, to the vast destruction of World War I and the tragedy of the peace that failed. In all, it exalted a standard of public life that later generations have rarely attained.

As vital as America's political culture during these decades was its popular culture, which took distinctive and lasting shape between 1900 and 1920. Major league professional sports, particularly baseball, produced new popular heroes, such as Ty Cobb and Babe Ruth. Motion pictures, even before the advent of sound, created "stars" in such men as Charlie Chaplin and Douglas Fairbanks and such women as Lillian Gish and Mary Pickford. Movies and radio—still embryonic—foreshadowed the long heyday of electronic "mass media." Mass journalism, already established in large-circulation newspapers, made a great leap ahead with the rise of popular magazines in this era. These magazines established the first truly national medium of information and entertainment, and in their avid pursuit of critical exposure and analysis—dubbed "muckmaking"—they fixed the canons of investigative reporting and set the posture of the press that have endured ever since.

This book offers various interpretations of political, economic, social, and diplomatic developments in the United States between 1900 and 1920. My aim has been to construct a comprehensive narrative and not to argue an overarching interpretation of the period. Many observers have noted that the major fields of history have wandered far apart from each other in recent years. Social, economic, and political histories of this period have often had so little reference to each other that one critic noted not long ago that they seem to have been describing

different countries. But, for all its diversity, the United States is one nation, and I have taken it as my task to gather together again the diverse departments of life during these decades and the rich characters who filled them.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Writers can be a complaining lot: When it comes to the loneliness of their craft, they let everybody know about it. Less sung is the cooperative aspect of writing books, and for me that aspect has loomed much larger than the solitary acts of filling blank pages or revising ones already cluttered with additions, deletions, and corrections. A number of people have helped me generously and intelligently with advice and criticism. John Braeman (University of Nebraska) and Michael McGerr (Indiana University) each read a draft of the manuscript, made many suggestions, and saved me from errors. Charles Eagles (University of Mississippi) read the manuscript with great care and critical insight, offered extended comments on the entire work, and gave advice on approaches to several areas. John M. Blum (Yale University), whose work I had long known and admired, became a friend and advisor in the course of discussing the book and reading two drafts with consummate critical skill and unsurpassed knowledge of this era. Steven Furtman encouraged and aided me greatly along the way, and read the drafts with the eye for structure, arguments, balance, and style that mark the editor at his very best. Margie Brussil applied her considerable talents as manuscript editor with patience, care, and efficiency. Eric Crawford provided essential cartographic information at a critical time. Ruth Mandel did wonderful picture research. The staff of the Department of History of the University of Wisconsin-Madison cheerfully and efficiently filled my repeated requests for "word processing." Anita Olson and Karen Delwiche did singular service in this department. To all of these folks, and to my family for living with me through this project—deepest thanks.

John Milton Cooper, Jr.  
Madison, Wisconsin  
May, 1989

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## The United States in 1900

The beginning of a century leads nearly everyone to think about where they and their nations have come from and where they are going. For the United States of America, 1900 was only 124 years since thirteen modest-sized, thinly populated, mostly unsettled colonies along the Atlantic seaboard of North America had declared themselves independent from Great Britain; 111 years since those newly independent states had joined together in a federal union under a constitution; 97 years since the fledgling republic had extended its territory beyond the Mississippi River, and 52 years since its boundaries had reached the Pacific Ocean. Further, 1900 was just 55 years since the country had assured its survival as a united nation with the victory of the Union in the Civil War.

Yet, as many Americans publicly proclaimed, look where their country stood in 1900. Not only had the United States grown to continental size, but its population had swelled to seventy-six million, spread from coast to coast in forty-five states, and concentrated in thirty-eight cities of more than one hundred thousand people. In 1900, no aspect of American life was more striking than this rapid, fantastic growth. The ballooning numbers of people sprang in part from a high, but now declining, annual birth rate: 52.3 live births per thousand of population (down from 55 in 1800 and 43.5 in 1850). Greater growth resulted from lowered infant mortality and lengthened life span, which had reduced the annual death rate to 16.5 per thousand, the lowest in the world. But by far the greatest numbers of new Americans came with

the waves of immigration from overseas. Nearly 425,000 Europeans arrived on the nation's shores in 1900 alone.

Americans were proud of the drawing power of their political and religious freedoms, which had long since made them a "nation of immigrants." From the beginning of the nineteenth century, European migration to the United States had steadily mounted and had become more diverse than in the colonial period, when most settlers had been English and Scottish Protestants. Starting in the 1840s, thousands of Irish immigrants, most of whom were Roman Catholics, as well as Germans of various religious persuasions, flocked across the ocean. After the Civil War, the sources of European immigration broadened still further to encompass growing numbers from Scandinavia, Italy, Greece, and Eastern Europe. These newcomers, like their predecessors, felt the magnetic attraction of freedom drawing them away from Europe's aristocratic, inegalitarian traditions; they sought escape from the poverty, religious prejudices, and forced military service that had made the "Old World" seem, to many of its inhabitants, a vast prison. But they were also seeking jobs, land, and advancement in the nation that boasted the greatest agricultural and industrial economy on the face of the planet. In 1900, the rate of immigration was



*Hopeful newcomers at Ellis Island in New York harbor.*

still accelerating. During the first decade of the twentieth century, over eight million more immigrants would come to the United States—the largest number in any decade before or since. These newest arrivals would account for more than 10 percent of the entire American population.

Size, population, wealth—each marked how far the United States had come in such a short time from its raw, humble beginnings. Only two countries, Russia and Canada, occupied larger land areas. Among the Western nations—those with predominantly European ethnic origins, languages, and cultures—only Russia had a larger population. No country anywhere enjoyed so large and dynamic an economy. American commerce, transportation, industry, and agriculture were wonders of the world. By almost any measure of economic performance, the United States excelled. Steel production in 1900 amounted to over ten million tons, more than a third higher than Germany's, the closest competitor. Railroad trackage stretched to 167,000 miles, or one-third of the world's total. Per-capita income was estimated at \$569, far above the nearest rival, Britain. Literacy rates stood at nearly 90 percent of the populace. The country had over 2,200 newspapers and nearly one thousand colleges and universities, with a combined student body of nearly 240,000. School enrollment amounted to over sixteen million pupils—the world's largest in both numbers and percentage of the population. Of those students, nearly one hundred thousand would graduate from secondary schools in 1900, also ahead of every other nation in numbers and percentages, and nearly double the total in 1890. Its physical expanse, and its economic and social dynamism, made the United States one of the biggest, richest, and potentially strongest nations in the world in 1900.

#### ADVANCES AND SOCIAL DIVISIONS

For most Americans in 1900, optimism ran rampant. The scientific and technological revolutions of the nineteenth century had begun to fulfill age-old dreams of human mastery over nature. Thanks to steam and internal combustion engines, sea transportation had grown much less subject to wind and wave, while river traffic could defy the currents. Even more spectacularly, the railroad had transformed land travel. For the first time in history, people and goods could move more swiftly and easily over land than over water. More amazingly still, through applications of electricity to communications, the telegraph could



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