

The Issues of 1912

From the close of the Civil War to 1912, presidential elections had followed each other with monotonous regularity, with colorless candidates, and with a minimum of party warfare. For a half century government and politics played only a secondary role in American life, while the growth of industry and finance held the center of the stage, and Wall Street, not Washington, determined the health of the American economy. Great fortunes were made and lost on that fabulous street, where men dealt in bits of paper representing coal, iron, steel, grain, miles of railroads, or — in later years — oil. A handful of men often held the destinies of worker and farmer in their hands; this same handful also manipulated the strings which determined the legislation — or lack of it — of the American government.

All this had not come about without protest, however. From time to time men demanded of the government that it assert itself, that it place the rights of the people above those of property. Financial panics — especially in 1873 and 1893 — increased these pleas for reform. Grangers and Anti-Monopolists in the seventies, Greenbackers and Alliance men in the eighties, and Populists in

the nineties were all asking for basically the same thing. Twice these reform movements had reached national proportions and a national presidential ticket: in 1880 with the Greenbackers and in 1892 with the Populists. And on both these occasions an Iowan — James B. Weaver — was the candidate of the third party of reform.

In the early twentieth century these political and intellectual stirrings culminated in the rise of a new movement — Progressivism. So strong was this movement that its followers in Congress came to be known as "Insurgents," as opposed to their opponents — the let-well-enough-alone "Stand-patters." Theodore Roosevelt's two terms as president coincided with this groundswell of reform, and his name became associated in the minds of the people with the popular Progressive movement. His war on the "trusts" won him a devoted following among the people, who feared the growing power of great business combinations; his colorful personality brought excitement to the White House, too long occupied by figureheads. He may have been "that damned cowboy" to political boss Mark Hanna; but to the American people he was "TR" or "Teddy," and they loved him.

Meanwhile, young men appeared on the national and local political stages who attacked the old ways, who pushed through needed reforms, and who fought for government action in the interest of the people, in contrast to government sub-

servience to the privileged few. Iowa Senators Albert Baird Cummins, James P. Dolliver, and William S. Kenyon were in the forefront of the Progressive movement. Their names stood high in the roster of Insurgents, along with those of Robert M. La Follette of Wisconsin, William E. Borah of Idaho, George W. Norris of Nebraska, Albert E. Beveridge of Indiana, Hiram Johnson of California, Woodrow Wilson of New Jersey, and many others. For the first time Progressivism found expression in new legislation or in enforcement of old laws, and Washington began to regain its place as the center of American life.

When Roosevelt retired from political office in 1908, he left things in the good hands of William Howard Taft — or so he thought. But no sooner had Teddy's famous "Big Stick" been removed than the portly Taft succumbed to the influence of the Standpatters, led by Speaker Joseph Cannon and Senator Nelson W. Aldrich. In 1909 Congress, against the violent protest of the Progressives, passed the notorious Payne-Aldrich Tariff, whose authors interpreted the Republican platform's promise of tariff "revision" to mean tariff "increase." To the conservatives, the voice of the lobbyist spoke louder than that of the consumer who could see little advantage in paying high prices for the "protection" of the giant United States Steel trust, among others. Cummins and the other Insurgents, defeated in their battle

against privilege, went home to arouse the voters. But things went from bad to worse, in the light of Insurgent policies. In Congress "Uncle Joe" Cannon ruled with an iron hand, permitting only such legislation as he wished to come before the House of Representatives. Aroused at last, a coalition of Insurgents and Democrats finally took over the reins and stripped most of the powers from the Speaker of the House, and on election day in 1910 the voters spoke: for the first time in sixteen years Congress had a Democratic majority.

Democrats, however, were not Progressive enough to suit the Republican Insurgents, who felt that Democratic Progressivism did not go beyond reduction of the tariff. Thus, in order to give a stronger voice to the Progressive movement, the Insurgents, in December, 1910, formed the National Progressive Republican League under the leadership of Robert La Follette. "Insurgency had come of age." La Follette was an avowed candidate for the Republican presidential nomination in 1912, a nomination which would traditionally go to the incumbent, if he wished it. Having failed to control Congress by "minority bloc tactics," the Progressives now laid plans to capture the Republican party organization itself, over the protest and opposition of the Standpatters and their candidate, Taft. Thus was laid the groundwork for the breakup of the Republican party.

This breakup was further insured when Roosevelt, but recently returned from lion-hunting in Africa, seized the leadership of the Progressive movement from La Follette, its real founder, and set himself to do battle with his former friend, Taft.

As 1912 dawned, both major parties were set for the first real struggle in American politics since 1860. Nothing was cut-and-dried as in the past, and strong men fought desperately for control. Underlying the whole struggle was the issue of Progressivism, which was basically as old as the United States. According to one historian of the movement, Progressivism had three "tendencies" — the removal of minority influence in government; the demand that the many, rather than the few, control that government; and, lastly, an increase in the powers of government to enable the administration to relieve social and economic injustice and distress. Succinctly, the real core of Progressivism was, thus, "whether government was to be administered in the interest of privilege or of the people"; whether or not it was to be, in the words of Lincoln, a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people." Every issue of 1912 — government control of monopolies, the right to regulate railroads, a more equitable tariff structure, the initiative and referendum, the recall of judges — all these found a place in the Progressive philosophy. It was a demand for more, rather than less, democracy; a demand

which had begun in the days of Sam Adams and Thomas Jefferson, was heard again in the days of Jackson, of Lincoln, of the third party revolts in the late nineteenth century, and in 1912 under the banner of Theodore Roosevelt.

The party battle was lost in 1912, when Roosevelt went down to defeat; but the Progressive movement itself won in the election of Woodrow Wilson.

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