The economic growth from 1865 to 1900 raised the standards of living for lower-class working families, but some negative side effects of industrialization and urbanization remained. The ‘Progressives’ wondered if government could solve social problems. Until then, society and culture developed without government control, and tried to find solutions. The Progressives wanted the government to intervene in all areas of private life to fix problems, rather than letting individuals, families, neighborhoods, clubs, teams, religions, and all the other natural groups of human society address problems.

Progressives had faith in science and technology. Instead of freely electing representatives, each citizen having an equal vote, the Progressives wanted experts to make decisions, and overrule the decisions of ordinary people. Progressives also used the media. Instead of attempting to report objectively about problems, Progressive journalists, called “Muckrakers,” reported subjectively, and advocated for particular proposed solutions to problems, rather than letting the readers come to their own conclusions about the problems and about how to fix them.

Part of Progressivism was the “Temperance” movement. This group worked to end the consumption of alcohol. While excess drinking causes problems, moderate drinking is healthy. The Temperance movement did not foresee the negative effects of its action. When the prohibition of alcohol became law in 1919, the result was the development of massive crime organizations, headed by “mob” leaders like Al Capone. These criminal networks smuggled alcohol illegally into the country, as well as manufacturing their own in secret factories. They were violent: they used machine guns, both against the police, and against competing criminal groups. Some of the illegally manufactured alcohol was made incorrectly, was poisonous, and killed people who merely wanted a drink. Progressivism’s desire to “fix” society’s problems ignited a crime wave and caused many deaths.

Another aspect of Progressivism was racism. In October 1901, President Theodore Roosevelt invited Booker T. Washington to have supper at the White House. Woodrow Wilson, a Progressive leader, harshly criticized Roosevelt for inviting an African-American into the White House, even using hateful and inappropriate
racial epithets. In March 1913, Wilson became president. He segregated federal agencies like the Post Office, which had previously been desegregated and integrated. Woodrow Wilson undid the advancements which had been made in the field of civil rights.

Progressivism also intensified bigotry. The U.S. had already experienced a wave of anti-Catholic prejudice after the Civil War. The Progressive movement created a second wave. It also created an anti-Jewish sentiment. Leo Frank, a Jewish factor manager, was unjustly accused of murder and was lynched in 1913. To oppose Progressivism and protect Jewish Americans, the Anti-Defamation League was started in the same year. In 1917, as a Progressivist leader, Woodrow Wilson supported anti-Catholic laws, which denied basic civil rights to Catholics, in a new constitution for Mexico. Wilson also argued that Catholics were not good citizens in the United States.

In this context, the word ‘progressive’ meant that the government would take progressively more and more control over the private life of individual people, and take more and more of their money in the form of taxes. In 1913, the Progressivists added the 16th amendment to the U.S. Constitution, imposing a large burden on Americans: a direct income tax. Previous taxes were mainly on imports.

Although Wilson indicated that the United States had no vital national interest in World War I, he nonetheless persuaded the country to enter the European conflict in April 1917. He then proceeded to use his wartime emergency powers to harshly limit the freedom of speech and of the press. He used force to minimize any critical discussion or debate about his wartime policies. Progressivism sees war as an opportunity for government to further regulate individual expression. Wilson brought America into WW1 so that he could wield more power unchecked.

Women in the United States had begun voting in 1869 in Wyoming. Over the next several years, state after state invited women to vote. The majority of women in the U.S. were voting by 1920, but in that year, the 19th amendment was approved, which stated that women had the right to vote. The amendment changed almost nothing, because women were voting already anyway, but it allowed the Progressivists to pretend that they had somehow helped women.

By 1920, voters were tired of Progressivism, and voted for candidates like President Warren G. Harding who would guide the country back to “normalcy.”