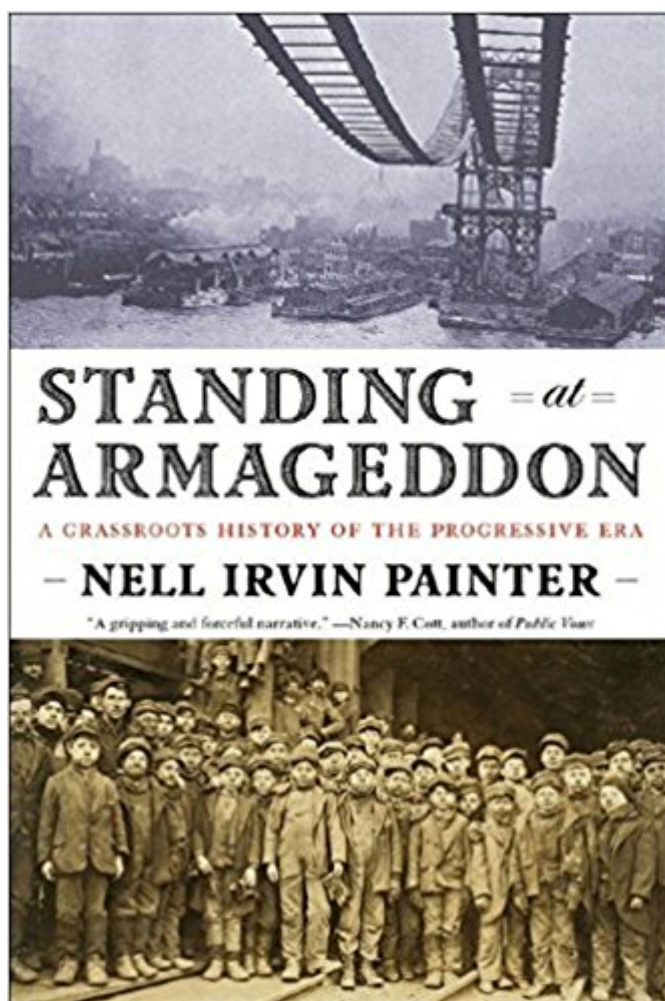


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# Standing At Armageddon: A Grassroots History Of The Progressive Era



## Synopsis

"A consistently engrossing, occasionally irreverent, always smoothly written history of America's painful entry into the modern age." — Kirkus Reviews  
Standing at Armageddon is a comprehensive and lively historical account of America's shift from a rural and agrarian society to an urban and industrial society. Nell Irvin Painter will be featured in the PBS multipart series The Progressive Era with Bill Moyers, which coincides with the release of the updated edition of this acclaimed work.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Fear of working-class violence," the author comments in the preface, "explains much of what has been called progressive reform." In this excellent illustrated survey of American labor radicalism and political reaction from the end of Reconstruction to the end of World War I, Painter concentrates largely on the struggle between "partisans of democracy" and "protectors of hierarchy" during a 42-year period when the country was evolving from an agrarian to an urban industrial society. Her major theme is the public's identification of organized labor with incendiary radicalism. She notes that the years of greatest unrest inspired ever more violent "red scares" during which the restoration of law and order meant using whoever could be defined as "reds" as the scapegoats. The author is a history professor at the University of North Carolina, at Chapel Hill. Copyright 1987 Reed Business Information, Inc.

This book offers general readers and students a fresh introduction to the United States during the Gilded Age and the progressive era. Painter has relied on the latest biographies and monographs to write her descriptive synthesis. She gives attention to blacks, women, and immigrants as well as the industrial and political elite, combining social, economic, and political history. The author concludes that the strong pressures of the agricultural and industrial laborers forced the passage of progressive reforms in the early 20th century. Painter's narrative joins other worthwhile surveys of the era, e.g., S.D. Cashman's *America in the Gilded Age* ( LJ 12/15/83) and Ray Ginger's standard treatment *Age of Excess* (1975, rev. ed.). Joseph G. Dawson III, History Dept., Texas A&M Univ., College Station Copyright 1987 Reed Business Information, Inc.

If you think that the present era is bad, all you need to do is read about the Reconstruction to see America at its absolute worst. This book covers the close of Reconstruction, into what has long been portrayed as an era of explosive "progressivism", but it is a kind of people's history as well as covering the leaders. The result is a brilliant and dense tableau by a first rate historian and writer. At the beginning of the era, the government has been thoroughly corrupted by the "robber barons", who have essentially turned the Republicans into defenders of capital over labor: they essentially made it illegal, in some cases even treasonous, to strike or even speak out, followed by executions on trumped up charges after violent confrontations. To the 1880s, as the industrial revolution was gaining momentum and resulting in vast fortunes and power, the conditions of work were often of an unimaginable brutality: 7-day work weeks, child labor, virtual imprisonment of laborers in shabby industrial complexes at dirt-low pay, etc. Unions were not recognized as legitimate representatives of labor and hence not allowed to negotiate collectively, workers could not feed their families, and education was largely unavailable. With all three branches of the government completely in the pocket of the "capitalists", the working class felt as if it was disenfranchised and without any means of effecting change. Then there were terrible economic downturns that thrown millions into the streets without any government social safety net. The result was a build-up of anger that reached revolutionary proportions, ready to burst forth in the most violent confrontations - industrial, racially motivated, etc. - that America had seen since the Civil War. While there were many anarchists (later tainted by terrorism association) and socialists, many of their demands were pragmatic, including an 8-hour work day, the end of child labor, the legalization of union representation, and higher pay. The author tells all of the principal stories associated with these incidents, such as the Haymarket bombing or the Railroad Strike of 1877. Add to this the emergence of a cadre of reformers - suffragettes, muckraking journalists, union and social activists engaging in fundamental

experiments, even some politicians - and the mix became extremely volatile. What is so interesting about this book is the modest assessment of the end results that the author portrays. In other words, beyond some pretty basic accomplishments, the progressive era's political momentum in her view was dissipated first by the Great War and then by the prosperity that followed until the Great Depression. This was a great surprise to me, though it was apparently enough to ward off violent revolution as the middle class expanded to enjoy the fruits of the American dream. The book is written in a beautifully fluid and elegant style, honing in on details and mini-biographies. At times, it is a bit pedantic at an undergraduate level (I did not need to be informed, for example, that the Ottomans were Turks!), but this is a minor criticism. This is a splendid introduction with a strong point of view and many delightful surprises. Personally, I was fascinated by Frances Willard, who gave the name to a nearby school in my conservative home town: a suffragette and advocate of prohibition (they were intimately linked), she was also a lover of women at a time when such things were never discussed and even lacked an adequate vocabulary to describe it. Warmly recommended, This is a masterpiece.

Excellent transaction!! A++

This book is a commendable look at a very contentious period in US history. At the start of this period, the nation, even so-called radical Republicans, had lost tolerance for Reconstruction, essentially turning the South over to the Redeemers, that is, the old oligarchy, which essentially restored ante-bellum race relations. The story of this period involves far more than simply the dramatic rise of large enterprises and super-rich entrepreneurs. Of concern to this author are the social divides in the nation that revolved around agrarian vs. industrial interests, economic class, political effectiveness, religion, mode of production, reform vs. standpattism, native born vs. immigrants, ethnicity, and race. Farmers, artisans, and laborers usually found themselves on the wrong side of many of those divisions; attempts at amelioration were often inadequate and fleeting. The US joined the Europeans in carving up the world through imperialistic ventures based on an ideology of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority. The US certainly emerged after WWI as the world's dominate power, but most of the cracks in the foundation of American society remained. The author's principal focus is on the so-called "labor issue," as the elites of the times referred to it, that is, workers and their jobs and actions in the context of the larger society. The nature of work underwent vast changes in the decades after the Civil War. Much of independent artisanship was swallowed up by the de-skilled, corporate machine-tending mode of production. Easily replaced and

therefore essentially powerless, workers found it extremely difficult to counter the squeezing of their wages to subsistence levels in a time of over all deflation with significant economic downturns occurring at least once a decade. Given the levels of desperation and anger, it is not surprising that the era was filled with numerous, prolonged employer-employee confrontations. Denying the legitimacy of such worker actions, conservatives maintained that all Americans had an "identity of interests" in an hierarchical economic order controlled from the top by business elites. All manner of movements and actions were undertaken to counter various aspects of the undemocratic control of status-quo elites. Third-party movements such as the Greenback Party, Henry George followers, the Populists, and the Socialists advocated for such changes as relaxed monetary policies and silver coinage, governmental regulation or ownership of utilities and railroads, reduced tariffs, restrictions on child and female labor and maximum hours, direct election of Senators, etc. Labor organizations from the National Labor Union, the Knights of Labor, the American Federation of Labor (AFL), to the International Workers of the World (IWW) ranged widely in their approaches to effect reform from increased political participation, forming producer and consumer cooperatives, only bargaining for wages and worker conditions, to forming one big Union to run US factories in the interest of the working class. Notable violent confrontations of the era were the Great Railway Strike of 1877, the 1886 Haymarket Square bombing, the Carnegie Homestead Strike of 1892, and the Pullman Strike of 1894, all of which started as strikes or worker protests but were quickly escalated to the level of being national panics through the actions of employers and authorities. Successes in these various approaches, especially in the 19th century, were quite limited and impermanent. As the author notes, fear of even greater reactions from the working class induced elite-controlled legislatures and Congress to offer such palliatives as workplace regulations or the toothless Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890. Of course, the conservative judiciary either invalidated the legislation or used it against working people, such as using Sherman antitrust to declare labor organizations as illegal conspiracies, prohibited from actions by judge-issued injunctions. As the author indicates, the "red scare" phenomenon, that is, demonizing individuals or groups as communists, anarchists, syndicalists, etc, began in earnest with the Haymarket affair, well before the Bolshevik revolution in 1917. With such characterizations, all manner of suppression is then justified from the use of armed force, both private and governmental, even the use of federal troops, to using the judicial system as a means of giving legitimacy to harsh retaliations, such as the hanging of several anarchists indirectly associated with Haymarket. The working class and labor organizations hardly represented a uniform front, much of the split being on a personal level. Native-born Brits and some German and Irish, many of whom were craftsmen, regarded themselves as superior to the flood of immigrants

from Italy, Eastern Europe, and Russia who found work in factories. Not only did their place in the work order define them, but religion - Protestant vs. Catholic, political affiliation - Republican vs. Democrat, and personal habits - drinking for one, separated them. Moreover, labor organizations operated from different sets of principles. The AFL was exclusionary, permitting only unions of tradesmen, while the Knights were an inclusive, industrial union, accepting all workers. Peculiarly, Terrence Powderly, head of the Knights, eschewed both strikes and political action, while Samuel Gompers, head of the AFL, preferred direct bargaining with companies with no outside aid or interference. These ethnic differences dovetailed with endemic racial biases to justify American interventions in Central America, the Philippines, and the Caribbean beginning with the Spanish-American conflict in 1898, but continuing through the period. As the author points out, the first decade of the 1900s was fairly prosperous pushing remnants of the turmoil of the last decade to the side, though labor unions had gained no greater standing, still being subjected to adverse reactions from all quarters. In some cases, more notice was being taken of the economic excesses that continued from the last decade. An active press reported on the most flagrant abuses of giant trusts, leading to selective enforcement of the Sherman Antitrust Act. For example, both J. P. Morgan's holding company of railroads, Northern Securities Company, and John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil, among others, were forced to disband into smaller units. In addition, the IWW and the socialists were gaining a significant following among workers and the AFL was emerging from political indifference. Given this persistent level of agitation, another downturn in 1907 forced many social and political elites, including Pres. Theodore Roosevelt, to realize that more vigorous reform efforts were needed if American society was not to come apart. The Progressive era driven by the impetus of middle-class professionals was actually rather short-lived. Pres. Woodrow Wilson, surpassing his conservative, Southern roots sponsored some legislation favorable to workers, including the Clayton Act that supposedly exempted labor unions from being considered anti-competitive combinations. The conservative side of the labor movement, that is, the AFL, supported the War effort and was likewise granted recognition in the nation's places of work. But, as so often happens in America, when the unions attempted to extend their gains after the WWI, in particular by organizing US Steel, the forces of reaction rose in vigorous opposition. IWW offices were raided with members being beaten or killed and all unions were painted with the red brush of communism. The convenient accommodations necessitated by wartime were quickly forgotten. Complete corporate hegemony had been reestablished by the early 1920s. This book is a clear repudiation of any notion that the rise of the US to world prominence in the early 20th century was one long progressive, glorious rise that as a matter of course benefitted all citizens. More

realistically, this book demonstrates that in so many areas of American society that the industrialism that emerged in the decades after the Civil War resulted in intense struggles for broad swaths of the American population depending on what side of the class, race, etc divides one was located. While significant modifications have been made to the capitalistic order over ensuing decades, what is remarkable is how much remains the same. In the year 2010, laissez-faire ideas regarding business are in ascendance. The ability of financial and corporate elites to largely control the economy has hardly diminished. Worker organizations have been under assault for decades, resulting in the kind of inequality found in the era of the robber barons. If anything, the corporate regime is even more consolidated and integrated into society now than in the early 1900s. The use of the media and other institutions of "information" are so much more sophisticated than before resulting in scarcely noticeable "persuasion." Evidence for the widespread acceptance of the corporate order is that the sizeable, focused alternative movements in the early decades of industrialism, like the Knights, the Populists, the Socialists, etc, have not been replicated since WWII, except for the college kids' protests of the 60s which was more scattered and spontaneous than coherent - more stylish than substantive. Those earlier generations would have never accepted so passively the undermining of their well-being from the totality of such corporate acts as reckless financial dealings, gratuitous downsizing, shipping jobs overseas, allowing in millions on visa programs, and the like. In fact, the corporate-political order that perpetrates such is validated time and again in national elections. This book is well worth reading to get a more complete picture of what underlay the rise of what a recent author referred to as the American "super-economy."

The author skillfully led me through a foundation that clarifies deeply embedded principles that both sides of current social and political advocates need to understand if we are to avoid another civil war. We will not hold our standing among nations without using history to heal our division and re-discover our common ground. Painter, provides both poles of our divided nation with guideposts toward a greater country.

I was interested in how a well educated black woman would view this period of American history versus most historians who are white men. While it was not as different as I thought it might be, she did offer some different perspectives and broaden my understanding of the progressive era.

Perfect! Looking forward to reading it.

I really enjoyed reading professors' account on America's past. She very carefully guided the reader through the early years of America as it rose from an Agrarian oriented society to an Industrial one. She documented each era with facts and was still able to do so without really interjecting any of her own personal biases. A job well done, and should be in everyone's book case within easy reach.

My son loved this book. He had to read it for school and it came in a very timely manner. Perfectly fit in his backpack.

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