

Theodore Roosevelt: The Square Deal

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

A robust recovery from the financial crises of the 1890s and resounding victory in the War of 1898 swept President William McKinley and the Republicans back into the White House in 1900 by a solid popular majority. McKinley's new vice president was his former assistant secretary of the Navy: the famous Rough Rider Theodore Roosevelt.

When President McKinley was assassinated in 1901, Roosevelt became the youngest President in the nation's history. His administration ushered in an era of Progressive national politics and changed the role of the president in the 20th century.

This tutorial examines Theodore Roosevelt and the Square Deal in four parts:

1. The Progressive Era

Theodore Roosevelt's presidency contributed to the emergence of **Progressivism** on the national scene.



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

Progressivism

A broad movement between 1890 and 1919 led by White, middle-class professionals for legal, scientific, managerial, and institutional solutions to the ills of urbanization, industrialization, and corruption.

The Progressive Era (1890–1919) was a time when activists and reformers of diverse backgrounds and agendas advanced a variety of causes to improve America. Referred to as “Progressives” by historians, they responded to challenges that had emerged during the Gilded Age, including the following:

- rapid industrialization, urban sprawl, and immigration

- machine politics and political corruption
- the growth and consolidation of large corporations and monopolies
- poor industrial working conditions
- racial violence and inequality
- women's suffrage

The first attempts to solve these problems occurred at the grassroots level. They involved a range of people and approaches, including **Walter Rauschenbusch** and the **social gospel**, **Jane Addams** and the **Settlement House Movement**, and muckrakers like **Jacob Riis**.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Walter Rauschenbusch

Christian theologian and Baptist pastor in New York who advocated for the social gospel and led a grassroots movement of Progressive reformers who sought to remake American society according to Jesus's teachings.

Jane Addams

Progressive reformer who led the Settlement House Movement in the United States and founded Hull House in Chicago.

Jacob Riis

Danish immigrant and muckraking journalist whose book *How the Other Half Lives* documented scenes of urban life and poverty to generate support for Progressive reforms.



TERMS TO KNOW

Social Gospel

The belief that churches should be as concerned about the conditions of people in the secular world as they are with their afterlife.

Settlement House Movement

An early social reform movement, led by women, that offered a variety of social services to the urban working poor.

Muckrakers

Investigative journalists and authors who wrote about social ills from child labor to the corrupt practices of big businesses and urged the public to take action.

Progressive movements and organizations included a diverse range of viewpoints, but historians have identified a set of principles that were shared by most Progressives:

- perfecting democracy, including the expansion of suffrage and the development of mechanisms to make the government more responsive
- efficiency of or reliance on science and technology and the input of experts, in matters of governance
- active regulation and oversight of the market economy on behalf of social justice and reform

With its dedication to expanding democracy, expertise, and active government to solve the problems that had emerged during the Gilded Age, the Progressive Era marked the emergence of **modern liberalism** in the United States.



TERM TO KNOW

Modern Liberalism

Philosophy based on the belief that the government should protect individual rights and social well-being.

Although a wide range of Americans supported Progressive movements, many were White and native born, members of a new **middle class** that emerged at the end of the 19th century.



TERM TO KNOW

Middle Class

A social group that included managers, salesmen, and other salaried individuals and their families, who were better educated and compensated than the working class.

Many middle-class citizens responded to the challenges of modern, industrial America as Progressives. They saw themselves as the agents of social justice and reform, as well as stewards of the disadvantaged. Unfortunately, their belief in their expertise led some of them to disregard the voices of those they sought to help, including workers, immigrants, and racial minorities.

2. The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt

Theodore Roosevelt's upbringing and early career prepared him to become a dynamic leader for the Progressive agenda. From an early age, Roosevelt had a keen interest in nature, particularly in birds and other animals. After the tragic death of his first wife and his mother (both of whom passed away on the same day), Roosevelt traveled West and, for a brief time, ran a cattle ranch in the Dakota Badlands. In the early 1890s, he reentered public life as the New York City police commissioner.



DID YOU KNOW

As commissioner, Roosevelt learned about the problems plaguing urban America. It was at this time that he met Jacob Riis.

After serving as President McKinley's assistant secretary of the Navy, Roosevelt became famous for leading the **Rough Riders** cavalry regiment during the War of 1898.



TERM TO KNOW

Rough Riders

Theodore Roosevelt's volunteer cavalry unit, which fought in Cuba during the War of 1898.

After returning from the war, Roosevelt was elected governor of New York and, to the consternation of traditional party operatives like Mark Hanna, became a rising star in the Republican Party. In an attempt to derail his ascension, Hanna and other Republican leaders nominated Roosevelt for vice president—long considered a dead end in politics—during the 1900 election campaign. However, in September 1901, an assassin killed President McKinley at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York. Hanna lamented, "Now look! That damned cowboy is now President!"



President William McKinley's assassination (a) at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, in September 1901 made Theodore Roosevelt (b), then 42 years old, the country's youngest president.

3. Roosevelt the Trustbuster

Initially, Roosevelt moved cautiously with respect to his reformist agenda while completing McKinley's term. His first message to Congress included only one Progressive goal for his presidency: to eliminate business trusts and holding companies.



TERMS TO KNOW

Trust

A legal arrangement in which a small group of trustees has legal ownership of a business that they operate for the benefit of other investors.

Holding Company

A central corporate entity that controls the operations of multiple companies by holding the majority of stock for each enterprise.

In 1903, Roosevelt created the Department of Commerce and Labor. The department included a Bureau of Corporations; its sole responsibility was to investigate trusts. Roosevelt also asked the Department of Justice to resume prosecutions under the **Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890**.



TERM TO KNOW

Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890

Restricted the creation of monopolies and other unfair business combinations that restrained freedom of trade.

➔ **EXAMPLE** The Sherman Antitrust Act had seldom been enforced during the first decade of its existence. In 1902, Roosevelt began his first antitrust suit under the act by prosecuting the Northern Securities Company for unfair business practices. The suit progressed through the judicial system all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1904, the Supreme Court affirmed the lower court's ruling to break up the Northern Securities Company in a five-to-four vote.

Although the Supreme Court's decision in the Northern Securities case earned Roosevelt the nickname "the Trustbuster," he did not consider all business combinations dangerous to public welfare. As president, Roosevelt used his executive power and influence to distinguish between "good" and "bad" trusts.



“The President’s Dream of a Successful Hunt,” by Clifford Kennedy Berryman (1907), illustrates that Roosevelt distinguished between “good” and “bad” trusts. Note the harness labeled “Restraint” around the bear labeled “Good Trusts,” which indicates Roosevelt’s willingness to use government power to regulate business. Likewise, his shooting of the bear labeled “Bad Trusts” shows that he is determined to eliminate unfair business practices and combinations.

According to Roosevelt, “good trusts” used their power in the marketplace and economies of scale to deliver goods and services cheaply.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Roosevelt allowed the U.S. Steel Corporation, which J. P. Morgan purchased from Andrew Carnegie in 1901, to continue operations. He also let it take over smaller steel companies. At the same time, Roosevelt used his power and influence to denounce “bad trusts”—corporations that

exploited their market positions for short-term gain—and to order prosecutions by the Justice Department.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Roosevelt initiated over two dozen successful antitrust suits, more than any president before him.



THINK ABOUT IT

1. According to Theodore Roosevelt, what role could the federal government play in regulating business?
2. How did Roosevelt’s prosecution of “bad trusts” reinforce the Progressive agenda?

4. Roosevelt and the Square Deal

In 1904, Roosevelt was elected president for the first time, receiving an overwhelming 57% of the vote. He immediately began working to enact his version of the Progressive agenda, which he called the **Square Deal**.



TERM TO KNOW

Square Deal

Theodore Roosevelt’s name for the involved, hands-on government he felt the country needed. Roosevelt described the Square Deal in a September 1903 speech:

Theodore Roosevelt, Speech Excerpt, September 1903

“We must act upon the motto of all for each and each for all. There must be ever present in our minds the fundamental truth that in a republic such as ours the only safety is to stand neither for nor against any man because he is rich or because he is poor because he is engaged in one occupation or another, because he works with his brains or because he works with his hands. We must treat each man on his worth and merits as a man. We must see that each is given a square deal because he is entitled to no more and should receive no less.”



THINK ABOUT IT

According to Roosevelt, who benefits from receiving “a square deal” and why?

In Roosevelt’s vision, the federal government would use its authority to build a society in which hardworking members of all classes—whether urban workers, rural farmers, or industrial capitalists—would succeed together.

Roosevelt’s Square Deal focused on the following three areas:

- control of corporations
- consumer protection
- conservation

4a. Control of Corporations

To realize his vision, Roosevelt continued to use federal power to regulate corporations, most notably by signing the Elkins Act of 1903 and the Hepburn Act of 1906. These acts increased the Interstate Commerce Commission's power to regulate railroad prices and practices. They also extended the commission's authority to include the regulation of interstate transportation on bridges, ferries, and oil pipelines.

4b. Consumer Protection

Early in his second term, Roosevelt read **Upton Sinclair's** 1905 novel about the meatpacking industry, *The Jungle*. It described the deplorable conditions in which workers processed meats for American consumers. The results of government investigations of the industry confirmed Sinclair's descriptions. Alarmed by these revelations, and in response to growing public disgust, Roosevelt used his executive power to promote the passage of legislation that protected consumers. He strongly supported two laws in particular: the **Meat Inspection Act** (1906) and the **Pure Food and Drug Act** (1906).



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Upton Sinclair

Muckraking journalist and novelist whose 1905 book *The Jungle* exposed the deplorable working conditions and sanitation in the meatpacking industry, leading to the passage of the Meat Inspection Act (1906) and the Pure Food and Drug Act (1906).



TERMS TO KNOW

Meat Inspection Act

Established a system of government inspection for meat products, including the grading of meat based on its quality.

Pure Food and Drug Act

Required labels on all food and medicine products to clearly state the ingredients; prohibited the inclusion of dangerous additives in food and drug products.



DID YOU KNOW

For Upton Sinclair, laws like the Meat Inspection and Pure Food and Drug Acts were a disappointment. He wrote *The Jungle* to draw attention to the plight of immigrant workers in Chicago's slaughterhouses, not the poor quality of the meat they produced. He concluded that he had "aimed at the public's heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach."

4c. Conservation

The third key element of the Square Deal was conservation, including federal regulation of wildlife and natural resources on public lands. Roosevelt's most notable achievements in this area were accomplished in 1905 when he appointed Gifford Pinchot as the first chief of the U.S. Forest Service, a newly created agency under the Department of Agriculture during Roosevelt's administration. The Forest Service hired experts in forestry and other fields to administer and oversee the private use of timber, grass, and other natural resources in Western national forests.

With assistance from the **Antiquities Act** (1906), Roosevelt used his executive power to protect cultural heritage sites, areas of environmental beauty, and habitats for birds and other wildlife.



TERM TO KNOW

Antiquities Act

Enabled the president to declare land “of historic or scientific interest” as national monuments, protected and maintained by the federal government.



Theodore Roosevelt’s interest in the protection of public lands was rooted in his personal experiences and interest in nature and was encouraged by people like Gifford Pinchot and John Muir (pictured above with Roosevelt), the founder of the Sierra Club. Muir toured Yosemite National Park with the president in 1906.

Roosevelt used his executive authority to create or enlarge 150 national forests and to create 18 national monuments under the Antiquities Act, including the Grand Canyon National Monument (which was later designated a national park).



SUMMARY

Although many of the reform organizations associated with Progressivism emerged at the grassroots level, the movement gained a supporter in the White House when Theodore Roosevelt was elected president. His activist administration (particularly in business regulation, consumer protection, and conservation) transformed the presidency in the 20th century. Moreover, his insistence on a Square Deal for all Americans rallied Progressives, who believed that the government should use its power to build a society in which all hardworking citizens could succeed. By 1908, Roosevelt had launched a Progressive agenda that would be difficult for his successors to match.

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REFERENCES

Theodore Roosevelt, Address to the New York State Agricultural Association, Syracuse, NY September 7, 1903, The American Presidency Project, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/270557



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Theodore Roosevelt's volunteer cavalry unit, which fought in Cuba during the War of 1898.

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Social Gospel

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