

“Men with the muckrake are often indispensable to the well-being of society, but only if they know when to stop raking the muck.” (Theodore Roosevelt, 1906)

Introduction: A wave of political reform, known as the progressive movement, washed over the U.S. as the new century opened. Progressivism was inspired by muckraking journalists, who exposed corruption, the adulteration of food and drugs, and the exploitation of labor; by socialists, who called attention to the growing class division in the industrial U.S.; by ministers of the gospel alarmed at the poverty in which many Americans lived; and by feminists who clamored for fair treatment for families, women and children.

Teddy Roosevelt embraced many of the tenants of progressivism when he became president in 1901. He fought to tame the big corporations and to protect consumers from dangerous products. Among his major achievements as a reformer was the invigoration of the campaign to conserve the nation’s fast-disappearing natural resources, especially the forests. Other progressives championed the cause of woman suffrage, still a subject of hot controversy. When Roosevelt’s hand-picked successor, William Howard Taft, appeared to betray many of the principles of progressivism, Roosevelt determined to challenge him for the Republican presidential nomination in 1912.

Source: *The American Spirit*, Volume 2, by Kennedy & Bailey

Topic 1: The Heyday of Muckraking

- Exposing the Meatpackers (1906)
 - In 1906 Upton Sinclair, the youthful and prolific socialist writer, published his novel *The Jungle*, a damning exposure of conditions in the Chicago meatpacking plants. Seeking to turn people to socialism, he succeeded in turning their stomachs. The uproar that followed publication of his novel caused President Roosevelt to initiate an official investigation, and the report that followed was hardly less shocking than the novel. It confirmed the essential truth of Sinclair's expose, except for such lurid scenes, as men falling into vats and emerging as lard. **Which aspects of the official investigation revealed conditions most detrimental to the public health?**
- Theodore Roosevelt Roasts Muckrakers (1906)
 - President Roosevelt, though recognizing some unpalatable truths in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, was critical. He wrote the author bluntly that Sinclair had said things that should not have been written unless backed up "with testimony that would satisfy an honest man of reasonable intelligence." Privately he declared that Sinclair had reflected unfairly on both honest and dishonest capitalism in Chicago. Finally, nauseated by excessive sensationalism, Roosevelt made a famous attack (which gave rise to the term muckraker) in a Washington speech. **What are the strengths and weaknesses of his argument that hysterical and indiscriminate muckraking was doing more harm than good?**

Topic 2: Corruption in the Cities

- Lincoln Steffens Bares Philadelphia Bossism (1904)
 - A California-born journalist, (Joseph) Lincoln Steffens, after serving as a “gentleman reporter” in New York, emerged as one of the first and most influential of the reforming muckrakers. Associated with *McClure’s Magazine*, the leading muckraking journal, he published a sensational series of articles on municipal graft, later collected in book form as *The Shame of Cities* (1904). After the muckraking craze ended, Steffens became disillusioned, visited Russia, interviewed Lenin, and developed a warm admiration for the Soviet Union. **In his famous expose about conditions in Philadelphia, what is most ironic? What is most shocking? Who was responsible for the existence and continuation of these irregularities?**
- George Washington Plunkitt Defends “Honest Graft” (1905)
 - Tammany Hall was the powerful and corrupt Democratic political machine that dominated New York City politics for many years. One of its cleverest officials who became a millionaire thought “honest graft,” was George Washington Plunkitt. According to his account, as here recorded by a newspaper reporter, he was above such dirty work as “shaking down” houses of prostitution (“disorderly houses”). **Is his distinction between two kinds of graft legitimate? How did Tammany Hall sustain its power? Did it provide any valuable service?**

Topic 3: The Plight of Labor (Pick 2)

- George Baer's Divine Right of Plutocrats (1902)
 - The anthracite coal miners of Pennsylvania, who were frightfully exploited and accident-cursed, struck for higher wages in 1902. About 140,000 men were idled, and the chilled East was threatened with paralysis. George F. Baer, the multimillionaire spokesman for the owners, refused to permit intervention, arbitration, or even negotiation. He believed that mining was a "business," not a "religious, sentimental, or academic proposition." In response to a complaining letter from a W.F. Clark, he sent a response that was full of "hypocrisy, vanity, and blasphemy." **What is the social philosophy of big business as here revealed?**
- Child Labor in the Coal Mines (1906)
 - The arrogant attitude of the coal operators seems even less excusable in the light of John Spargo's book *The Bitter Cry of the Children*--another significant contribution to the muckraking movement. An English-born socialist, Spargo had come to America in 1901 at the age of 25. He was especially stirred by the rickety children on the New York tenement districts. Their mothers had no time to prepare proper meals; needlework labor in the sweatshops ran from twelve to twenty hours a day, at a wage ranging from ten cents to a cent and a half an hour. **In Spargo's description of the work in the coal mines, what were the various kinds of hazards involved?**
- Sweatshop Hours for Bakers (1905)
 - The abuse of labor in dangerous or unhealthful occupations prompted an increasing number of state legislatures, exercising

so-called police power, to pass regulatory laws. In 1898 the Supreme Court upheld a Utah statute prohibiting miners from working more than eight hours a day, except in emergencies. In 1905, however, the Court, by a five-to-four decision in the case of *Lochner v. New York*, overthrew a state law forbidding bakers to work more than ten hours a day. The majority held that the right of both employers and employees to make labor contracts was protected by the 14th Amendment. **How might one describe the social conscience of the majority of the Supreme Court in the light of this memorable decision written by Justice Rufus W. Peckham?**

- The Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire Claims 146 Lives (1911)
 - One of the most grisly catastrophes ever to befall American workers occurred at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company's New York City garment factory on March 25, 1911. Trapped in a burning building in which many exit doors had been locked to discourage workers from taking unauthorized breaks, 146 laborers, mostly young women, perished. The resulting outrage encouraged the enactment of more stringent building codes and fed the growing movement for laws regulating working conditions, especially for women. **In the account of the fire that follows, what conditions seemed most responsible for the high loss of life? How might they have been remedied? How much of the public outrage about the fire owed to the fact that so many of the dead were young women?**

Topic 4: The Conservation Crusade

- Roosevelt Defends the Forests (1903)
 - Greedy or shortsighted Americans had long plundered the nation's forests with heedless rapacity. President Roosevelt, a onetime Dakota cattle rancher and an accomplished naturalist, provided the lagging conservation

movement with dynamic leadership. Using the Forest Reserve Act of 1891, he set aside some 150 million acres of government-owned timberland as national forest reserves--more than three times as much as his three immediate predecessors had preserved. The large timber companies complained bitterly, though in fact the worst predators on the forests were the small-fry lumbermen who had neither the incentive nor the resources to adopt long-term, sustained-yield logging practices. **What are the implications of the distinction he draws between “beauty” and “use”? What does he mean when he says that “the whole object of forest protection” is “the making and maintaining of prosperous homes”?**

- “Beauty as Against Use” (1920s)
 - When Gifford Pinchot used the phrase “beauty as against use” in his testimony before the House Committee on Public Lands in 1913, he succinctly summarized the terms of the debate about natural resources in the opening years of the century. Conservationists like Pinchot, who advocated that national resources be utilized efficiently, faced two enemies: on the one hand, commercial interests that exploited natural resources, and on the other hand, preservationists like John Muir who celebrated the beauty of nature and wanted to preserve it unspoiled for all time. The following images by Herbert Johnson, illustrate the starkly contrasting ways in which conservation issues were often posed. **Why did they all find it so difficult to combine beauty and use? If the artist had drawn a third, middle panel in this scene, what would it have looked like? If forced to choose, which of these images would Theodore Roosevelt have endorsed? Why?**

Topic 5: The Crusade for Woman Suffrage

- Senator Robert Owen Supports Women (1910)
 - Wedded to the tried and true, President Taft was no enthusiast for woman suffrage. He believed the issue was one that should

be handled by the individual states. As late as 1912 he wrote privately, "I cannot change my view... just to suit the exigencies of the campaign, and if it is going to hurt me, I think it will have to hurt me." But the embattled women now had an increasingly strong argument. Rapid industrialization after the Civil War had lured millions of women from the home into the office and factory, where they were competing with men. By 1910, four states (Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, and Idaho) had granted unrestricted suffrage to women, and the progressive upheaval of the era added great impetus to the reform. Senator Robert L. Owen of Oklahoma, who had earlier demanded citizenship for Native Americans, here makes a speech to a learned society favoring woman suffrage. **What ideas about the nature of womanhood underlie his argument? What changes in society does he think woman suffrage will entail?**

- A Woman Assails Woman Suffrage (1910)
 - As late as 1910 many women plainly did not want to shoulder the heavy civic responsibilities that would come with the ballot. One argument was that each sex was superior in its own sphere (women in the home, men in the outside world) and that a separation was best for all concerned. The suffragists argued that the women who wanted the vote ought to have it. Mrs. Gilbert E. Jones, an opponent of votes for women, here pleads her case before a scholarly group. **How do her views differ from those of Senator Owen, just given? Which of them esteemed women more highly?**

Topic Analysis

- 1) In what ways did the muckrakers represent both the best and the worst features of a free press in the U.S.?

- 2) Was corruption a “natural” by-product of the adaptation of U.S. institutions to the new urban environment? Did it serve any useful civic purpose?
- 3) Was government protection necessary to improve the lots of the laborer in the industrializing U.S.? How justifiable were special laws to guard women and youthful workers?
- 4) What motives inspired Roosevelt’s crusade for conservation? How different or similar is the attitude of the West today toward efforts at government control of the environment?
- 5) Were women powerless without the ballot? How has the suffrage changed the position of women? How has the nation’s political agenda changed as a result of woman suffrage?

**At the end of class, students will work in pairs to find quotations that could support the answers to the questions. Students are not required to answer the question, but find relevant evidence that can be quoted from the primary source documents, or even the introductions if necessary.

Quotes should use the following format:

Topic One

“But the man who never does anything else, who never thinks or speaks or writes, save of his feats with the muck rake, speedily becomes, not a help but one of the most potent forces for evil” (Roosevelt 2).

***Author and page number always need included, when available. Use the page numbers from the electronic version of the documents, and read the introductions if you are not sure who is speaking or writing from that source.**