Progressive Presidents: Crash Course US History #29

Crash Course: U.S. History
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=====Introduction=====

Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course U.S. History and today we're going to finish our discussion of progressivism and indulge in a bit of Great Man history.

Mr. Green, Mr. Green! Great Man history, huh? Well, I was born on a sunny summer morning in 197-

Yeah, you're not that great me from the past. Also, you're a boy not a man, and the only historically significant thing you ever participated in was a brilliant senior prank that wasn't even your idea. However, 39 of our 43 presidents were at least arguably great men and today we'll be talking about 3 of them. It will be kind of like a Jefferson versus Hamilton for the 20th century--except not like that at all. But there will be a canal and two people get shot!

[Intro]

=====Nationalism=====

So as we saw in Crash Course World History, national governments were on the rise from the middle of the 19th century until, basically, now. And in the U.S., corporations became national and then by the 20th century, international, like the British East India Company was kind of an international corporation, but it wasn't the same as Coca Cola, although they did both deal in narcotics! And this mania for nationalization even affected sports, like in baseball the "National" League and the "American" League were formed and in the 1903 they played the first inaccurately named "World Series." I'm sorry, was Botswana invited? Then it's not a World series.

Anyway, the rise of a strong national government was seen as an alternative to peoples' lives being controlled by provincial city and state governments or by ever growing corporations. Like Herbert Croly, editor of the *New Republic*, thought that to achieve the Jeffersonian, democratic, self-determination, ideal of individual freedom, the country needed to employ Hamiltonian government intervention in the economy, and he wasn't the only one who believed that.

=====Theodore Roosevelt and Progressivism=====

OK, so in 1901, 42 year old Theodore Roosevelt became the youngest American president ever after William McKinley was assassinated by Leon Czolgosz. [John struggles with pronunciation.] His name was Leon Chuckles?.. Man, Leon Chuckles was a real barrel of laughs for an anarchist; usually they're very serious.

Right, so Leon Chuckles paved the way for Teddy Roosevelt, who in many ways was the model of the 20th century president. He was very engaged in both domestic and foreign policy, and he set the political agenda for the whole country. His political program, the Square Deal, aimed to distinguish good corporations--that provided useful products and services at fair prices--from evil corporations--that existed just to make money. That is hilarious, a corporation that doesn't exist just to make money! That's fantastic, Teddy. Everybody knows that corporations are just inherently greedy people, but they are people.

Roosevelt felt it was the federal governments responsibility to regulate the economy directly and to break up power of wealthy corporations. And he used the Sherman Act to prosecute bad trusts, such as the Northern Securities Company which was a holding company created by J.P. Morgan that directed three major railroads and monopolized transport. And that did not make J.P. Morgan a happy bunny. Thank you for that, Stan, that-that's wonderful.

Shockingly, the legislative and executive branches managed to work together and Congress passed some actual legislation, including the Hepburn Act of 1906 which gave the Interstate Commerce Commission the power to regulate railroad rates and examine their company books. And Roosevelt was also a conservationist. He wanted to preserve the environment from economic exploitation, probably so that there would be plenty of animals for him to hunt with his big stick, while he walked softly. Having appointed noted progressive Gifford Pinchot, head of the Forest Service, millions of acres were set aside for new, highly managed, national parks reflecting the progressive idea that experts could manage the world.

=====William Howard Taft and Trustbusting=====

But then in 1908, Teddy Roosevelt decided to go elephant hunting instead of running for re-election and he picked William Howard Taft to be his successor. But the man who became our largest president massively disappointed Roosevelt. When I say our largest, by the way, I don't mean our greatest, I mean our largest. Taft was a pretty hardcore trust-buster who ordered the prosecution that broke up Standard Oil in 1911, but he didn't see big business as bad, unless the corporation stifled competition.

He also supported the 16th amendment allowing congress to pass an income tax, and that paved the way for the 18th amendment, Prohibition, because with an income tax the federal government didn't have to rely on liquor excise taxes. So why didn't Roosevelt like Taft? Well, not only was Taft more conservative than most Progressives, he also fired Pinchot in 1910 and Roosevelt was so frustrated with Taft that he actually challenged the incumbent President for the Republican nomination in 1912. Which Roosevelt lost, but he didn't let it drop. He founded his own progressive party, called the "Bull Moose Party" so that he could run again. So the election of 1912 featured four candidates: Taft, Teddy Roosevelt for the Bull Moose Party, Eugene Debs for the Socialist Party, and Democrat Woodrow Wilson. It's worth noting that in contemporary American political discourse, all four of these people would have been seen as somewhere between crazy Liberals and actual Communists.

=====Election of 1912=====

So, Eugene Debs--from right here in my home state of Indiana--did not support the Socialist Party's goal of abolishing capitalism, but he ran on a platform that included public ownership of railroads and banks and laws limiting work hours. And, running on the Socialist ticket, Debs won 6% of the vote which was, to quote another President, "not bad." But the election of 1912 turned out to be a contest between Wilson and Roosevelt's competing views over the dangers of increasing government power and economic concentration. Wilson claimed "Freedom today is something more than being let alone. the program of government must in these days be positive, not negative merely." That's just not good grammar, sir. His program, called New Freedom, was supposed to reinvigorate democracy by restoring market competition and preventing big business from dominating government. It included stronger antitrust laws and policies to encourage small businesses. Roosevelt's answer to New Freedom was a program he called New Nationalism, because of course, in election years, all things are

new. Roosevelt recognized the inevitability of big business and hoped to use government intervention to stop its abuses. New Nationalism included heavy taxes on personal and corporate fortunes and greater federal regulation of industry.

So the Bull Moose Party platform was in some ways a vision of a modern welfare state, it called for women's suffrage, federal regulation, national labor and health legislation for women and children, 8 hour days and living wage for all workers, national systems of social insurance for health, unemployment and old age, what are we Canada?! God, I wish we were Canada. You weren't recording that, were you Stan?

Roosevelt thought his party's platform was one of the most important documents in the history of mankind and Americans agreed, they supported him and elected him in a landslide - oh, wait, no they didn't. Instead, he lost, and also, a guy shot him at one of his campaign stops. That's shooting number two, Roosevelt however survived and even went on to make the speech after being shot. What happened in the election is that Taft and Roosevelt split the Republican vote, leaving Woodrow Wilson president with a mere 42% of the popular vote, giving us our only democratic president between 1896 and 1932.

=====Mystery Document=====

Oh, it's time for the Mystery Document? The rules here are simple. I guess the author of the Mystery Document, if I'm wrong I get shocked by the shock pen, which many of you insist is fictional, but I promise, it's not.

"The two things we are fighting against, namely, excessive tariffs and almost universal monopoly, are the very things that these two branches of the Republican party both decline to combat. (...) They intend to accept these evils, and stagger along under the burden of excessive tariffs and intolerable monopolies as best they can through administrative commissions. I say, therefore, that it is inconceivable that the people of the United States, whose instinct is against special privilege and whose deepest convictions are against monopoly, should turn to either of these parties for relief when these parries do not so much as pretend to offer them relief."

Alright, it's definitely about the 1912 election, talks about the Republican party being split into two parts so it's by a democrat or a socialist but probably a democrat judging from the Mystery Document itself... You always make it hard, Stan, so it's not going to be Woodrow Wilson because that would be obvious but I do not know the names of any other prominent democrats so I am going to guess Woodrow Wilson. Yes?!?! Get in!!

=====Woodrow Wilson and New Freedom=====

So with its stirring anti-tariff, anti-monopoly, do not pass go, do not collect 200 dollars stance, New Freedom won out, and because the democrats also controlled Congress, Wilson was able to implement this program. The Underwood Tariff reduced import duties and after the ratification of the 16th Amendment, Congress imposed a graduated income tax on the richest 5% of Americans. Other legislation included the Clayton Act of 1914, which exempted unions from anti-trust laws and made it easier for them to strike, the Keating-Owen Act, which outlawed child labor in manufacturing and the Adamson Act, which mandated an eight hour work day for railroad workers.

If Wilson's New Freedom sounds a lot like Roosevelt's New Nationalism that's because they ended up being pretty similar. Wilson engaged in less trust busting than expected and more regulation of the economy. Wilson didn't institute a national system of health and unemployment insurance, but he did expand the powers of the Federal Trade Commission to investigate and prohibit unfair monopolistic practices. He also supported the founding of the Federal Reserve System in 1913, which gave the government much more control over banks in response to the Panic of 1907, where the U.S. had to be bailed out by J. P. Morgan. Fear not, big banks, the government will bail you out in due time.

=====Progressivism Internationally=====

So under Roosevelt and Wilson and, to a lesser extent, Taft, Progressivism flourished domestically. But it also became an international phenomenon, as Presidents expanded national government power outside the country's border, mostly in the Western Hemisphere. Like, between 1901 and 1920, U.S. marines landed in Caribbean countries over 20 times, usually to create a more friendly environment for American businesses, but sometimes just to hang out on the beach.

And this points to an interesting contradiction. Progressive presidents were very concerned about big business as a threat to freedom in the United States, but in Latin America and the Caribbean, they weren't that concerned about freedom at all. Teddy Roosevelt especially was much more active in international diplomacy than his predecessors. He was the first president to win the Nobel Peace Prize, for instance, for helping to negotiate the Treaty of Port Smith that ended the Russo-Japanese War in 1905. You may be familiar with his motto, "Speak softly and carry a big stick," which essentially meant the U.S. will intervene in Latin America whenever we want. And probably the most famous such intervention was the building of the Panama Canal. It featured feats of engineering and succeeding where the French had failed. Stan, these are my favorite things! Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

=====Thought Bubble: Panama Canal=====

The way we got the 10-mile wide canal zone wasn't so awesome. In 1903, Panama was part of Columbia, but the U.S. encouraged Philippe Bunau-Varilla to lead an uprising. Banau-Varilla, a representative of the Panama Canal company was so grateful after the U.S. sent gunboat to ensure that the Columbian army couldn't stop him, that he signed a treaty, giving the U.S. the right to build and operate the canal, and sovereignty over newly independent Panama's canal zone, which we gave up in 2000 after enjoying nearly 100 years of sovereignty thanks to Jimmy Carter's stupid altruism.

Roosevelt also added the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, the 1823 statement that the U.S. would defend independent Latin American states from European intervention. Now, according to Roosevelt, we would wield our big stick like a policeman waving around a night stick exercising an international police power over the western hemisphere. In practice, this meant using American troops to ensure that Latin American countries were stable enough for Americans to invest there, like in 1904 we seized the customs house in the Dominican Republic to make sure that they paid their debts to investors, then by executive agreement, American banks got control of the D.R.'s finances. Roosevelt also encouraged investment by the United Fruit Company in Honduras and Costa Rica, helping to turn those nations into banana republics. No, not the store Thought Bubble, yes.

Taft on the other hand, maybe because of his experiences as governor of the Philippines, was less eager to wave Americas big stick. He emphasized loans and economic investment as the best way to spread American influence as a policy that came to be known as Dollar Diplomacy. Ultimately Dollar Diplomacy was probably more effective, but it seemed weak to many people, in contrast to Roosevelt's strategy of "Send all the troops right now!!!

=====Wilson and Isolationism=====

Thanks Thought Bubble, I wore my Banana Republic shirt just for this occasion! So we've discussed Roosevelt and Taft's foreign policy, let's move on to Wilson, who was of course an isolationist. No, Woodrow Wilson, okay. Woodrow Wilson was not a volleyball, he was the son of a Presbyterian minister, a former American history professor, and once had been governor of New Jersey. So he understood moral indecency. Wilson thought the best way to teach other countries about the greatness of America was to export colossal amounts of American products, like in 1916, he instructed a group of businessmen "Sell goods that will make the world more comfortable and happy and convert them to the principles of America. In short, Woodrow Wilson believed correctly that the essence of democracy is the freedom to choose among hundreds of brightly colored breakfast cereals.

Still, Wilson intervened in Latin America more than any other U.S. president, and his greatest moral triumph was in Mexico, where he wanted to teach the Mexicans quote "to elect good men." To do this, Wilson sent troops to stop weapons from flowing to the military dictator Victoriano Huerta, but the Americans who landed in Vera Cruz were not welcomed with open arms and 100 Mexicans and 19 Americans were killed. And then in 1916 having learned his lesson, just kidding, Wilson sent 10,000 troops into Northern Mexico to chase after revolutionary bandit Pancho Villa. Villa had killed 17 Americans in New Mexico and everyone knows that the proper response to criminal act is to send 10,000 troops into a foreign country. Pershing's expedition was a smashing success fortunately, uh, except that he actually did not capture Pancho Villa...

But all of that was a prelude to Wilson's leading America to our first international moral crusade, our involvement in the great war.

=====Conclusion=====

So this period of American history is important because Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson oversaw the expansion of the power of the Federal government both at home and abroad; and in doing so, they became the first modern American presidents. I mean these days we might talk about small government and large government but really, we're always talking about large government. Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson recognized that the national government was going to have to deal with big business and that it would have to get big to do that, and also that it had a role to play in ensuring that Americans would retain some freedom in this new industrial era. And they also built Neo-Imperialistic foreign policy around the idea that the safer the world was for American business, the better it was for Americans. as our old friend Eric Foner wrote, "the presidents who spoke the most about freedom were likely to intervene most frequently in the affairs of other countries." Sometimes for good and sometimes for ill. We'll see an extreme and ambiguous case of that next week when we look at America in World War I. Thanks for watching, I'll see you then.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, our script supervisor is Meredith Danko, the associate producer is Danica Johnson, our show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer, Rosianna Rojas, and myself, and our graphics team, is Thought Cafe. Every week there's a new caption for the libertage, if you would like to suggest one you can do so in comments, where you can also ask questions about today's video that will be answered by our team of historians. Thanks for watching Crash Course, and as we say in my hometown, Don't Forget To Be Awesome.