



The Gilded Age

In A Nutshell

The Gilded Age lasted from 1870-1900. The name came from the title of a Mark Twain book "Gilded" means covered with gold on the outside, but not really golden on the inside. The Gilded Age was a period of rapid economic growth but also much social conflict. The Gilded Age, which spanned the final three decades of the nineteenth century, was one of the most dynamic, contentious, and volatile periods in American history. America's industrial economy exploded, generating unprecedented opportunities for individuals to build great fortunes but also leaving many farmers and workers struggling merely for survival. Overall national wealth increased more than fivefold, a staggering increase, but one that was accompanied by what many saw as an equally staggering disparity between the rich and the poor. Industrial giants like Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller revolutionized business and ushered in the modern corporate economy, but also, ironically, sometimes destroyed free-market economic competition in the process. Record numbers of citizens voted in national elections, but the politicians they voted for were often lackluster figures who turned a blind eye to the public interest.

It was, as Dickens might have said, the best of times and the worst of times.

But even that Dickensian understanding of the Gilded Age isn't quite right. It's not enough to say that the Gilded Age was a time of high highs and low lows; the highs and lows were actually often deeply intertwined parts of the exact same developments. In other words, the

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highs often *were* the lows, and vice versa. In the Gilded Age, every dark cloud had its silver lining... and every silver lining had its dark cloud. For more than a hundred years, critics have been ripping the business strategies that allowed big industrialists to build powerful monopolies—but those much-maligned monopolies brought desperately needed order to America's immature economic system. Many have also long resented the immense fortunes of personal wealth that a handful of big businessmen were able to acquire—but that wealth paid for a huge surge in philanthropy, building hundreds of libraries, schools, museums, and other public facilities still enjoyed by the American people even today. Reformers decried the way urban politicians turned corruption into a way of life—but those same crooked politicians also provided vital services to working-class and immigrant neighborhoods.

The Gilded Age *was* a dynamic age of incredible economic opportunity, just as it *was* a harsh era of incredible economic exploitation. Any version of this tale that includes only the exploitation but not the dynamism—or vice versa—is missing half the story.

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Brain Snacks - Trivia

After President James Garfield was shot by Charles Guiteau, numerous physicians and scientists were consulted concerning his treatment. Their biggest challenge was locating the bullet buried deep in his back. Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, developed a crude metal detector for this purpose but he was unable to locate the bullet.

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Garfield died of blood poisoning eleven weeks after he was shot—most likely caused by the physicians' attempts to dislodge the bullet. The perennial power in college football during the late nineteenth century was Yale. That's right, Yale.

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