Progressive Reforms

Did You Know?
Governor Robert La Follette founded La Follette’s Weekly Magazine in 1909. During the next two decades, both the Republicans and the Democrats put into effect many of the progressive ideas first presented in this magazine.

I. Political Reform (pages 251–254)

A. Most progressives agreed with the need to break the power of political machines, but few agreed on how to destroy and supplant the corruption that made them powerful.

B. One alternative to machine politics was the city commission system instituted in Galveston, Texas, after a hurricane destroyed the city. By centering power in the hands of a few business-oriented managers, Galveston developed an efficient city government.

C. Within 20 years, more than 500 other cities adopted a commissioner system. Another 158 cities adopted a city-manager system in which the city council hired a professional to manage the daily affairs of the city.

D. Other reforms to city government included a reduction in the number of padded contracts that ward bosses could hand out, tightening of bloated government payrolls, and changes in election procedures that allowed for nonpartisan elections.

E. In Wisconsin, Governor “Fighting Bob” La Follette and his supporters attacked the power of bosses and instituted reforms that made government more responsive to the people. Reforms included the direct primary, initiative, referendum, and recall. Other states under progressive leadership instituted similar reforms.

G. To counter Senate corruption, the progressives won passage of the Seventeenth Amendment, which called for the direct election of senators.

H. The women’s suffrage movement gained momentum, with 9 states west of the Mississippi River granting women the right to vote in all elections by 1912. Women nationwide, however, did not win that right until passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920.
I. African Americans tried to undo laws that prevented them from voting, but they won little support from white progressives.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

What was the main goal of the progressives who tried to reform government? (Although the progressives often differed on specific goals and method for change, they generally backed the need to break the corruption of political machines at all levels of government.)

II. Economic Reform (pages 254–256)

A. Again following the lead of Wisconsin, the progressives sought to curb the power of big business by establishing commissions to regulate railroads, electric power companies, and gas companies. Some cities went beyond mere regulation, setting up and running utilities as part of city government.

B. Articles by muckrakers and protests by unions roused public support for worker compensation laws, first passed at the state level and then at the national level with enactment of the Workmen’s Compensation Law of 1916.

C. Progressives, who believed women were weaker than men and more deserving of protection, championed efforts to win shorter work days for women. In Muller v. Oregon, lawyer Louis Brandeis convinced the Supreme Court that a state government, to protect the public interest, had a right to regulate the work of women.

D. In arguing the case, Brandeis revolutionized legal thought by supporting his case with detailed statistical data collected by Josephine Goldmark of the National Consumers League. Beginning with the Muller decision, courts considered a law’s impact on people’s lives, rather than simply evaluating laws on narrow legal grounds.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

How did the decision in Muller uphold the progressive view of government? (The decision reinforced the idea that government should play a leading role in reshaping society.)
III. Social and Moral Reform (pages 256–257)

A. The progressives worked to protect children by establishing separate juvenile courts, backing laws that provided financial assistance to children in homes with no father present, and expanding public education.

B. During the late 1800s, not only did the number of public schools increase sharply, the method of education changed as well. Reformer John Dewey criticized rote learning and called for instruction that centered on the child’s social needs and promoted good citizenship.

C. Other reforms focused on the well-being of women. They ranged from the efforts of Margaret Sanger to counsel women on birth control to Francis Willard’s Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU).

D. Under Willard’s leadership, the WCTU attacked a wide range of social ills other than the abuse of alcohol. The organization advocated women’s suffrage, prison reform, world peace, and health reform.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

In calling for special juvenile courts one woman reformer said: “Brutal treatment brutalizes and prepares [youth] for crime.” What did she mean? (By exposing juvenile offenders to the same harsh treatment as adults, they were destined for a life of crime.)