Course Learning Outcomes for Unit III

Upon completion of this unit, students should be able to:

1. Describe the impact of industrial expansion on the evolution of big business in the United States.

5. Summarize varied perspectives concerning American Imperialism, including expansionism, foreign policy, and trade.
   5.1 Identify the key figures who challenged traditional thoughts on American Imperialism, expansionism, foreign policy, and trade.
   5.2 Recall key figures in domestic reforms.
   5.3 Examine multiple theories and perspectives surrounding American Imperialism.

6. Explain the United States’ role as a superpower during the world wars.
   6.1 Identify key figures who pushed America towards intervention.
   6.2 Explain how intervention and isolation led to the United States becoming a superpower.

Reading Assignment


For information regarding the Unit III Essay, please click here.

To gain further knowledge of the material, please view the PowerPoint presentations below. These will help you identify key people discussed in this unit, important details not covered within the lesson, and political cartoons from the time period to have a view into the mindset of people towards key topics.

Unit III PowerPoint Presentation A click here. For a PDF version click here.

Unit III PowerPoint Presentation B click here. For a PDF version click here.

Unit III PowerPoint Presentation C click here. For a PDF version click here.

Unit Lesson

The Dawn of the 20th Century

Unit II left off with an evolving America at the turn of the century. Migrations from Europe rolled in each day, the African American population of the American South began the first stages of a larger migration, and what
many publicly had dubbed as a “Progressive Era” was, in reality, all too often a scene laced with corruption and inequality, especially for the lower classes.

In the eastern cities, the now overcrowded tenements, strategically organized to resemble ethnic European neighborhoods, were the ticket for the ever-successful political machines. Even with their good works for the poor, the graft they instilled was arguably on or above par with the scandals of today. Labor, even with minor successes, still had trouble fighting for better conditions and wages. Big business, run by industry’s giants, still had the strength and influence to ensure that their profits were unaffected. The final act of the passing century would be a question of America’s true intentions as a world entity. Showing great interest in staking a claim throughout the Pacific, including trade in Asia, led down a winding path into controversial military action and a question of imperial ambition.

That being said, the close of the 19th century was not without its highlights. The technological and market revolutions of earlier decades, which bred smaller family sizes and skilled labor forces, saw the family unit begin to embrace leisure at all levels of society. Reform groups, including women, African Americans, working classes, and even the church, were growing in influence and number. The political spectrum, fed by these reform-minded citizens, showed evidence of upheaval on the state and local levels. The dawn of the 20th century would reflect on these reforms. Also, with the rise of a world conflict, the U.S. would again be given an opportunity to prove its ambitions as either an isolationist economic juggernaut or an active western power.

The 20th century begins with a look back at progressivism. In cities such as New York, Boston, and Chicago, populations were continuing to increase, laying the foundation for the modern cities as they are today. The reforms, which had often started on the grassroots level, now began to inspire the support of the neighborhoods they supported.

The idea of a place of hospitality was not an original idea to these American progressives, but it was an effective one. Jane Addams of Chicago and her Hull House complex was one of the most noteworthy. These houses and groups served dual functions. First, they were centrally located within lower-class neighborhoods and served as a safe place (like a community center or YMCA). Second, they were often viable alternatives to political machines, which only catered to the majority for their votes.

Charles Sheldon, like Jane Addams, spread a religious message with these efforts in specific attempt to attack the elitism discussed in the previous unit. These institutions worked hand-in-hand with reforms, and from their efforts gained public awareness and support. These efforts would bear the early fruit of progressive works with judicial victories (at that time) such as Muller v. Oregon.

Even with these early victories, change was slow. Arguably the most significant reform movement in the 19th century after abolition was women’s suffrage. Unlike abolition, which was eradicated by the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, women would still be without an equal voice or vote on the federal level until 1920. Some early groups, such as the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), were effective in rallying support in Western states. There was renewed hope in groups such as the Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL): a workers union, forged in 1903 and strengthened from disasters like the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire of 1911, which united the voices of active women in major cities.

To gain support, there were other attempts to change the cultural norm, such as attacking the saloon culture and the economic culture with limited government oversight (laissez-faire), which had ensured that the classes remained separated. Even in this new atmosphere, there would be significant opposition to women getting the vote. This often came from companies that thrived on the cultural norms being attacked, such as big tobacco, alcohol, and other such corporations. These companies benefitted from the vices primarily enjoyed by men of the era. For the next two decades, reform-minded women would be lampooned as brainless, stuck-up, pampered, and pesky, all in the name of halting their efforts, which threatened the cultural norm as they gained national support.

**Civil Rights Activists and Roosevelt**

Even with the passing of the three Civil Rights Amendments, African Americans were far from considered equal in American society. The end of Reconstruction had led directly into another era of subjugation. As new laws were passed protecting these civil rights, new forms of segregation and angst rose to combat the situation. In response to these troubles, two major voices would emerge: Booker T. Washington, a charismatic, self-made former slave, and W.E.B. Du Bois, who was well-educated and outspoken.
These two men, with all-too-often opposing viewpoints, would lead the charge for progress in the wake of reform. Washington is perhaps best-remembered today for his work with building Tuskegee University and for his motivational methods, which demanded effort, not entitlement, such as his famous Atlanta Compromise speech in 1895. (For more information see http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/88/.) Washington’s message of rallying faith through good works was rivaled by his contemporary, W.E.B. Du Bois, who demanded the immediate equality that the law guaranteed and co-founded the NAACP. His most famous work, _The Souls of Black Folk_, is considered one of the prominent collections of writings depicting African-American culture in the post-Reconstruction era. Events such as the riots in Atlanta (1906) and Chicago (1919) would put these men, and later like-minded voices, at the forefront of a new era of reform.

Starting in the last years of the 19th century, progressivism grew into a political entity. Despite setbacks in the federal elections of 1892 and 1896, local municipalities with significant lower-class working populations showed up and put representation in place to vocalize the need for reform. One of the more noteworthy figures to emerge with this wave was Eugene V. Debs, an outspoken Socialist who championed the lowest classes and feared the direction that the two-party system was going. Debs, however, was not alone; the assassination of President William McKinley in 1901 would promote his Vice President, Theodore Roosevelt, to the executive office. (For more information see http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/theodoreroosevelt.)

Roosevelt was the epitome of the manly expectation, being viewed as a warrior, sportsman, cowboy, activist, reformer, and politician. He led the American people with a confidence and charisma that inspired feelings of American infallibility and arrogance. Politically, his influence is perhaps best renown for _trust-busting_, or enforcing regulations on the monopolies that had overtaken the railroads, oil, and other economic entities, which used _laissez-faire_ tactics to widen the economic gap. Roosevelt also believed in holding these corruptive influences publicly liable, which would become synonymous with his role serving alongside, and arguably as, a muckraker. He was first a man of the citizens, though—hoping to build relationships over enemies and even serving as a mediator between labor disputes, such as with the United Mine Workers (UMW). He did not seek to punish the successful but simply to ensure that the system was fair for all.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the contiguous United States map, with the exception of a few southwestern territories, closely resembled modern times—at least politically. Hawai’i and Alaska, protected U.S. territories at the time, along with Roosevelt’s arrogance, led to questions about America’s imperial potential. The same “big stick” that Roosevelt had used to bust corruptive business would also sometimes reach across U.S. boundaries. He would be directly influential in U.S. actions in Cuba and Panama. As a Navy man, he was an advocate of international ambition. The idea of the U.S. as a “world police” agency would be made law with his Roosevelt Corollary, an amendment to the Monroe Doctrine that spelled out the United States’ role as an international police power. (For more information see http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=56.)

The threat of a developing American empire became very apparent under Roosevelt’s watch. Though his terms would not include the inclusion of any particular U.S. military conflicts, it is arguably fair to consider his time as Executive similar to that of wartime Presidents—he is arguably fair to consider his time as Executive similar to that of wartime Presidents—he is arguably fair to consider his time as Executive similar to that of wartime Presidents—his impact in foreign affairs would change U.S. positioning in the world and set the stage for leaving the Western Hemisphere in case of world conflict.
**Fluctuations in Unity**

Roosevelt would serve the remainder of McKinley’s term and earn re-election the following term. He was so popular as President that even his chosen successor, William Howard Taft, would fail to keep the nation, or the Republican Party, united. Taft was not the charismatic presence Roosevelt had been, and he also proved susceptible to swaying from Congress and allowing the courts to return to social politics. In a few short years, almost all of Roosevelt’s good will with the American people was undone by rivals from both within and outside of the party. Anti-American sentiment was even fostered abroad due to unsupported economic plans.

In 1912, one of the more fascinating political battles in American history occurred. A third political party, the Bull Moose Party, came out of nowhere to attack Taft’s administration. Led by former President Teddy Roosevelt, this political family feud would ultimately seal the victory for Democrat Woodrow Wilson to take office in 1913. Wilson, however, needed more than a civil conflict to guarantee victory. With the failures of Taft, progressivism once again gained steam, and Socialist Eugene Debs was again a legitimate national contender for office. Though four names were on the ballot, Wilson was the clear victor. The nation was the most politically divided as it had been since Lincoln was in office, but Wilson had support throughout the nation, and helped to unite the nation after what had been a disaster for Republican supporters.

Wilson, like Roosevelt, was a competent economist and a bulldog for reform. He would quickly stabilize trade and taxation, attack trusts, put the banks back in check, and his Federal Reserve Act of 1913 gave the federal government an economic control that it had lacked since the Jackson administration. Progressivism was in remission except for a few strategic programs. Wilson had patched the nation back together, but his reelection in 1916 was won on a different platform: isolationism and neutrality. War had broken out in Europe, and the U.S., with its melting pot of cultures, was a wildcard. Wilson knew that war could be an economic savior from the recession of 1913, but a political death sentence if the U.S. became directly involved. His best move was keeping the U.S. out of the fight while serving as supplier to those fighting.

**The Path to War**

Oddly enough, the United States’ path to joining the war in Europe would start with disputes in Central America. The Monroe Doctrine once again encouraged U.S. influence in the Americas, and, like Roosevelt, Wilson felt that the U.S. model was to be the savior for struggling nations to the south. The U.S. wanted to shore up economic ties in the Caribbean and Central America and felt that helping to secure pro-U.S. leadership would be the best way to do so.

Influences in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua provided some positive results, but adjacent Mexico would incite a series of challenges. A takeover of Mexico by anti-U.S. General Victoriano Huerta would quickly result in U.S. interference. When Huerta fled to Spain, another rebellion emerged—this one under the leadership of Francisco “Pancho” Villa. Villa proved to be more adept at avoiding U.S. pressure, and with the war in Europe continuing to heat up, Wilson could not dispense too much military might to the dispute.

On February 25th, 1917, the British intercepted a letter from Germany’s Foreign Secretary Arthur Zimmerman. This letter stated that if Mexico would declare war on the U.S., Germany would return its former holdings in the American Southwest to Mexico at the end of the war. In response, Wilson asked Congress to allow arms to protect American merchants; the U.S. remained neutral, unnerved by Germany’s tactics.

While Wilson preached neutrality, the U.S. was not entirely out of the war’s influence. The U.S. trade with Britain constituted almost half of the country’s wartime supplies, and Wilson even approved billions in U.S. loans to cover the growing cost. This trade was so lucrative that even the blockade by Britain against Germany did not significantly faze U.S. interests.
In response to the British blockade, on May 7th, 1915, German U-Boats in the Eastern Atlantic sunk a luxury liner off the coast of Ireland that was carrying 128 U.S. citizens. Germany explained the sinking as a measure of war, as the liner was carrying war supplies. Tensions calmed with the U.S. until March of 1917, when Germany again targeted passenger vessels it considered to be a covert part of the war effort. These attacks would kill another 66 U.S. citizens, and with the Zimmerman threat from only weeks before, Wilson had no choice but to ask Congress to declare war on Germany.

The First World War

The war started in 1914 with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary as he paraded in the city of Sarajevo. However, it can be argued that the battle lines were drawn much earlier.

Upon the U.S. entry into the war, Europe was divided between the Central powers (aka the Triple Alliance), which included the nations of Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria, and the Allied powers (aka the Triple Entente), which included Great Britain, France, Japan, Russia, and the U.S. The war was as much a family feud as it was a political powder keg. Monarchs from multiple nations, including the aforementioned Franz Ferdinand of Austria, as well as Wilhelm II of Germany, Nicholas II of Russia, and George V of Britain, all claimed some lineage to the Austrian Royal Family, which was once also part of the Holy Roman Empire. Some of the smaller nations would also boast leaders of great charisma and influence, such as Italy’s ambitious Victor Emmanuel III, Serbia’s sickly Peter I, and the fearless Belgian Albert I.

These fronts, or battle lines, were crafted from a series of alliances, which had been drafted over the previous decades. The assassination of an Austrian heir by a Bosnian extremist, Gavrilo Princip, was the only spark necessary to cause a territorial dispute in the Balkan region to explode into a full-scale world conflict. Nation after nation, compelled by their alliances, declared war against one another. Even the bloodline of the influential Habsburg family, which included many of the prominent royal families of Europe, was not enough to suppress the chaos that politics and fear had created. (For more information see http://gcveteransmemorial.org/photo-panels/.)

World War I is also known as the Great War. It was the first modern war, the first trench war, and the last war to be dominated by the traditional European monarchies, which used nationalism as a method for championing combat as a glorious rite of passage. This conflict was brutal for those on the front lines, as weeks to months at a time were spent crouching in dirt trenches. Covered in filth and waste, gas masks at the ready, soldiers had to hold their resolve while preparing for the worst. Reinforcements and supplies were not always on schedule or reliable; when there was an advance, it was rarely more than a few feet. For those who did brave “no-man’s land” between the trenches, all too often they had maybe only moments to reach the next trench. Any gains meant braving a sprint over barbed wire, mud, and fallen comrades, all while machine gun fire mowed down entire lines.

What nationalistic ideals and images had promised was far from the truth, as the accounts we have reflect this barbaric scene. Erich Maria Remarque’s unforgettable account of innocence lost as a German soldier in All Quiet on the Western Front matches lesser known but equally horrific versions from both sides of the conflict.

On the home front, the war received mixed reviews. In the mix of hysteria and fear from loved ones half a world away, there was also a question of American purity, which got especially hostile, with even multiple-generation Americans who had German ancestry being ostracized. Politically, on one side, Socialists saw this as an unnecessary threat to the American people fueled by a Capitalist agenda. On the other side, Progressives saw this as an opportunity for reform—with the men away, there were opportunities for others to advance and capitalize on the wartime production. This even fed into prohibition (18th Amendment) as an effort to conserve resources. The suffrage debate would also quickly gain support in this charged atmosphere.

By 1918, Wilson had changed his perspective to one of support for the betterment of the war. By 1919, the 19th Amendment was passed and then ratified in 1920, giving women the right to vote. It is important to note, however, that there was still a heavy lobby against the passage of this suffrage bill; even in the prohibition years, alcohol companies held a strong political pressure, and they were frantically jumping from state to state trying to slow the passage.
It would be a showdown in Nashville, Tennessee, that ultimately decided the bill’s future. With a strong anti-suffrage feel among the state congress, most did not ever expect the bill to pass. The sudden disappearance of large numbers from the Tennessee Congress kept the vote from reaching quorum. Only with the threat of the law was order restored, and even then the numbers expected a no vote to suffice. It was after receiving a letter from his mother that a shocking change of heart compelled one representative, Harry Burn, to change his vote. This tipped the scale towards ratification, and women were finally granted their voting rights.

Women would have their first opportunity to vote in the presidential election of 1920, which witnessed Republican Warren G. Harding take all but the American South. Eugene Debs would run yet again as a Socialist, but in a charged post-war atmosphere, his support was barely visible.

By the time the U.S. entered the war, it was in its latter stages. The Bolsheviks, a Russian revolutionary group, had taken control of Russia from Nicholas II and soon after pulled out of the war—essentially removing the Eastern front. With the help of the draft (Selective Service Act) and some effective nationalist propaganda, the US built a military just shy of five million in number, including draftees and volunteers.

As at home, there was cultural divide among different races, creeds, and cultures in the ranks of the military. The 92nd Division, which was composed of African Americans, was the first to be integrated with the French. Interestingly enough, being stationed in France became a kind of utopia for these African Americans, as European prejudices were not as loud as those in the U.S., and many earned medals of valor that came with extended times at the front.

Most American soldiers would not see war until March 1918, when they were sent to reinforce the war-weary French troops along the Western front. A couple months later, an Allied march into the heart of Germany would seal the end of the fighting, and by November, Wilhelm was forced to abdicate. Armistice Day, November 11, 1918, would be the official ending date for the conflict.

Working Toward Peace and Cooperation

One of Wilson’s most infamous failures was his Fourteen Points plan, from which he hoped to inspire a peaceful forum for debate and discussion, a proposed League of Nations reminiscent of today’s United Nations. With the Democrats no longer in control of the legislature, this plan flopped on both the national and international level, failing to even receive the support of the U.S. Congress. Still, the year 1919 would see official peace and strides made toward Wilson’s desired cooperation.

There would also be sanctions that gravely wounded the nations that had made up the Central powers—especially Germany—who would end up on the cusp of total economic failure. Left with mountains of debt and the loss of the disputed Alsace-Lorraine region to France, and without the right to retain a standing army, Germany was a shell of its former self—providing a dangerous opportunity for a charismatic and ambitious young German corporal named Adolf Hitler. Other nations, too, would suffer from these sanctions, many of which were decided by Western powers without account to local cultural ties and potential new powder kegs.

As with the end of any conflict, so also ends the wartime opportunities. This all too often causes the economy to slow and new “villains” to emerge. The new threat would be any opposition to democracy. The first “Red Scare” emerged in full force, with vengeance toward anyone who threatened the American ideal. This would include two major migrating populations within U.S. borders: Mexicans and African Americans.

The war years and economic opportunities motivated the movement of approximately 500,000 African Americans to northern industrial cities in search of work and an escape from the continued harsh realities in the South. In the following two decades, another 500,000 also migrated, oftentimes as families came together. With day labor moving to industry, that opened up opportunities in agricultural centers such as the American South and Southwest. It is from this motivation that hundreds of thousands of Mexicans entered the U.S. in search of better lives and escape from corrupt government. As their numbers grew, so did their voice, representation, and just as suddenly, renewed forms of segregation and hate.

These first two decades of the 20th century proved to be a time of both pros and cons, as almost every community would be drastically impacted either by the war, migrations, or legal changes. As important as it is to consider the international impact of an event such as World War I, it is also important to reflect on the local impact; for some communities, entire generations of young adult men were lost, while in other communities, new laws led to an upsurge in family potential. In still others, the entire demographic changed as the need for
labor surged during wartime production. The next two decades would be stark reminders of just how quickly life could change and how even positive developments, such as the end of a bloody war, can have negative consequences.

References


Learning Activities (Non-Graded)

Power Point

For a review of the key terms of the unit, click here to access the interactive Unit III Flashcards in PowerPoint form. (Click here to access a PDF version.)

Non-graded Learning Activities are provided to aid students in their course of study. You do not have to submit them. If you have questions, contact your instructor for further guidance and information.