Conclusion

An Imperfect World

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.
—MARTIN LUTHER KING, 1963

MARTIN LUTHER KING wrote these words while sitting in jail in Birmingham, Alabama almost 100 years after the end of slavery. His call for universal justice and for direct action to overturn racism, as well as his expressed belief in democracy, could have been written during the Progressive Era. If racial segregation and discrimination still existed in 1963, as well as many other injustices that the progressives had fought to eliminate, how do we evaluate the Progressive Era? Was it a success or a failure? Did it end or was it just a beginning?

To begin this book in the 1890s and close it in the 1920s is to a great extent an arbitrary decision. No single event began progressivism, as no event ended it. Even designating these dates as an era, and labeling it as such, suggests a temporally limited historical period. Historians do always like to have beginning and ending dates, however, and without them a book would never finish. This book has aimed at exploring how across these four decades certain groups and their ideas came into public discussion and how by implementing them into public policy they reformed the social, political, and economic institutions of the United States in ways that were obvious by the mid-1920s. It has explored how these ideas were translated into actions, and which progressive reform proposals succeeded and others failed.

To answer one obvious question, yes, America was reformed in this time period. Federal government was strengthened and the presidency began to accumulate more power to determine the country's political and economic course. Citizenship was increasingly defined as national citizenship. Laissez faire liberal ideals of government, economics, and society gave way to a belief that democratic society had to work for everyone in it. Most Americans accepted that it was the government's job to help regulate the economy and to provide at least a modicum of protections for all people.

Progressive reforms resulted in no one group in the country any longer being allowed to control the destiny of everyone else. They put significant brakes on rapacious capitalism and its exploitation of the country's natural resources. Citizens adopted an activist and positive stance toward government. Special-interest lobbying gave progressive groups entree into the political system that they would otherwise not have had, and that structure characterizes American politics today. Some of those groups, such as the NCL, the GFWC, the NAACP, and the National Civic Federation, still exist and the contemporary urban landscape is prolific with city clubs and civic associations, housing associations, and neighborhood groups, many of which survive from the Progressive Era.

Progressivism also made Americans aware that they were connected to one another and that they had to accept at least a modicum of social responsibility for other people. Individualism was thereafter balanced against a sense of social responsibility in public discourse and in policy-making.

Progressivism also thrust the United States into the world. The sense of internationalism promoted by groups of progressives meant that, even when they objected to many foreign-policy initiatives, Americans had at least been forced out of isolation and into seeing that they were connected. The women's international peace movement, the Pan-African movement, and international workers organizations became part of the global political landscape in which Americans participated.

Yet, progressivism only went so far in reforming the country. Significant social problems were left unresolved. It took the massive depression begun in 1929 to push government and the American people to accept more government responsibility for social welfare. Only then did some progressive measures such as old-age pensions, no child labor, and minimum wage and maximum hours laws become reality. Without these issues having been raised earlier, however, and without the women of the Children's and Women's Bureaus, the progress of the New Deal would have been undoubtedly different. Even when such social protections were enacted, they never went nearly as far as the social justice progressives had wanted. And private enterprise continued to resist government intrusion too far into welfare issues such as housing.

One of progressivism's most conspicuous failures was in not resolving the problem of racism in American society. In some measure, progressives would have faced formidable structural obstacles to attempt this. States' rights arguments, and the Supreme Court's upholding of these rights, made it virtually impossible to attack legalized segregation and discrimination. But it is also true that most white progressives failed black Americans by not mounting a strong challenge to legalized segregation and not demanding their social and economic integration into society. Most progressives simply could not get past their own racism. They rejected theories of innate racial inferiority, but took comfort in believing that equality would happen eventually, once African Americans were better prepared for the responsibilities of citizenship. Many progressives were also unable, or unwilling, to fight strenuously to bring all people of color into equal citizenship or to confront an imperialistic foreign policy based on ideas of racial superiority.

Progressives were also unable to counter other trends in American society. They could not stop immigration restriction nor reactionary antiprogressive

movements such as 100 percent Americanism. Many Americans willingly accepted government regulation and some measure of social welfare, but they remained convinced that there were specific characteristics that defined who was an American. These were long-held ideas in the United States that many people were unwilling to surrender.

World War I probably harmed the course of a progressive movement more than anything else. Once the United States entered war, the idea of loyalty produced the corresponding reaction of dissent and repression. Progressives were caught in the middle. The best they believed they could hope for was that by remaining loyal to their country, even if they remained unconvinced about the righteousness of the war, international progressivism would result. Their hopes were dashed and repression of civil liberties remained a constant problem in the aftermath.

Progressives never set out to change the structure of American society. They were not revolutionaries but reformers and regulators. They did not object to capitalism per se as an economic system; they objected to how it was practiced and how it harmed large segments of American society. They also objected to the undemocratic idea that one or two groups could determine the fate of everyone else and they decried the political corruption that accompanied this process. The vast majority of Americans had agreed with them that change was needed. The enormity of change that would have been needed to create the socially just democratic society that many progressives wanted would have daunted even the most committed reformer. The fact is, the majority of Americans seemed satisfied by the 1920s that economic regulation had sufficiently reformed society to make it work better for more, if not all, Americans. They were willing to accept a certain level of injustice, most especially when they did not feel it touching themselves. They also remained convinced that the United States was the best democracy in the world and rejected any ongoing criticism of it.

As this book depicts, progressivism as both idea and ideal did not stop in the 1920s. The concept of social justice in a democratic society is still being debated. Although the majority of Americans agree that social justice should be part of democracy, not all Americans agree that it is the job of government to provide for it. The ideal of individualism has never faded from American society, so that some Americans remain suspicious that social welfare means "handouts" to the undeserving who have not tried hard enough to make it on their own. The debate continues as to whether the economic structure and prejudice against certain groups is the cause of poverty, homelessness, unemployment, etc., or whether it is individual failure to take advantage of the opportunities offered by capitalism. The early twenty-first century debate over whether to privatize social security is rooted in the idea that capitalism and private enterprise, not government, is the best means to provide for old-age security. The United States remains the only industrialized country without a national health care system.

But, the argument goes beyond that of how best to secure pensions or health care. It returns Americans to the disagreements of the Progressive Era over individualism versus social responsibility. That is the argument that the social justice progressives never quite won. They never successfully convinced

Americans that social responsibility had to come before individual needs in order to create a good democratic society. Since the Progressive Era, the United States has vacillated between periods that emphasize social responsibility and those that emphasize individualism.

The Progressive Era also inextricably linked democracy and capitalism in the minds of most Americans, although not all progressives intended that as an outcome of their internationalism. Since the Progressive Era all foreign-policy developments have been undertaken with those two ideas as one inseparable concept. When Colin Powell appeared before the U.S. Senate on January 17, 2001, for hearings on his nomination as secretary of state his opening remarks suggested just that. Among his declarations were the following statements: "I have seen more and more nations moving on to the path of democracy and the free enterprise system." "Democracy and free markets work, and the world knows it." In the United States, the ideas of social democracy or industrial democracy never gained a foothold as they did all across western Europe.

Finally, the Progressive Era did settle the question that citizenship was national, not local. By making citizenship national, the progressives opened the door for the federal government to make laws guaranteeing and protecting equal rights of citizenship. On the other hand, the debates over citizenship also produced the equation of American with certain ways of thinking and acting. The concept of "un-American" thinking, speech, and behavior entered into the national consciousness. It even appeared in government as the U.S. House of Representatives formed a House Committee on UnAmerican Activities (HUAC) in 1938, which was not disbanded until the 1970s.

Progressivism did not create a perfect world. Some of its results can seem dubious at best in terms of whether they were progress. But progressives believed that people possessed the intelligence and the will to continue to fashion a good democratic society. Despite its shortcomings, progressivism made the United States by the mid-1920s a far more orderly, well-regulated, and fairer society than it had been in the 1890s.