Progressivism Essay, Research Paper

Progressivism implies a philosophy that welcomes innovations and reforms in the political, economic, and social order. The Progressive movement, 1901 to 1917, was ultimately the triumph of conservatism rather than a victory for liberalism. In a general sense, the conservative goals of this period justified the Liberal reforms enacted by Progressive leaders. Deviating from the “traditional” definition of conservatism (a resistance to change and a disposition of hostility to innovations in the political, social, and economic order), the Conservatist triumph was in the sense that there was an effort to maintain basic social and economic relations vital to a capitalist society. The Progressive leaders essentially wanted to perpetuate Liberal reform in order to bring upon general conservatism.

Expansion of the federal government’s powers, competition and economic distribution of wealth, and the social welfare of American citizens concerned the many leaders of this era. The business influence on politics was quite

significant of the Progressive Era. Not only did the three leading Progressive political figures, Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson, bring upon new heights to government regulation, but also the great business leaders of this era defined the

units of political intervention. With political capitalism rising to fame, Progressive politics experienced new themes and areas. The inevitability of federal regulation policies, reformation of social welfare, conservation, and various innovations with banking led to one conservative effort: the preservation of existing powers and economic/social relations. The political leaders of this ear were conservative in that they all believed in the fundamentals of basic capitalism. The various forms of anti-trust legislation presented by each president made the nation one step closer to providing a stable, predictable, and secure, therefore, conservative capitalist society. Theodore Roosevelt’s statist tendencies brought new meaning to government regulation. Roosevelt’s Anti-Trust policy of 1902 pledged government intervention to break up illegal monopolies and regulate corporations for the public good. Roosevelt felt that “bad” trusts threatened competition and markets. in order to restore free competition, President Roosevelt ordered the Justice department to prosecute corporations pursing monopolistic

practices. However, the Judicial Branch repudiated its duty (right of reason) and now, even if the impact of the market was not harmful, actions that restrained or monopolized trade would automatically put a firm in violation of the

Sherman law. In 1902, the United Mine Workers were willing to submit to arbitration, but the coal operators adamantly opposed any recognition of the union. Thus, the union members decided to strike over wages, safety

conditions, and union recognition. The Anthracite Coal Strike of 1902 ended with the appointment by Roosevelt of an arbitration commission to rule on the issues. Business men did not regard politics (government regulation) as a necessary evil, but as an important part of their position in society. Roosevelt did not see big business as evil, but a permanent development that was necessary in a modern economy. Roosevelt couldn’t rely on the courts to distinguish between “good” or “bad” trusts. The only solution was for the executive to assume that responsibility. Roosevelt’s ingenious “square dealings” and “gentlemen’s agreements” controlled many firms. In 1903, a new cabinet position was created to address the concerns of business and labor (Department of Commerce and Labor). Within the department, the Bureau of Corporations was empowered to investigate and report on illegal activities of corporations. The abuse of economic power by railroads proposed another problem for Roosevelt. However, in 1903,

the Elkins Act empowered the ICC (Interstate Commerce Commission, first American federal regulatory agency) to act against discriminatory rebates. Also, in 1906, the Hepburn Act increased the ICC membership from five to seven.

The ICC could set its own fair freight rates, had its regulatory pwer extended over pipelines, bridges, and express companies, and was empowered to require a uniform system of accounting by regulated transportation companies.

Besides economic relations, Roosevelt involved himself in many important conservative social relations. The Secretary of treasury created an inspection organization to certify that cattle for export were free of disease. With disappointing results, Germany and other European countries banned the importation of American meant. Federal regulation helped improve exports to Europe, free competition, another conservative effort. In 1906, the Meat

Inspection Act provided for federal and sanitary regulations and inspections in meant packing facilities. Also, the Pure Food and Drug Act prohibited the manufacture, sale, and transportation of adulterated labeled foods and drugs in

accordance with consumer demands. Roosevelt passed many conservation laws from 1902 to 1908 to create federal irrigation projects, national parks and forests, develop water power, and establish the Nation Conservation Commission to oversee the nation’s resources. Taft, hand picked by Theodore Roosevelt, had two primary political goals in 1909. One was the continuation of Roosevelt’s trust-busting, and the other was the reconciliation of the old guard conservatives and

young progressive reformers in the Republican Party. Taft, being an anti-statist, was a poor progressive politician. Instead of the positive outlook toward big business and competition resembling Roosevelt, Taft was an advocate of

minimum governmental regulation. However, in perusing anti-monopoly law enforcement, Taft and his Attorney General George Wichersham brought44 indictments in anti-trust suites. Taft was successful in healing the Republican split between conservatives and progressives over such issues as tariff reform, conservation, and the almost dictatorial pwer held by Republican Speaker of the House, Joseph Cannon. Taft’s inability to bring both wings of the party together led to the hardened division which would bring about a Democratic victory in the 1912 elections. In 1910, Republican progressives joined with Democrats to strip Speaker Cannon of his pwer to appoint the Committee on Rules and serve on it himself. Although critical of Cannon, Taft failed to align himself with the

progressives. Also, another event pushing the greater split in the Republican party was the Ballinger-Pinchot Disputes (1909-1910). Progressives backed Gifford Pinchot, chief of the U.S. Forest Service, in his charge that the

conservative Secretary of the Interior, Richard Ballinger, was giving away the nation’s natural resources to private corporate interests. A congressional investigatory committee found that Ballinger had done nothing illegal, but did act

in a manner contrary to the government’s environmental policies. Taft had supported Ballinger through the controversy, but negative public opinion forced Ballinger to resign in 1911. Taft’s political standing with progressive

Republicans hurt the election of 1912. Taft promoted the idea of a nation budgetary system. In 1909, Congress passed a graduated income tax amendment to the Constitution which was ratified in 1913. Also, Progressives

generally considered high tariffs to be a major cause for the decline of competition and the rise of “bad” trusts. Taft had campaigned for a “sizable reduction.” However, Taft was won over by the conservative Republican bloc and gave his approval for the protectionist Payne-Aldrich Tariff Act of 1909, which favored eastern industry. From this faction between fellow Republicans, the National Progressive Republican League, with Theodore Roosevelt as head, began a drive to take control of the Republican party. One important issued that distinguished Taft from the other Progressive Presidents was his position on trusts. He rebelled at the discretionary use of presidential authority over

instituting antitrust suits. The Sherman Act was unclear, yet enforced. “The New Nationalism” presented by Roosevelt stated that the federal government could be empowered to oversee big business to make sure it acted in public interest. The nation’s industrial corporations would be treated as if they were natural monopolies or public utilities and placed under direct public oversight.

While the Republicans battled among themselves, the Democrats had stepped into position. In the 1910 elections, Democrats made dramatic gains, bringing Woodrow Wilson into the Presidential office in 1912. The Wilson administration brought together many of the policies and initiatives of the previous Republican administrations, and reform efforts in Congress by both parties. Wilson achieved a lower tariff reform (Underwood-Simmons Act, 1913) and a graduated income tax through the 16th amendment. The Underwood-Simmons Tariff Act not only pared rates down to an average of 23 percent but also spurred competition and reduce prices for consumers. Wilson favored a Federal Reserve Banking System, which provided regulation and flexibility to monetary policy. However, when it came down to economic situations, Wilson quickly resembled Roosevelt on his decisions and actions. Like Roosevelt, Wilson did not consider big business as “bad”, but the abuses of economic power. Nor did Wilson think

that the abuse of pwer could be prevented without a strong federal government. Where he parted company from Roosevelt was however how the authority of government should be used to restrain private power. Wilson proposed

to deal with the problems of corporate power with court enforcement of the Sherman Act. His task was to figure out how to make that long-established antitrust approach work better. The main thing was to prevent the trust from

unfairly using their power to curb that free competition. In the Clayton Antitrust Act of 1914, it would only apply to where the effect may be to substantially lessen competition or tend to create a monopoly in any line of commerce. As

for the trade commission, Wilson initially wanted no more than an advisory and information-gathering agency. However, the Federal Trade Commission (1914) received much broader powers. As for other goals besides economic interests, Wilson succeeded in both social and economic affairs. Although not so familiar with Roosevelt’s social welfare, Wilson still enforced ways to help the general public. The Keating-Owen Act in 1916 protected the children of the work force. The Federal Farm Loan Act, 1916, was a credit reform for agriculture and an independent tariff commission came about later in 1916. By the end of Wilson’s presidency, the New Freedom and the New Nationalism merged into one government philosophy of regulation, order and standardization in the interest of an increasingly divers and pluralistic American nation. Through the many actions and decisions of each Progressive presidents and business leaders, the

Progressive Era was mainly that of a conservative effort. Although the actual details and literal events seemed to take a Liberal stance, the overall period was aimed at preserving competition, distribution of wealth, common good,

and existing powers. Government regulation not only played a vital role in trust regulation, but also served to regulate competition, money flow, and markets. The Progressive Era brought decentralization and competition to society,

which was what politicians, business leaders, and the common people wanted from the beginning. In essence, the Progressive Era served to maintain their primary goals. The new laws and acts put into order during the Progressive

movement seemed and are Liberal indeed. However, the Liberal reforms reinforced the original conservative goals. Business and political leaders accepted the growing competition. Laissez faire, complete Liberalism, hardly ever existed and will not appear in the near future. Political capitalism, by definition from Gabriel Kolko (author of “The Triumph of Conservatism), is the utilization of political outlets to attain conditions of stability, predictability, and

security in the economy. The fact that federal regulation of the economy was conservative in its effect in preserving existing power and economic relations in society shows that federal regulation in the economy was conservative as

well. Through the many antitrust acts and various economic and social policies, the Progressive Era ultimately operated on the assumption that the general welfare of the community could be best served by satisfying the concrete

needs of business. The big business and business leaders influenced the regulation and the government worked for the people, promoting competition and decentralization. Hence, the Progressive movement served to preserve

original goals, not reform society with Liberalism.