

# Progressivism and the First World War

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

When the United States entered the First World War in April 1917, the Progressive Era appeared to be reaching its apex. Five years earlier, during the election of 1912, Woodrow Wilson won a close race in which all of the major candidates—Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and Wilson—ran on Progressive platforms. While navigating the complex paths of wartime diplomacy, Wilson implemented several notable Progressive reforms. American participation in the war stimulated reform, especially with respect to Prohibition and women's suffrage.

This tutorial examines Progressivism and the First World War in three parts:

## 1. The Election of 1912

In 1912, **Progressivism** dominated national politics to the extent that the presidential election included three major candidates, each of whom promoted their brand of reform.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Progressivism

A broad movement between 1890 and 1919 that sought legal, scientific, managerial, and institutional solutions to the ills of urbanization, industrialization, and corruption.

William Howard Taft, who succeeded **Theodore Roosevelt** as president in 1909, ran for reelection in 1912. Although he was 6 ft tall and weighed 340 lb, Taft had big shoes to fill (Roosevelt's) when formulating a social reform program to follow the **Square Deal**.



### PEOPLE TO KNOW

#### Theodore Roosevelt

President from 1901 to 1909, who led a series of Progressive reforms at the federal level designed to curb the power of trusts, increase consumer protections, and advance the conservation of public lands through his "Square Deal."



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Square Deal

Theodore Roosevelt's name for the kind of involved, hands-on government he felt the country

needed.

In some ways, Taft continued and expanded Roosevelt's reform program.

➔ **EXAMPLE** In 1910, Taft signed the Mann-Elkins Act, which extended the authority of the Interstate Commerce Commission to include telephone and telegraph communication.



#### DID YOU KNOW

The Taft administration initiated two times as many antitrust suits against big business as Roosevelt had. Taft did not possess Roosevelt's negotiating skills and defined the "public good" differently from his predecessor. These differences became apparent during the Ballinger-Pinchot affair.

Taft's Secretary of the Interior, Richard Ballinger, believed that Theodore Roosevelt had exceeded his executive authority in declaring significant tracts of Western land as national forests. In 1909, when Ballinger tried to transfer national forests in Alaska back to the public domain (where they would be available to mining and timber companies), Chief Forester Gifford Pinchot objected. He publicly criticized Ballinger for violating the principles of conservation and the public interest. In response, Taft fired Pinchot.

Taft's actions in the Ballinger-Pinchot affair, along with his subsequent support of conservative Republicans in the 1910 midterm elections, created a rift with Progressives in his party, most notably with Former President Theodore Roosevelt. Despite this division, Taft won the Republican nomination for president in 1912. Roosevelt and other Progressives left the Republican Party and formed a new party—the Progressive Party—which nominated Roosevelt for president.

Realizing that a split of the Republican vote gave them a good chance of winning the White House for the first time since the 1890s, the Democrats nominated **Woodrow Wilson**, a former history professor and president of Princeton University and the current governor of New Jersey.

The presidential campaign focused on Roosevelt and Wilson, each of whom put forth competing Progressive platforms, known respectively as the **New Nationalism** and the **New Freedom**.



#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

##### Woodrow Wilson

Democratic president from 1913 to 1921, who pursued a Progressive federal reform agenda and advocated for U.S. neutrality in World War I until 1917; he was instrumental in the creation of a postwar League of Nations and advocated for "peace without victory" in the Treaty of Versailles.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### New Nationalism

Theodore Roosevelt's 1912 campaign platform, which called for a powerful federal government to protect the American public.

##### New Freedom

Woodrow Wilson's campaign platform for the 1912 election; called for a smaller federal government to protect the public from the evils associated with big businesses and banks.

Wilson won the election. Roosevelt came in second; Taft was a distant third. The internal split in the party also cost Republicans control of the Senate (the Democrats already had a majority in the House), along with the White House. Even though Wilson won only 42% of the vote, the Democrats were well positioned to implement their legislative agenda.

## 2. Woodrow Wilson and Progressivism

Upon taking office in the spring of 1913, Wilson began to implement his Progressive agenda. Although his “New Freedom” platform called for a smaller government to protect the public interest, Wilson’s Progressivism led to an increase in the government’s size and scope.

His program consisted of the following elements:

- *Lower tariffs to promote international trade and greater competition for the benefit of consumers* The first significant domestic achievement of the Wilson administration was the Revenue Act of 1913, also known as the Underwood Tariff Act. It consisted of two major components:
  1. Tariffs were reduced by approximately 15%, and tariffs on specific imported goods, including steel, iron ore, woolen products, and farm tools, were eliminated.
  2. A federal income tax was reinstituted to offset potential losses in federal revenue. This was made possible by the ratification of the Sixteenth Amendment in February 1913, which gave Congress the “power to lay and collect” income taxes.



### DID YOU KNOW

The income tax required married couples who earned \$4,000 or more and single people who earned \$3,000 or more to pay a 1% graduated income tax. The rate increased progressively for those who earned more. At the time, only 5% of Americans met these requirements.

- *New regulations for banks and businesses* Late in 1913, Wilson signed the Federal Reserve Act to regulate the banking industry and to establish a federal banking system. Designed to take control of interest rates from private bankers, the new system established 12 privately owned regional reserve banks regulated by a presidentially appointed Federal Reserve Board. The Board, known informally as “the Fed,” regulated the interest rate at which reserve banks loaned money to private banks throughout the country.

➔ **EXAMPLE** The Federal Reserve System remains the basis for banking today. It provides flexibility to banking institutions and borrowers in times of recession and prosperity. When the economy needs a boost, the Fed can lower interest rates to encourage borrowing, which puts more money into circulation and promotes spending and investment. When increased borrowing leads to excessive speculation or inflation, the Fed can raise the rates to discourage further borrowing.

In early 1914, the Wilson administration succeeded in passing the Clayton Antitrust Act, which regulated business and labor organizations as follows:

1. The act expanded the federal government’s authority to discourage unfair business practices by empowering officials to investigate “interlocking directorates”—companies that conspired to restrain trade and operate as an oligopoly.
2. It exempted labor unions from antitrust regulations and prohibited courts from issuing injunctions that curtailed labor’s right to strike.

As the 1916 election approached, the Wilson administration initiated more Progressive reforms. The most important of these measures are outlined in the table below:

Important Progressive Reform Measures Associated With the Election of 1916	
Federal Farm Act	Provided oversight of low-interest loans to millions of farmers in need of debt relief
Keating-Owen Child Labor Act	Prohibited the interstate distribution of goods produced by child workers younger than 14
Adamson Act	Implemented a federally mandated 8-hour workday for railroad workers

These reforms impressed key sectors of the voting public and helped Wilson win a second term in a close election in 1916. His victory, combined with reforms enacted during his first term and the broadening crisis of the First World War, seemed to indicate that the last wave of Progressivism was at hand. The first-term reforms had been wide-ranging, beginning with grassroots efforts and culminating in national reform legislation.

In some ways, Wilson's Progressive reforms continued the work of his predecessors and contributed to the emergence of a new American state. Laws, agencies, commissions, experts, and officials now protected citizens from the excesses of modern industrialism and urbanization. They also mediated the relationships between competing interests—like business and labor, and producers and consumers. In contrast to the Gilded Age, when citizens stood alone when dealing with political machines and corporations, the government—local, state, and federal—in the Progressive Era supported them by solving problems and resolving conflicts.

### 3. War and Progressive Reform

Mobilization for the First World War was a major test for President Wilson and the Progressive government. After the United States entered the war in April 1917, the federal government began to intervene in the everyday affairs of citizens to a greater extent than ever before. For example, the United States needed a large army to effectively support the Allied Powers, so the government acted to meet this need.



#### DID YOU KNOW

When the United States declared war on Germany in the spring of 1917, the U.S. Army consisted of approximately 200,000 men. The German Army had 4.5 million soldiers when the war began in 1914, and it mobilized over 11 million during the war.

To increase the size of America's armed forces, Congress passed the Selective Service Act in 1917. The Act initially required all men aged 21 through 30 to register for the draft. In 1918, it was amended to include all men between 18 and 45.



Young men register for the draft on June 5, 1917, the first national registration day.

Through a campaign of patriotic appeals, the federal government and private organizations encouraged young men to register with their local draft boards. On the first national registration day, over 10 million men signed up for the draft. Those who met the qualifications of the Selective Service Act but failed to register were referred to as “slackers” and were subject to arrest.



#### DID YOU KNOW

During World War I, 5 million men were drafted into the U.S. Army through the Selective Service Act. Another 1.5 million men volunteered for the Army, and over 500,000 enlisted in the U.S. Navy and the Marines.

Progressive reformers used the war to advance what remained on the Progressive agenda. During the war, reformers sought to make use of government power—the same power that built the nation’s large new fighting force—to change American social behavior. One of the most notable results of this effort was **Prohibition**.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Prohibition**

The campaign for a federal ban on the sale and manufacturing of alcoholic beverages, which came to fruition during the First World War.

Prohibition had been a Progressive goal for decades. Organizations such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Anti-Saloon League linked alcohol consumption to a number of societal problems. Throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they worked with municipalities and counties to limit or prohibit the sale and use of alcoholic beverages on a local level.

➔ **EXAMPLE** By 1908, local and state antiliquor laws affected approximately 33 million Americans.



#### DID YOU KNOW

The Women's Christian Temperance Union was the nation's largest women's political organization. In 1890, it had 150,000 members.

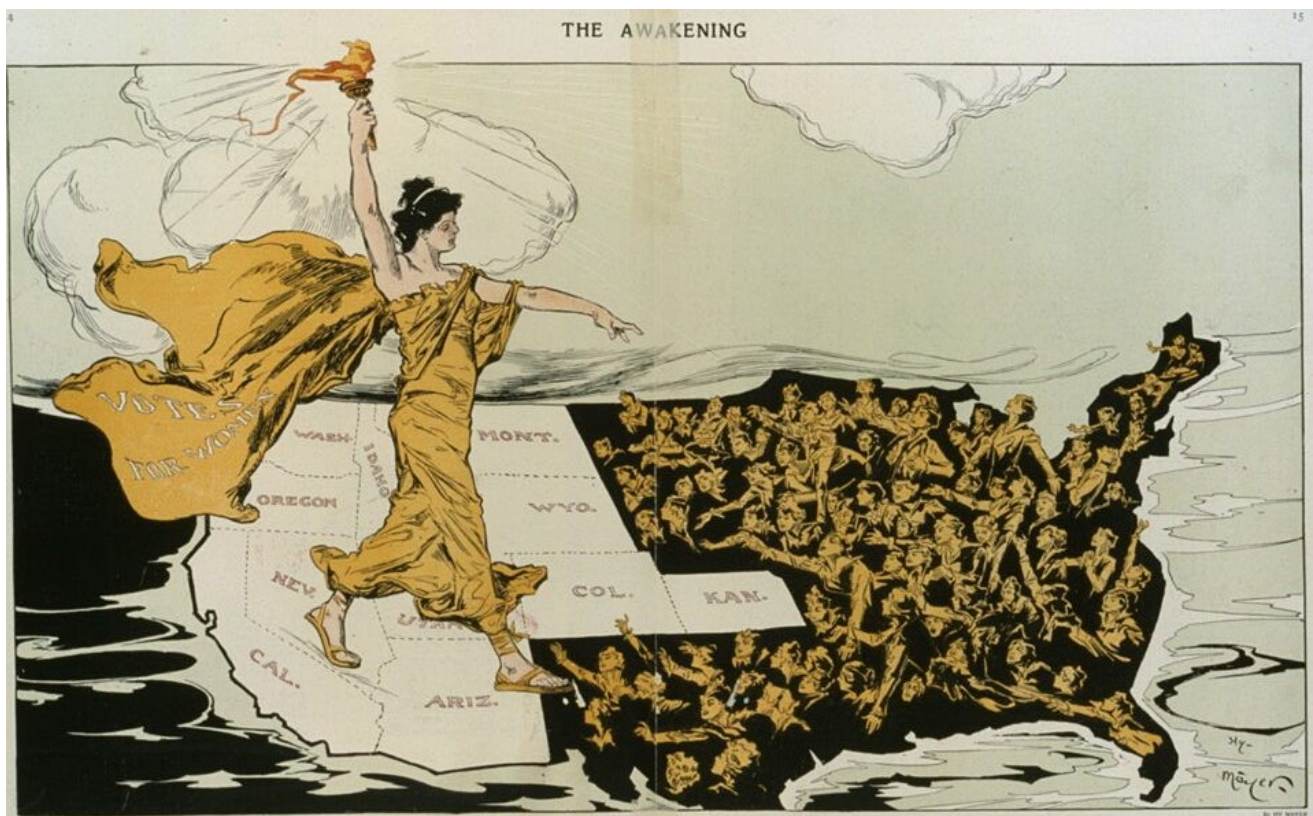
With U.S. entry into the First World War, advocates of a national Prohibition amendment to the Constitution saw an opportunity for federal support for reasons including the following:

- There was increasing anti-German sentiment, which turned many people against the German immigrants (and their descendants) who ran breweries.
- There were calls for food and grain rationing to support the war effort; grains were key ingredients of beer and hard liquor.
- In the spring of 1917, Congress passed the National Prohibition Act as a wartime emergency measure.

Amid widespread support for a ban on the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages, Congress passed a constitutional amendment and sent it to the states for ratification. In early 1919, the Eighteenth Amendment was ratified, implementing Prohibition throughout the United States. The amendment did not prohibit the consumption of alcohol, but by prohibiting the manufacture, sale, and transportation of alcoholic beverages, drinking was effectively outlawed.

American participation in the First World War also provided an impetus for one of the longest-lasting legacies of the Progressive Era: women's suffrage. Like Prohibition, women's suffrage was a major issue on the Progressive agenda. Significant strides had been made at the local and state levels prior to the war, particularly in the West.





“The Awakening,” by Henry Mayer, published in *Puck* in February 1915. The image shows a torch-bearing woman, who wears a robe labeled “Votes for Women,” walking across the Western states (where women had the right to vote) to the Eastern states. The women of the East reach out to her, expressing their desire for the right to vote.



#### DID YOU KNOW

By 1914, 3 million women were fully enfranchised: They could vote in local, state, and presidential elections.

When the United States entered the First World War, supporters of women’s suffrage, including **Carrie Chapman Catt** (president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association), pointed out the contradiction in Wilson’s promotion of war “to make the world safe for democracy.” Catt argued that Wilson and other opponents of women’s suffrage acted hypocritically in sending American men to die for democracy while depriving American women of the right to vote. **Alice Paul** of the National Woman’s Party organized protests outside the White House and, later, hunger strikes by those who were arrested for protesting on behalf of suffrage.



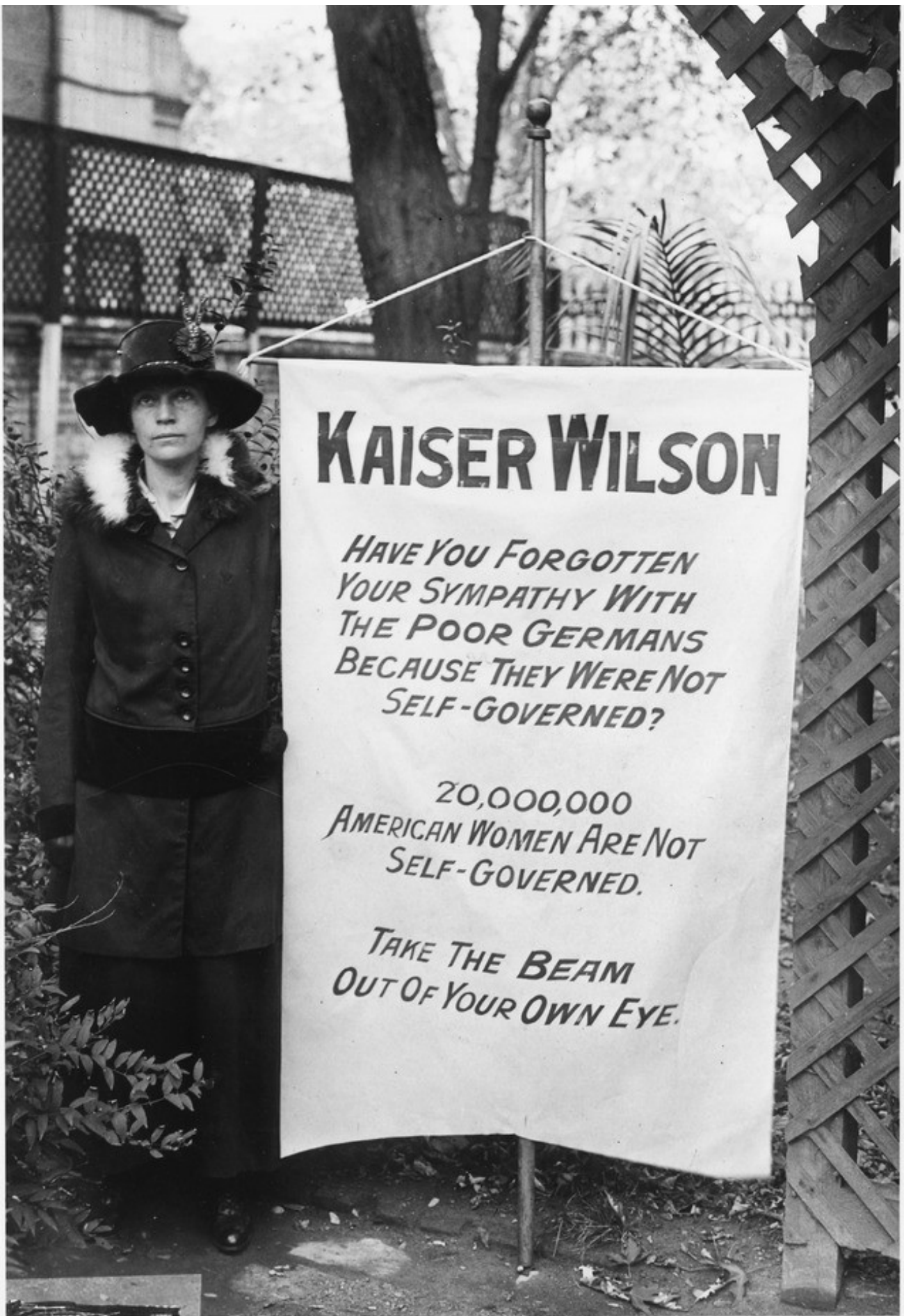
#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

##### Carrie Chapman Catt

National women’s suffrage advocate and president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, who appealed to the Wilson administration to support votes for women.

##### Alice Paul

Radical women’s suffrage advocate and leader of the National Woman’s Party, who organized protests outside the White House and hunger strikes among those who were arrested for protesting on behalf of suffrage.



One of the most well-known protest signs in support of women's suffrage compared President Wilson to the German emperor, the "Kaiser."



Lobbying and protests during the war, along with persistent pressure applied by Wilson's suffragist daughter, Jessie Woodrow Wilson Sayre, convinced the President and many in Congress to support legislation granting women the right to vote throughout the nation. In June 1919, Congress passed an amendment to the Constitution. The states ratified it by August 1920.

The Nineteenth Amendment prohibited efforts to deny the right to vote on the basis of sex. It went into effect in time for women across the United States to vote in the presidential election of 1920.



## SUMMARY

Progressivism was part of the national political conversation during the election of 1912, which included three prominent Progressive candidates for president. After winning the election, Woodrow Wilson ushered in a wave of legislation that grassroots Progressives had long advocated. American participation in the First World War illustrated Progressivism's promise—and contradictions. Although the war created opportunities for regulation and social control (e.g., the Selective Service Act and Prohibition), it enabled the final step in the process of perfecting democracy by granting women the right to vote.

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## TERMS TO KNOW

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Woodrow Wilson's campaign platform for the 1912 election; called for a smaller federal government to protect the public from the evils associated with big businesses and banks.

### New Nationalism

Theodore Roosevelt's 1912 campaign platform, which called for a powerful federal government to protect the American public.

### Progressivism

A broad movement between 1890 and 1919 that sought legal, scientific, managerial, and institutional solutions to the ills of urbanization, industrialization, and corruption.

### Prohibition

The campaign for a federal ban on the sale and manufacturing of alcoholic beverages, which came to

fruition during the First World War.

### **Square Deal**

Theodore Roosevelt's name for the kind of involved, hands-on government he felt the country needed.



## **PEOPLE TO KNOW**

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