

Unit 1: Introduction

Overview

Industrializing America 1877–1900: "Rags to Riches?"

When we asked Professor Richard White what he considered to be a key question about United States history since the Civil War, he replied that it "is how a country so utterly transforms itself." Throughout the course, you will hear many other historians raise questions that help direct our study of "how we got from there to here" and remind us "to remember the very vital presence of the past in contemporary American life." Keep these questions in mind as we survey the economic, political, social, and diplomatic transformation of America.

Video: Key Questions

What are the key questions we should be asking about American history since 1877? An array of prominent American historians set the stage for the course by offering questions to think about before beginning the study of American history after the Civil War.

Video script:

Music introduction

Richard White, Stanford University: For me, the key question about the United States emerging from the civil war is how a country so utterly transforms itself.

Albert Camarillo, Stanford University: How have the lives of Americans changed, dramatically so?

David Levering Lewis, New York University: What are we becoming? What do we want to be? What can we be?

Susan Strasser, University of Delaware: If we looked at the United States at the end of the Civil War now, we would think of it as what we call an underdeveloped country. And the real question is how we got from there to here.

Susan Hartmann, Ohio State University: We need to understand how our economy grew to be

the biggest and most productive and prosperous in the world...

Michael McGerr, Indiana University: The way in which industrial capitalism has unfolded...

Julianne Malveaux, Economist and Author: How we decided to divide the pie, what kinds of decisions we made about capitalism, about distribution, about the rights of labor...

Michael Kazin, Georgetown University: Who had power in the society... economic power, political power, cultural power?

Lisa McGirr, Harvard University: And the way that power has been challenged by other social groups that have been more excluded from power...

Julian Bond, NAACP Board of Directors: How people of the past struggled to make things at least as good as they are today...

Eric Arnesen, University of Illinois at Chicago: Struggled to become included and in the process have changed the nation.

Steven Hahn, University of Pennsylvania: All of American society, white and black, different ethnic groups, different social classes, were going to have to struggle over what the meaning of freedom was.

Kevin Boyle, Ohio State University: That, in some ways, turns into a question about who gets to be defined as an American and who doesn't and who does the defining.

Ken Alfers, Mountain View College: Who are Americans? What does it mean to be an American?

Michael Bernstein, University of California at San Diego: I think a major theme is the evolution of America's relationship with the wider world.

H.W. Brands, University of Texas: How does the United States become this global power?

Judy Wu, Ohio State University: And how does that affect our sense of what it means to be an American?

Joan Hoff, Montana State University: Maybe one would want to look at our notion of our own exceptionalism.

David Levering Lewis, New York University: This idea that we are a special people who formed

ourselves on a city on a hill – it seems presumptuous. And yet there's much good in that notion of a people who are making history rather than being imprisoned in it.

Patricia Limerick, University of Colorado: I would like to have questions about why this matters, why historical understanding matters.

Bruce Schulman, Boston University: If we had to distill it to one thing, it's to remember the very vital presence of the past in contemporary American life – how it shapes the decisions we make and the options that present themselves to us. I think that's the central lesson we want to look at.

End of video.

One of the most significant outcomes of the Civil War was the triumph of northern industrial capitalism. During the late nineteenth century, the American people experienced what that meant as the nation underwent a remarkable transformation. Corporate America, with all of its promises and shortcomings, emerged to become the driving force in shaping an America that was quite different from that of pre-Civil War America but quite familiar to those of us living today.

Increasing numbers of people, including immigrants, moved off the land and went to work in the cities. Americans shared the joys of their daily lives and coped with their hardships. Minorities of all sorts found it particularly difficult to pursue the American Dream of rags-to-riches. Toward the end of the century, frustrations prompted both workers and farmers to challenge the power of the political and economic elites. Meanwhile, by the late 1890s, the industrial nation stretched its influence well beyond American boundaries. The nation and the world would never again be the same.

Video: America at the Crossroads

In American history, the principles of freedom and equality have a tense relationship. What did it mean to be an American in 1876 in terms of freedom, identity, and equality? What evidence do you see that these concepts continue to be contested today? These questions are explored as we begin our study of America after the Civil War.

Video script:

Music introduction

Actor, Abraham Lincoln: We here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that the nation, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Narrator: The end of the Civil War set the stage for a new era in American history.

Actors, Reading key phrases from the 14th and 15th Amendments: The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. No state shall deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

Narrator: The triumph of Northern industrial capitalism over the rural, agricultural South unleashed a period of unprecedented economic growth that would forever alter the way Americans lived and saw the world.

Nearly four million new citizens, formerly slaves, now struggled for a foothold in a society still largely closed to them. Meanwhile, an ever-increasing flood of immigrants exerted new pressures on a nation that both welcomed and excluded them.

“The Grand Experiment”, as some referred to American democracy, continued to challenge and enlarge Americans’ notions of freedom, equality, and identity.

David Gutierrez, UC San Diego: From the founding, pretty much, we had a huge population of very different people – different interests, different regional interests, different class interests, and obviously very deep divides based on race and national origin. So to talk about American identity, it’s much more accurate I think to talk about American identities, plural.

Patricia Limerick: The question of what American identity was in 1876, what America stood for, has very different answers depending on if you are an Indian person undergoing the conquest in the West, if you’re a Mexican-originating person whose status or family status, was changed to Mexican-American and resident of the United States in 1848, whether you are a freedman hoping for rights in, even hoping for land and economic opportunity and in only very rare cases getting that.

Alice Kessler-Harris, Columbia University: Of course regional identity exists in great measure.

The war is still a very painful memory for many people and the consequences of adjusting to the economic transformation that the war brought created enormous subjective differences among people in different parts of the United States.

Narrator: For Americans of all races and regions, freedom was a cherished ideal. But, freedom meant different things to different people.

Eric Foner, Columbia University: There are always more than one definition of freedom in existence at any time and competing with each other. In 1876, freedom had, because of the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, freedom had been exalted as the national...the key national principal of American life. And with freedom came this new conception of the rights of American citizenship and of a national government empowered to protect the rights of citizens over and above violations by the states.

At the same time a very different vision of freedom is growing in importance among many thinkers who argue that freedom really means that you let nature take its course and those who get ahead are the fittest and those who fall behind, that's their own fault.

Alice Kessler-Harris: The relationship between freedom and equality has always been one in which people have argued you have to give up a little of one to get the other. And, in some sense, that relationship has been a creative relationship, a relationship filled with creative tension.

Clayborne Carson, Stanford University: Freedom and equality sometimes work together and sometimes work at odd purposes. We think of freedom in some respects as equally shared but clearly it's not and the dominant groups in the society have a great deal more freedom. And one of the ways in which that expresses itself is a resistance to equality.

Eric Foner: If you think freedom means the right of people to act without outside constraint, well, that often produces lack of equality. And often people feel that if you want to promote equality you have to limit freedom. You have to limit the freedom of entrepreneurs to exploit their workers. You have to limit their freedom to simply despoil the environment. So there is a tension between freedom and equality.

End of video.

Activity: Timeline: 1877 to Present

The United States history timeline organizes topics in chronological order from 1877 to present day. It provides quick and easy access to events, people, and places that relate to the time period you are studying.

Interactive Activity: Timeline – 1877 to Present

Organizes and highlights important events in chronological order from 1859 to the present. Focuses on historic events, people, and places in the history of the United States from the mid-nineteenth century to modern day, beginning with the discovery of oil by Edwin "Colonel" Drake in 1859 and concluding with the lifting of the military ban of women serving in combat positions in 2013. Chronicles events from the drafting of the Civil Rights Act to the election of the first African American president. Describes the continuing struggle of ethnic groups and women for equal rights. Covers a wide range of technological innovations, from the invention of the automobile to rockets that allowed man to walk on the moon. During this period, the United States also engaged in several international wars and conflicts. Events in the timeline highlight how these moments in the nation's history further shaped modern-day America.

Additional Resources

Websites

[Touring Turn-of-the-Century America](http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/det/)

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This collection of photographs includes over 25,000 glass negatives and transparencies as well as about 300 color photolithograph prints, mostly of the eastern United States, from 1850–1920.