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The time before the Gilded Age in the United States was characterized by the Civil War and efforts of reconstruction to rebuild the country following the war. The Civil War served as a transition stage for America as they had left behind their massive institution of slavery; the United States was left to redefine themselves with global eyes watching their every move. The United States main challenge in reconstruction was to construct a new economy for the New South that would allow them to compete economically on a global scale. This need for change ushered in the Gilded Age which was characterized mainly by great economic growth that in turn had major ramifications on other aspects of America. Some historians argue this new era of big business had little impact on the economy and politics and the responses of Americans to these changes, however the increase in power of these corporations allowed the rise of unethical economics, biased political agendas, and greatly affected the laborer and consumer society. Big business had major impacts on the economy and politics and the responses of Americans to these changes in America between 1870-1900.

As America was transitioning into a much more manufacturing centered economy, unethical economic practices also arose as a result. These ruthless practices mainly came about from the powerful business moguls and monopolies that an unchecked corporation centered country allowed to exist. For instance, George Rice was put out of business because monopolies like Standard Oil were in alliance with the railroads that shipped their oil. Through their unethical business practices, Standard Oil was able to demolish any and all of their competition by selling the same quality oil at lower prices due to rebates that the railroads provided them on the cost of shipping (Document H). This testimony of someone’s life business being absolutely destroyed with no remorse by John D. Rockefeller illustrates how corporations being able to grow to such size and influence to the point of a monopoly had major ramifications on America’s economy during the Gilded Age. America’s economy was no longer held to the weather that produced their crops; now she was tied to the pity of the business monopolies that she created.

Another example of how big businesses greatly impacted America’s economy in respect to the rise of immoral business practices was the utilization of tactics such as horizontal and vertical integration. Horizontal integration was the practice of a company buying up all its competition and therefore they did not have to worry about costs and prices, which became a real problem for consumers because there were no other options to buy the product at a different price. Vertical integration was the act of making all of a company’s supplies in house and therefore able to cut out any middleman prices, which meant the owner could lower his product’s prices and use that as a weapon against any competition. Both of these tactics were born out of the immense growth of corporations and completely changed the way the economy ran and was dominated at this time in America.

Not only did the massive growth of big businesses have major ramifications on the economy, it also led to an increase in biased political agendas. For instance, oversized trusts and monopolists had massive amounts of influence in Senate decisions and essentially blocked off all public influence (Document D). No wonder the government allowed these monopolies to continue running unethically; the government was being run by them! The overarching presence of big trusts in the Senate displays just how much power they held in the government and the degree to which they were able to completely sway a decision to benefit their huge industries. To further emphasize, McNiel states how railroad presidents held the government in their hands. During the Gilded Age, railroad presidents could postpone lawsuits, control legislative bodies, and were much like kings who ruled America at the time (Document B). The power that these corporations held over the government, their employees, and consumers at the time exemplifies how they so easily were able to sway the government to make decisions that would be best for their industry. Whether they did it by bribing a government member or packing the Senate, these businesses got what they wanted in the political arena which had major impacts on America’s politics during the Gilded Age.

The rise of colossal manufacturing industries also significantly impacted society at the time, specifically in respect to the workers and consumers. For example, Wells illustrates how once these corporations built up they only needed the employees to perform one task as their work. The sheer nature of these corporations made laborers feel as if part of a military regime and has taken away any individualism associated with one’s own work (Document C). This shock to the lifestyle of the laboring class of America caused laborers to decrease their pride in their work which changed American society in large. Their lack of skill set needed to do these jobs also made the workers easily replaceable, which significantly changed the way society worked and perceived the jobs at this time. Dreiser also emphasizes how this era changed the consumer society as he illustrates how department store displays were very intriguing and seemed to have a significant effect on shoppers (Document I). This shows how consumers began to buy things that they wanted rather than solely what they needed. It also conveys how the glamour of department stores, luxuries, and urban cities drew ordinary people from all around, specifically the rural populations from the South and West. The emergence of these big businesses had major impacts on both industry laborers and the consumer society in America during the Gilded Age.

Another way the growth of these massive corporations impacted American society at the time was through their reaction to unethical working conditions. Big companies often provided its workers with absolutely horrible working conditions, so the people rose up and fought against it in the form of labor unions. Labor unions used tactics such as strikes, collective bargaining, and protests in attempts to persuade their company to give more reasonable working conditions such as less hours, higher wages, and safer facilities. Because the worker’s skill was so easily replaced, companies could simply ignore the protest and hire someone new. However, collective bargaining was designed to avoid just that as the laborers would all get together at once to make it a bigger inconvenience and less likely for the company to be able to replace all the workers. These labor union efforts showed just how impacted the working class felt by the growth of powerful corporations and how they were compelled to respond to the changes.

During the Gilded Age the government was clearly ineffective due to the influence of money-hungry monopolies. Because of the size and power of these monopolies, America’s people experienced a massive economic gap between the wealthy elite and the working class. The working class was made up of many minorities such as immigrants, women, and African Americans; they all experienced exclusion because of their economic class, gender, and race. However, people began to take more notice and felt led to make a change. This brought in the era of populists and progressives who wanted to bring social justice to America after the Gilded Age. They came to the realization that previous attempts to bring relief would only go so far as to fix such a large social crisis; they needed the government to engage in their efforts if they were actually going to make a substantial impact. Progressives demanded that the government abandon its previous philosophy of laissez faire and pushed for the government to actually start doing its job beginning with reform. So began the strife against these horrible social treatments.