CHAPTER TWENTY: COMMONWEALTH AND EMPIRE, 1870–1900

TOWARD A NATIONAL GOVERNING CLASS

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KEY TOPICS

* The growth of federal and state governments and the consolidation of the modern two-party system
* The development of mass protest movements
* Economic and political crisis of the 1890s
* The United States as a world power
* The Spanish-American War

AMERICAN COMMUNITIES: THE COOPERATIVE COMMONWEALTH

Edward Bellamy’s Looking Backward described a utopian society that the Point Loma community in Southern California attempted to establish. The novel was about a society in which the economy was under the collective ownership of the people who ran all of its aspects. People enjoyed short workdays, long vacations, and retired at age 45. The Point Loma community, established near
San Diego in 1897, was a communal society that provided both private and shared housing. No one earned wages, but the community sought self-sufficiency through agriculture and received donations from admirers and wealthy members. The vignette illustrates the hopes for a cooperative commonwealth that could not be achieved without mass mobilization.

**TOWARD A NATIONAL GOVERNING CLASS** The size and scope of government at all levels grew rapidly during the gilded age. New employees, agencies, and responsibilities changed the character of government. Taxes increased as local governments assumed responsibility for providing such vital services as police, fire protection, water, schools, and parks. The federal government developed its departmental bureaucracy. Power resided in Congress and the state legislatures. The two political parties only gradually adapted to the demands of the new era. Political campaigns featured mass spectacles that reflected the strong competition for votes. Neither party commanded the clear majority needed to govern effectively. Although both parties were national in scope, politicians had to pay attention to local concerns. Nevertheless, campaigns were enthusiastically conducted and attracted massive turnouts. Political machines financed their campaigns through kickbacks and bribes and insured support by providing services for working-class neighborhoods. Offices were filled by the spoils system that rewarded friends of the winning party.

James Garfield’s career illustrates the changing character of politics. Born in a frontier cabin and a Civil War hero, Garfield initially was a reformer who attacked corporate interests. But by 1880 he looked to the business-oriented Republican Party to promote his ambitions. Elected as president, he was gunned down by a frustrated patronage seeker 200 days into his term. By 1883, reformers had begun to change the system. The Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act created the civil service system and a professional bureaucracy. This effort paralleled similar efforts at professionalism in other fields.

**FARMERS AND WORKERS ORGANIZE THEIR COMMUNITIES** Farmers and workers built movements that challenged the existing system. The first major challenge came from the Grange formed in the 1870s by farmers in the Great Plains and South who suffered boom and bust conditions and natural disasters. Grangers blamed hard times on a band of “thieves in the night,” especially railroads, and pushed through laws regulating shipping rates and other farm costs. Grangers created their own grain elevators and set up retail stores for farm machinery. The depression of the late 1870s wiped out most of these programs.

In the late 1880s, Texas farmers, led by Charles W. Macune, formed the National Farmers Alliance and Industrial Union, in cooperation with the Colored Alliance. The Alliance sought to challenge the disproportionate power of the governing class, restore democracy, and establish a cooperative economic program. Northern Plains farmer organizations soon joined the Alliance. Midwestern farm groups battled railroad influence. By 1890, the Alliance had elected Alliance candidates to office and was a major power in several states. The organization demanded a series of economic reforms.

Urban workers also protested. In 1877, a “Great Uprising” shut down railroads all across the country. Federal troops were called out precipitating violence. Government created national guards to prevent similar occurrences. Workers organized stronger unions that increasingly
resorted to strikes and created labor parties. Henry George, author of a best-selling critique of the American economy, ran for mayor of New York and finished a respectable second. In the late 1880s, labor parties won seats on numerous city councils and in state legislatures, particularly in industrial areas where workers outnumbered other classes.

Women actively shaped labor and agrarian protest. The Knights included women at their national convention and even ran day-care centers and baking cooperatives. Women were active members in the Grange and Alliances. The greatest female leader was Frances E. Willard, president of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. She mobilized nearly one million women to promote reform and to work for women’s suffrage. Women were prominent in the Knights of Labor and the Farmers’ Alliance. Both groups supported equal pay but did not endorse woman suffrage.

Between 1890 and 1892, the Farmers’ Alliance, the Knights of Labor, and the National Colored Farmers’ Alliance joined with other organizations to form the Peoples’ party. Its platform called for government ownership of railroads, banks, and the telegraph; the eight-hour day, the graduated income tax, and other reforms. Though the party lost the 1892 presidential race, Populists elected three governors, ten congressional representative, and five senators.

THE CRISIS OF THE 1890s
A series of events shook public confidence in the political system. In 1893, the collapse of the nation’s major rail lines precipitated a major depression. Full recovery was not achieved until the early 1900s. Unemployment soared and many suffered great hardships. Tens of thousands took to the road in search of work or food. Jacob Coxey called for a march on Washington to demand relief; “Coxey’s Army” never reached its intended size and was met with violence. In Idaho, a violence-plagued strike was broken by federal and state troops. In the aftermath, the miners formed the Western Federation of Miners. The hard times precipitated other conflicts, including a bloody confrontation at Andrew Carnegie’s Homestead steel plant. A major strike in Pullman, Illinois spread throughout the nation’s railroad system, ending with the arrest of the American Railway Union leader Eugene Debs, and bitter confrontations between federal troops and workers in Chicago and other cities.

Not only were secular critics of the social order becoming vocal, but so were religious critics. A “social gospel” movement led by ministers such as Washington Gladden, called for churches to fight against injustice. Charles M. Sheldon urged readers to rethink their actions by asking: “What would Jesus do?” Even the more conservative Catholic Church endorsed the right of workers to form trade unions. Immigrant Catholic groups urged priests to ally with the labor movement. Women’s religious groups such as the YWCA (Young Women’s Christian Association) strove to provide services for poor women.

POLITICS OF REFORM, POLITICS OF ORDER
Grover Cleveland won the 1892 election by capturing the traditional Democratic Solid South and attracting German voters alienated by Republican nativist appeals. When the economy collapsed in 1893, government figures concentrated on longstanding currency issues to provide a solution. The debate was over hard money backed by gold or soft money backed by silver. Cleveland favored a return to the gold standard, losing much popular support. The hard times strengthened the Populists, who were silver advocates. They recorded strong gains in 1894. But in 1896, when the Democrats
nominated William Jennings Bryan as a champion of free silver, Populists knew the Democrats had stolen their thunder. They decided to run a fusion ticket of Bryan and Tom Watson. The Democrats ignored their would-be Populist allies.

Republicans ran William McKinley as a safe alternative to Bryan. In a well-financed campaign they characterized Bryan as a dangerous man who would cost voters their jobs. Bryan won 46% of the vote but failed to carry the Midwest, Far West, and Upper South. Traditional Democratic groups like Catholics were uncomfortable with Bryan and voted Republican. The Populists disappeared and the Democrats became a minority party. McKinley promoted a mixture of pro-business and expansionist foreign policies. The return to prosperity after 1898 insured continued Republican control.

Neither McKinley nor Bryan addressed the increased racism and nativism throughout the nation. Nativists blamed foreign workers for hard times and considered them unfit for democracy. Southern whites enacted a system of legal segregation and disenfranchised blacks, approved by the Supreme Court. Racial violence escalated, despite Ida B. Wells’s one-woman crusade against lynching. Reformers abandoned their traditional support for black rights and accepted segregation and disenfranchisement. The tragic career of Tom Watson illustrates the end of hopes for an egalitarian South. As a Populist leader Watson called for a black/white coalition based on mutual interest. After the defeat of Populism, Watson returned to politics preaching vicious racial hatred.

“IMPERIALISM OF RIGHTEOUSNESS” Many Americans proposed that the economic crisis required new markets for American production. Others suggested Americans needed new frontiers to maintain their democracy. The Chicago World’s Fair displayed the ease with which American products might be marketed throughout the world. It displayed different cultures, but reinforced a sense of stark contrast between civilized Anglo-Saxons and savage people of color. Clergymen like Josiah Strong urged that Americans help Christianize and civilize the world. A growing number of writers urged America to take up the “White Man’s Burden.” Especially after the Civil War, missionary activity increased throughout the non-western world. They helped generate public interest in foreign lands and laid the groundwork for economic expansion.

Beginning in the late 1860s, the United States began expanding overseas. Secretary of State William Henry Seward launched the nation’s Pacific empire by buying Alaska and expanding the United States presence in Hawaii. Rather than promoting military occupation and colonial administration, United States policy emphasized economic control, particularly in Latin America. During the 1880s and 1890s, the United States strengthened its navy and began playing an increased role throughout the Western Hemisphere and the Pacific. It annexed Hawaii in 1898 following nearly a century of economic penetration and political intervention. Hawaii was a stepping-stone to Asian markets. In 1899, Secretary of State John Hay proclaimed the Open Door policy in Asia to insure American access and laid the basis for twentieth-century foreign policy.

THE SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR By 1895, public interest in Cuban affairs grew, spurred on by grisly horror stories of Spanish treatment of revolutionaries. McKinley had held off intervention, but public clamor grew following an explosion on the USS Maine. The United
States smashed Spanish power in what John Hay called “a splendid little war.” It spelled out its terms for Cuban independence through the Platt Amendment that protected its interests and acknowledged its unilateral right to intervene in Cuban affairs. The United States also annexed a number of other Caribbean and Pacific islands including the Philippines.

Initially Filipino rebels welcomed American troops, but when it was clear that the United States intended to annex their country, they turned against their former allies. Between 1899 and 1902, Americans fought a war that led to the death of one in every five Filipinos. Supporters defended the war as bringing civilization to the Filipinos. Critics saw the abandonment of traditional support for self-determination and warned against bringing in dark-skinned people. The Filipino war stimulated the founding of an Anti-Imperialist League which denounced the war and territorial annexation in no uncertain terms. But most Americans put aside their doubts and welcomed the new era of aggressive nationalism.

CONCLUSION The rural and working-class reform campaigns had been defeated. A new generation of reformers would attempt to correct societal flaws while accepting the framework of a corporate society.

Lecture Suggestions

1. Discuss the structure of gilded age politics. Students need to understand why national political leaders focused on the band of states from Illinois to New York—the key is that national elections were won and lost in those states because they were up for grabs. Explain the distinctions between Democrats and Republicans. Paul Kleppner’s *Cross of Culture* (Free Press, 1970) lays out the conventional ethno-cultural argument that shows the link between culture, ethnicity, and political identity. Pietistic Protestants in the Midwest supported the notion of a state that could intervene in public morality and supported the Republican Party. Ritualists opposed such intervention and backed the Democrats. This can help explain why Bryan was not a good candidate for the Democrats in 1896. Make connections with the material in Chapter Ten to show the continuity in voting patterns.

2. The idea that the 1890s were a dramatic turning point is a foreign notion to most students. Explain why the depression hit and why it hit so hard. Explain the range of solutions that were offered. You can set up the 1896 election as a conflict over three different explanations of and solutions for the depression. Republicans explained it as the result of threats to the gold standard and overproduction. Their solution was to maintain gold and expand trade. Democrats blamed the crisis on the gold standard and offered free silver as the solution. Populists blamed the crisis on an undemocratic economy and offered their package of reforms.

3. To discuss foreign policy, emphasize the continuity of American foreign policy aims after the Civil War. In a sense, much of what happens by the 1890s and early 1900s is an extension of Seward’s ideas that were laid out in the 1860s. You can get a good discussion of all this in LaFeber’s *The American Age* (Norton, 1994)
Discussion Questions

1. Was the American political system better off before the introduction of Civil Service? Were we better off before we had all that bureaucracy?

2. Why did farmers organize the Alliance? (Students should make connections with the material from Chapter Eighteen that discusses the problems farmers were having.)

3. Was the two-party system able to make the necessary reforms? Did enough reform get accomplished—or did the system insure that critically needed reforms were so thoroughly watered down that no serious changes occurred?

4. Who was pushing for a greater involvement in overseas affairs? Why?

5. Was the Spanish-American War avoidable? Was the Filipino War avoidable? Were we better off as a result of these wars?

Out of Class Activity

A central theme in this chapter is the difficulty of radically reforming the political system. Most students have had no experience in political reform. Yet people with that experience are all around. Students could go in groups to interview people who have had experience in reform politics. They might discover that their community has a “peace center,” where they might find veterans of Vietnam era protest movements. The Ross Perot campaign of 1992 created a corps of political insurgents. Students could interview these reformers and try to come up with a sense of why people felt the need to go outside of the conventional political system to affect political change.

If You’re Going to Read One Book on the Subject

Robert C. McMath, Jr.’s American Populism: A Social History 1877-1898 (Hill and Wang, 1993) is an excellent guide to the politics of insurgency. Note that previously mentioned surveys can also help out—Barney’s Passage of the Republic (Heath, 1987) for domestic affairs and LaFeber’s American Age (Norton, 1994) for foreign affairs.

Audio-Visual Aids

“Grover Cleveland” From the “Profiles in Courage Series.” Surveys forces affecting America during the gilded age. Explores Cleveland’s roles in vetoing the Dependent Pensions Bill of 1887 and how that affected his political fortunes. (B&W, 50 minutes, 1965)

“Industry and Empire: 1870-1914” From “World: A Television History,” Puts the connection between imperialism and industrialization in the context of world history. (Color, 26 minutes, 1984)
“Lure of Empire: America Debates Imperialism” Dramatizes Congressional debate over annexation of the Philippines. (Color, 1974, 27 minutes)