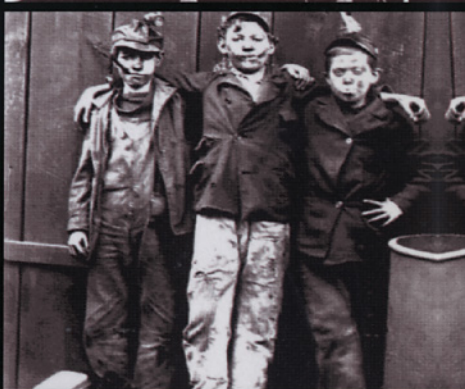


AMERICA IN 1900



NOEL JACOB KENT

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NOEL JACOB KENT

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For Chelsea and Daniel

And in memory of my father,
Alexander Kent

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Introduction

This study is a looking glass into the United States circa 1900. It is concerned with understanding the nation's trajectory as the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth, the lives that different kinds of Americans were living, and how various perspectives and myths helped them to interpret and cope with the changes they were experiencing.

These changes were profound, indeed. What was locking into place, as the English historian Geoffrey Barraclough has written in *An Introduction to Contemporary History* (Pelican, N.Y., p. 16), were "the basic structural changes which have shaped the modern world." In the United States, a series of overlapping revolutions in business, technology, and communications and the movement of people out of rural areas to cities were altering the country's physical and psychological landscapes. The way Americans worked and played was being transformed. Convinced as they were that theirs was the country of the future, Americans still remained divided about what that future might look like and how to reach it. Massive labor unrest sparked by growing social inequalities and an epidemic of racial violence in both the North and South exposed some of the nation's faultlines. Doubts were appearing (even among those welcoming the United States' new role as a world power) about the wisdom of soldiers in blue fighting a protracted war in the remote Philippines.

This work is also about making connections between then and now, of utilizing the years around 1900 as a mirror for reflecting upon our own time. This might seem a curious venture. After all, looking back from 2000, the United States of a century ago seems enormously remote, framed in photo-gravure images of top-hatted gentlemen clad in Prince Albert frock coats and whalebone-corseted ladies carrying lace-trimmed parasols, John Philip Sousa marches, and houses bedecked with towers and cupolas.

And the twentieth century has, of course, witnessed phenomenal transformations. What then were sleepy, backwater towns are now sprawling metropolises. Far-flung suburbs, superhighways, airports, and satellite dishes dot our external landscape. Computers, CD players, televisions, and faxes are fixtures

in our homes and offices. The rhythms of daily life have altered beyond recognition, as have the vocabulary and symbols we use to give meanings to things.

Nevertheless, one might wonder if a 1900 Bostonian or San Franciscan suddenly catapulted into the Massachusetts Avenue or Market Street of today would not be terribly surprised by the way things have turned out. Certainly, they would marvel at the range and sophistication of year 2000 machines and technologies, not to mention the abundance currently available to Americans. None of this, however, would be incomprehensible. After all, by the year “double-zero,” the Industrial Revolution was already rolling along in high gear, Americans were becoming accustomed to adaptation as a way of life, and a consumer revolution was emergent on the horizon.

By no coincidence, it was also around the beginning of the twentieth century that the core dilemmas that confront us today were appearing more or less full-blown. Geoffrey Barraclough says it well: “Contemporary history begins when the problems which are actual in the world today first take visible shape.” In that sense, we are still living in the same epoch as the Americans of 1900 (*An Introduction to Contemporary History*, p. 20).

Our travelers in time, in fact, scanning this morning’s headlines or television news would find much that resonates. Charges of monopoly practices against Bill Gates and Microsoft might easily recall the bitter controversy during their own time surrounding the machinations of John D. Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Company, or Henry Havemeyer’s American Sugar. Mergers on the scale of Exxon and Mobil would sound quite familiar. Reports of U.S. military action in the Middle East or the Balkans might conjure up the war in the Philippines. News stories about technological breakthroughs, trade disputes with China and Europe, racial problems and violence in Chicago or Texas, high levels of crime and frequent shootings, rising income gaps between rich and poor, volatile stock market prices, homelessness in the cities, the dangers of immigration, the controlling role of special interest money in elections and on Capitol Hill—all would have something déjà vu about them.

So for all the water that has flowed under the national bridge during the last century, a core of 1900’s most complex and difficult issues remain salient unto our own day. If this has a logic of sorts, it is that, contrary to Henry Ford, history is not “bunk,” and that the United States as it entered the twenty-first century was still being shaped by what had both happened and not happened as it entered the twentieth.

Here we are reminded of the mysterious and deep-reaching presence of the past in the present—how the deeds and omissions of forgotten ancestors continue to reverberate among us today. Ironically, much of what our time travelers are viewing is none other than the legacy bequeathed by their own generation of Americans to the current one. What was the nature of that legacy and what lessons can we in 2000 learn from it?

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Part I

In the Year Double-Zero

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Chapter 1

New Year's Day 1900

We step upon the threshold of 1900 which leads to the new century facing a still brighter dawn of civilization.

—*New York Times*, December 31, 1899

The annals of the world afford no parallel to the moral and physical advancement which has come to the United States in the rounded century which has passed since the death of the first president.

—*Lesley's Illustrated Weekly*, January 6, 1900

We're a gr-reat people. We are that. An' th' best ov it is, we know we are're.

—"Mr. Dooley," Peter Finley Dunne, 1898

The first morning of 1900 arrived in Washington, D.C., crisp and cold, accompanied by a night's fall of fresh snow. While some 2,000 citizens queued patiently for admission to the White House and the traditional New Year's presidential handshake, inside the mansion's lavishly furnished Blue Parlor room Mr. William McKinley and his frail wife received multitudes of diplomats, Supreme Court justices, congressmen, and other notables. A Marine band in full-dress red uniforms provided musical embellishment.

The night before, a nation of 75 million had found innumerable ways of celebrating the coming of the new year. Americans had thrown open houses and parties, gathered together and sung such popular ditties as "There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight" and "I'd Leave My Happy Home for You," and at midnight touched off fireworks, blew whistles, rung bells, and fired their Winchesters into the air. In New Orleans, boisterous crowds along Canal Street hailed carriages carrying flamboyantly attired women holding Roman candles. People also prayed, attended church socials, sat rocking on farmhouse porches, or did more or less what they did on any Sunday evening.

Despite the layer of snow covering much of the nation, New Year's Day was actively celebrated. Winnebago Indians gathered at their chief's house in Chicago to do war dances. In Greeley, Colorado, the Odd Fellows held a ball at the Armory Hall, while on Denver's Fifteenth Street, five hundred hungry people had turkey dinners served to them by volunteers. Cincinnati's Queen City Club luncheon featured a two-foot-high cake shaped in the form of a wheelbarrow. Eggnog and cigars were freely dispensed. The streets of fashionable neighborhoods in Houston were crowded with carriages as people exchanged visits. The members of a Boston bicycle club, the Metropolitan Wheelmen, celebrated by mounting their iron steeds and journeying over to the quaint seaboard town of Newburyport.

In the nation's largest city, clusters of people promenaded along Eighth Avenue and lined up for popular Broadway shows like *Sherlock Holmes* and *Ben Hur*, or to see ragtime singer May Irwin in the title role of *Sister Mary* at the Bijou. Along Fifth Avenue carriages carried men in top hats and women in fur coats to venues like the Holland House and Murray Hill, where hotel chefs were artistically fashioning table scenes depicting Neptune, Venus, and Mephisto. Up in the Bronx's Van Cortlandt Park rink, ice skaters were out in force, while in lower Manhattan the homeless slept on cellar gratings on Twenty-third Street, a tenement fire put a dozen families out on the street, and laughing boys threw snowballs and sledged in Tompkins Square Park.

The world was not particularly peaceful this January 1, perhaps a harbinger of what the coming century would bring. In the Philippines, three U.S. Army columns were beginning a coordinated drive across the island of Luzon aimed at rooting the "rebel" commander Emiliano Aguinaldo and his troops out of populated areas and destroying their capacity for combat. Two battalions of the Thirty-ninth Infantry occupied Cabuyan at the cost of twenty-four Filipino and two American lives. Heavy fighting occurred on the road to the town of Santa Rosa, while elsewhere, U.S. gunboats bombarded Filipino positions.

Encircled British soldiers at Mafeking and Ladysmith in South Africa were making sorties against the Boers, whose fighting prowess had won the Americans' admiration. The British General John French was announcing

the imminent capture of Boer-held Colesburg. Meanwhile, January 1 had been chosen by Wilhelm, the mercurial German kaiser, for an ominous, saber-rattling speech saluting the German army as "the embodiment of our history" and proclaiming his intention to double the size of Germany's navy in order to secure his nation's "place in the sun."¹

But these were specks on the distant horizon and generally ignored amid New Year's Day celebrations.

What also was passed over in the media and elsewhere was any meaningful attempt at assessing the tumultuous decade just ending. The late nineteenth century had been an era of massive, pulverizing change, and the Gay Nineties had brought its epic conflicts and contradictions to a head. Quite suddenly, the expansive vistas of an earlier America seemed to have vanished: "Now the nation seemed filled. The cities huge and choked, corporations omnipresent and overpowering, the frontier closed, immigrants everywhere."²

Life was culturally ajar and dislocated. Throughout the nineties, tensions and conflicts were being thrown up faster than the capacity of existing institutions to cope with them. If the United States had entered the modern industrial age, then the emotional loyalties of Americans still seemed rooted in an earlier era. Big corporations had not yet gained widespread legitimacy. Many citizens, such as skilled artisans making a last-ditch defense of their old autonomy, found they could no longer protect cherished lifestyles. The ending of the great spree of railroad building seemed to leave the nation without an engine to drive economic expansion.

Not only was the United States still in the midst of a transition from a small town-rural commercial and agriculture economy to an urban industrial one, but the genteel middle-class mores of the Victorian Age were giving way to a popular culture exemplified by rowdy popular music like ragtime and dances such as the cakewalk.³

Particularly unsettling was the realization that the free, open western frontier had passed. "And now four hundred years from the discovery of America, after a hundred years of life under the Constitution," the University of Wisconsin's Frederick Jackson Turner had intoned in 1893, "the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history."⁴

What Turner had done rather brilliantly was to recreate the frontier as a mythic story of national self-creation and loss. He argued that the process of conquering and civilizing the continent had been decisive for shaping the American national character, and inspiring citizens with the love for freedom and autonomy. So if "the West was another name for opportunity," a channel for national energy and talent, and a safety valve for the frustrated, then its demise as a frontier amounted to a catastrophe. To the pessimistic

Turner, nothing less than the future of American democracy was at risk.⁵

So Frederick Jackson Turner's analysis of the frontier as the crucial element in their history both nourished Americans' sense of a heroic past and unleashed fears of what a frontierless future might bring. If his analysis was evasive of the willful brutality, greed, and violence (amounting to genocide) found along various American frontiers, it was an evasion the people of his generation were happy enough with. Turner's story seemed compelling and scary enough—especially to a group of influential political, media, and military figures, led by Theodore Roosevelt, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Henry Adams, Josiah Strong, and Admiral Alfred Mahan, dedicated to making the United States an imperial power.⁶

Deeply anxious about the chaos in American life, the imperial party was convinced that internal tensions might be relieved and national confidence restored through overseas expansion. War and conquest represented an escape from the historic dead end they perceived the country to be in, the means of overcoming an intolerable *fin de siècle* blues. And no one epitomized this mood better than the talented, inexhaustibly exuberant Roosevelt, in 1898 strategically situated as assistant secretary of the navy.⁷

The program they advocated mixed up elements of idealism, commercial selfishness, racism, and the "strategic innocence" Americans habitually bring to foreign affairs. It was vastly ambitious: Build a world-class navy and overseas bases to anchor it, establish hegemony in the Caribbean and a U.S.-controlled isthmian canal, annex Hawaii, and gain access for American goods to Asian markets. If this was accomplished through war, so much the better. The warrior qualities of the Anglo-Saxon were threatened by the decadence of modern life and needed rekindling.

The mid-nineties were defined by hard times. Americans throughout the nineteenth century had experienced divisions along shifting lines of class, race, ethnicity, section, gender, and religion. Now economic distress intensified these cleavages.

Agricultural prices had been in decline since the eighties. Out there in the hinterland of wheat, corn, cotton, and tobacco were the same pioneers who had listened only too well to Horace Greeley's injunction to "Go west" and sought fortune and economic freedom along the new frontier. But they were being savaged by dismal crop prices, peonage to the railroads and banks, and, having trekked into semi-arid lands, drought.

A fierce hue and cry arose across the southwest and trans-Mississippi Valley and grew in intensity through the nineties. Farmers alliances sponsored an intricate network of cooperative and educational associations and, in the form of the People's party, or Populists, put governors, senators, and state legislatures in office pledged to curb the "Big Money Power" of eastern capital.⁸

They denounced the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few thousand families (the 1890 census revealed that the richest 1 percent of Americans had more total income than the poorest 50 percent) and indicted both major parties as creatures of business and enemies of farmers, workers, and the jobless.

People's party supporters wanted the government on their side, trusts reined in, railroads regulated, a scandalously corrupt and inefficient political system reformed, and "reasonable work and fair reward" made available. A social order become antihuman needed fixing. The eloquent writer and attorney Henry Demarest Lloyd defined the Populist goal as "a fuller, nobler, richer, kinder life for every man, woman and child in the ranks of humanity."⁹

Most Populists had no quarrel with dominant American values built around aspirations for individual business and financial success. They carried a mystique about the solidarity of "producers" and were much given to seeking out conspiracies to explain their ills. Yet, the creation of a just social order and a more cooperative path of economic modernization were central to their mission. What they had launched was a heavily evangelical and spiritual crusade, combining religious and political elements, to democratize political and economic life, temper economic ruthlessness, and make the quality of life of ordinary folk the measure of progress. At its boldest and most visionary, populism posed an alternative line of national development to "the sky's the limit/anything goes" mode of late nineteenth-century capitalism.¹⁰

After huge electoral gains in 1892, the Populists claimed the loyalties of a sizable group of voters in a score of states. But to emerge as an authentic national force, they would have to extend their constituency from southern and western agrarians to midwestern farmers and eastern workers, a formidable, if not impossible, task.

Nothing really had prepared the country for the full-blown depression that arrived in 1893, the nation's most catastrophic to date. Goods could not find markets. Agricultural exports to Europe crashed, imports soared, and gold poured out of the country; 15,000 factories and 550 banks closed their doors. Railroads were heaped on the bankruptcy courts like pickup sticks. Three million were jobless and wage cutting was widespread. The market prices of grains and cotton nose-dived and Great Plains farmers by the thousands lost their holdings. Real income declined 18 percent from 1892 to 1894. "The country began to be overrun with tramps," ran one contemporary account. "Men out of work and stopping to beg a meal and permission to sleep in barns . . . began to be seen daily. . . ."¹¹

It seemed to at least some within the nation's elite that unless prosperity could be restored, the country might lurch out of control. In New York finan-

cial circles, men talked of the imminence of "revolution," and armories were fitted out in major cities. Newspapers speculated on the implications of "the forming of military organizations by the unemployed."¹²

When a few hundred of Jacob Coxey's comic-opera "army" arrived in front of the Capitol after a march from Ohio (Coxey called it "a petition to Washington with boots on") to demand federal public works and support for the jobless, they were brusquely dispersed by troops. President Cleveland was advised by businessmen to vastly increase the army. His secretary of state, Walter Gresham, a man acutely sensitive to the inequalities and chaos of the new industrial order, wrote to a friend: "What is transpiring in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and in regions west of there, may fairly be viewed as symptoms of revolution."¹³

These were years when businessmen and their political allies routinely used hard-knuckled repression. Indictments were issued against union organizers and striking workers for fabricated criminal conspiracies. Chicago railwaymen and Idaho miners were imprisoned or shot. The July 1894 Pullman strike, which immobilized vast stretches of the nation's railways, petered out when thousands of federal troops were deployed by U.S. Attorney General Richard Olney against strikers, and union leaders like Eugene Debs were jailed. In 1897, the same Pennsylvania state militia that had previously broken the Homestead strike suppressed a major strike in the coalfields.

Certainly much of the ferocity of the nineties derived from, as Alan Trachtenberg argues, its being "a period of trauma, of change so swift and thorough that many Americans seemed unable to fathom the extent of the upheaval." Farmers and workers were shaken by the decline of abundance, the dashing of both established routines and future possibilities, the "loss of individual mastery."¹⁴

In such a context, nativism and scapegoating of "others" inevitably thrived. Anti-Roman Catholic feeling ran high, its main vehicle the American Protective Association (APA). Founded in 1887 by one Henry F. Bowers, the son of a German officer, the APA's basic message was that Jesuitic conspiracies were threatening the nation. The 1893-1894 economic collapse drove a surge in both APA membership and the political clout it wielded. It (and similar organizations flourishing during the mid-nineties) tapped a strain of paranoid nativism seeking out internal enemies to explain American dreams gone sour.¹⁵

Recent immigrants came under assault as both undigestible and undesirable. Prominent intellectuals argued that the immigration tide threatened the nation's "Anglo-Saxon" heritage and was overwhelming its carrying capacity. A popular movement to restrict immigration gathered force, moving the U.S. Congress in 1896 to legislate unprecedented restrictions on those seeking to enter. Acts of violence included the lynching of eleven Italians in New

Orleans. Asians living in California were singled out for discriminatory legislation. Those discontented with federal gold policy castigated Jewish international financiers for causing the nation's troubles.¹⁶

The nineties also witnessed the finale to post-Civil War black hopes for equality. In the former Confederate states, conservative Bourbon economic elites, deeply disturbed by Populist class agitation against them, had entered alliances with poor whites. African Americans were the designated scapegoats, their civil and human rights sacrificed to consummate this reconciliation. In 1896 came the Supreme Court's watershed *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, upholding the legality of segregation. New state constitutions disenfranchised black voters en masse, while white supremacy was fortified by frequent acts of vigilante violence and lynch law.

The historian Richard Hofstadter has argued that the debacles of the nineties brought on a "psychic crisis" among some Americans and a demand for outlets to both vent frustrations and express genuinely humanistic impulses. Such an environment made the imperial party's vision of the United States as a global power and world leader tremendously appealing.¹⁷

Thus came the outpouring of popular support for a buildup of the U.S. Navy, and the wildly toughest-kid-on-the-block jingoism that dominated U.S. foreign policy after 1895. Rumbly of war with Germany, then Chile, and finally Great Britain were heard, and there were moments when a visceral, evangelical American nationalism seemed anxious to take on anybody or everybody. Immense pressures on the stolid, cautious William McKinley led him to rebuff fairly major Spanish concessions on Cuba following the February 1898 destruction of the U.S. battleship *Maine*. Washington would dictate the island's future or there would be war. When war did indeed come and the U.S. bumbled to victory over a moribund Spain, rhetoric about defending the human rights and aspirations of the Cubans quickly gave way to a far different, far more imperial vision.¹⁸

Ultimately, the New Industrial Order handily survived the challenges of the nineties. A turning point was the decisive triumph of Republican William McKinley over William Jennings Bryan's free silver crusade in the 1896 presidential election. The huge Republican advantage in funding and press support, fears that free coinage of silver would lead to the ruin of modest savers, and the adroit handling of the candidate by national campaign manager Marcus Alonzo Hanna all contributed to the outcome.

But it was also a victory forged from popular belief in the return of good times and the country's unlimited potential. Crucial voting blocs like midwestern farmers and eastern workers were attracted by slogans heralding McKinley as "the advance agent of prosperity."

At the outset of the election campaign, the populist People's party, desperate to break out of its regional isolation and appeal to a national audience, and swept up in the Bryan euphoria, had endorsed the Democratic presidential nominee. Following McKinley's decisive victory, the party's always fragile unity broke on the issues of war and intense divisions over continued alliance with Democrats. With the party's passing withered the vision Populists had offered of the "cooperative commonwealth."

Yet, the Sturm und Drang of the middle nineties had in some way rent the sublime sense of American faith, optimism, and harmony. Things that simply were not supposed to happen in the land of perpetual progress had indeed occurred. And the undercurrent of anxiety people felt was accentuated by an unprecedented pace of economic and social change that showed no prospect of slowing down.

The modern world was a place, thought pioneer feminist Olive Schreiner, "... where nothing is as it was, and all things are assuming new shapes and relations." The new economic and social order was forcing Americans to make painful accommodations, a relentless economic revolution reorganizing lives and identities across the continent. The "losers" were legion. Rural youth found good farm land harder to get and more expensive. New divisions of labor into specialized tasks separated workers from the products they made. A wide spectrum of citizens felt a definite lack of control over the larger changes occurring in their lives and were left wondering about the meaning of the vaunted American "democracy."¹⁹

Among native-stock Americans there was a pervasive sense of having irrevocably lost something of value—thus the turn-of-the-century popularity of Booth Tarkington and Joel Chandler Harris, two authors whose forte was evoking a wistful nostalgia for an earlier, simpler, and mythically harmonious America. Additional evidence of a lingering crisis of confidence is found in reports by European travelers in the United States of constantly being interrogated as to "what do you think of America" and told point-blank that this was the "finest nation on God Almighty's Earth."²⁰

There were also the loudly publicized fears of affluent younger white men that American ("Anglo-Saxon") manhood was being endangered by soft urban living and bureaucratic jobs. For a generation bred on fathers' and uncles' tales of Gettysburg and Antietam, the taste for action was palpable. President McKinley had called for 125,000 volunteers to fight Spain and a million men had rushed to enlist. The quick end of the war had left many of these fellows still groping for "manly" new adventures. "For a million dollars you cannot lawfully kill a buffalo," wrote one critic. "There is no West. Our young men long for one more such country. America is . . . a country with mission still unfulfilled, yet certain of fulfillment."²¹

Yet, on this January 1, the relative peace and domestic prosperity of the last eighteen months seemed to have vanquished other realities. Given the national talent for historical amnesia, the rough upheavals of the nineties were whisked aside as only a temporary glitch in the program. Dominant cultural assumptions were not under challenge; relatively few people were questioning why so much sacrifice was being exacted in the name of the march of "progress." If such silence signified denial, it also meant that as the United States entered 1900, it appeared to be on a great and irresistible roll.

The "splendid little war" with Spain had accomplished everything its promoters had hoped for and more. Clear-cut victory on both Caribbean and Pacific fronts brought a new role for the United States in the global arena. The first conflict since the Civil War thirty years before, it had been a powerful stimulus for reconciliation between North and South. Military parades of returning soldiers and a stream of newspaper and magazine articles kept the victory-at-arms vividly before the public. The United States now held dominion over the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, Guam, and Cuba, the Caribbean was an American lake, and the Pacific well on its way to becoming so. Mounting the world stage as a new world power had swollen the national "brag."

In fact, in late September 1899, Admiral George Dewey, whose victory at Manila Bay had made him a national cult figure, sailed into New York harbor to a reception unprecedented in United States history. Dewey means "heroic achievement," editorialized *Harper's Weekly*. "He stands for what we think we are . . . a manly discharge of our duty to civilization in the Asian archipelago." Impeccable in his naval blues and epaulettes, the white mustached, sixty-two-year-old admiral (like a conquering proconsul of ancient Rome) reviewed an immense parade flowing under a seventy-foot triumphal arch built for the occasion on Fifth Avenue. Two million people watched and cheered. Throughout that fall, Dewey made a grand tour across the continent, stopping in various cities for similar parades of homage.²²

Economic recovery accompanied military triumph. In late 1898, the economy had gone into boomtime. The discovery of new sources of gold in Alaska and South Africa relieved an obstacle to commercial expansion. Reviving European economies began buying huge quantities of U.S. products. Farm prices moved to levels unseen in decades. New revolutionary technologies in energy, transportation, communications, and manufacturing drove production forward, generating employment. The return of prosperity in the aftermath of a successful war guaranteed that the country would continue on its existing trajectory of national development.

Americans circa 1900 were not unaware that the turning of the century

was coming at a watershed moment in their country's history: The United States was simultaneously coming to economic maturity and making its debut as a major international player. "It was," writes David Traxel in an important recent study, "an uncertain time when anything seemed possible." Yet this also meant unprecedented challenges as new issues arose and older ones were recast into new molds. Americans would engage a trio of provocative questions:²³

- How should the nation address the logic of markets in concentrating increasing wealth and economic power in corporate elites and big business, while marginalizing vast numbers of working and poor people? In brief, could the society be democratized to provide opportunity for the majority of Americans?
- Would Americans accept and draw strength from what they really were—a great experiment in ethnic/racial diversity—and create pluralistic ideas and institutions, or hunker down and seek to remain a "White Man's Country"?
- How was the United States to fulfill its new role as a world power and balance its moral and economic objectives abroad?

Each issue posed the quandry of how deliverance, American-style, and balance and national cohesion might be achieved. All were intermeshed. The responses that citizens were to make would be framed by two overshadowing national realities: the emergence of a powerhouse economic engine uniquely capable of generating just about anything asked of it, and the unchallenged dominance of the American dream ideology over national thought.