

"What happened every time reformers tinkered with American life, from the Tom Johnsons to the FDRs, teaches one simple lesson: ANYTHING YOU TRY WILL JUST MAKE THINGS WORSE." While this quote does hold some truth, it is not the complete, full, accurate lesson of the 1890s to 1945. The complete lesson of this time period showcases many reforms that did well and were successful, but it also highlights the ones that did more damage than good.

The reforms that were brought about were not random, they mostly reflected past issues that affected America's economy and wellbeing as a whole. Reform can be defined as "making changes in something, typically a social, political, or economic institution or practice in order to improve it" (Dictionary.com).

After the Civil War, America became obsessed with determining who in the United States was deserving of the blessings of liberty. For example, in the textbook it says, "American society seemed to be fracturing along lines of both class and race. The result... a ... obsession with redrawing the boundary of freedom by identifying and excluding those unworthy of the blessings of liberty." (Foner, 521). Although this happened before the 1890s, it plays a significant role in the **Open Door Policy**. The war took place between the Confederacy and the Union. The war ended in April of 1865 and resulted in the abolishment of slavery. This is very significant because it provides background to America's history and it highlights some of the negative aspects of reform.

After slavery was abolished African Americans did not go straight into having the same and equal rights as white people did, instead segregation spread through the south in the 1890s. The segregation laws required separate schools, facilities, entrances and more for African

Americans to use. But these laws were not equally distributed over all of the South, it was dependent on the facility. For example, in the textbook it says, “Some railroads, theatres, and hotels admitted blacks and whites on an equal basis while others separated them by race...” (Foner, 519). This quote showcases how the South didn’t have an organized plan on what their thoughts were about the race situation, all they knew was that their once “property” can’t just automatically have the same rights as them. This is also important in giving context to the reform that comes in the years after since it is one of the main reasons it takes place. At this point in time the laws were left to the states on whether or not they wanted to adopt them or not, but by 1896 it reached federal power in the Supreme Court case of **Plessy v. Ferguson**. The Court concluded that, “it approved state laws requiring separate facilities for blacks and whites.” (Foner, 519). This incident took place in Louisiana where the local government had decided to adopt the law that railroad companies must have a separate car for black people when traveling. Plessy and his lawyers argued that the law violated the 13th Amendment and the 14th Amendment Equal Protection Clause. The Court disagreed with his argument, establishing the “**separate but equal**” precedent. This showcases an instance where the reform was both successful and did damage to America. It was successful in the sense that the government accomplished their goal of segregation and was able to set the “separate but equal” precedent for almost sixty years until it was overturned by the case of *Brown v. The Board of Education* in 1954. It was damaging to the black population in America because their Constitutional rights were being violated on the sole basis of their skin color, children had to walk miles to make it to a school that was meant for their skin color, and their facilities were never of equal standards as white facilities. Not as much money went into the infrastructure made for black people, so they were at an automatic disadvantage in every part of their life. In a way this instance proves the

quote, “ANYTHING YOU TRY WILL JUST MAKE THINGS WORSE” to be correct because it was almost as if black people were still living in slavery. They still had little to no rights.

The “**separate but equal**” doctrine significantly connects to the **Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882**. “Congress temporarily excluded all immigrants from China from entering the country” (Foner, 525). This is significant because America doesn’t even allow every citizen born in their country to have the rights of a natural citizen, but they are worried about immigrants from China. This example showcases both how a reform was successful and did damage. The Chinese Exclusion Act was successful in restricting Chinese immigrants and even was renewed for ten more years. It was damaging because everyone of Chinese descent had to register with the government and carry identification papers or else they got deported, this included people of Chinese descent that were born in America like Anna May Wong. This further highlighted America’s racist ideas and beliefs and showed they made little progress since the abolishment of slavery.

Finally, this connects with the **Open Door Policy of 1899**, where America wanted equal access to China so that the country could export their goods there and boost the American economy. The textbook defines “Open Door Policy: as, “... the free movement of goods and money, not people.” (Foner, 534). This highlights how America had little care for people that were non-white and only cared about boosting their economy. This further damaged their image and made things worse, which in this case proves the quote, “ANYTHING YOU TRY WILL JUST MAKE THINGS WORSE.” to be the lesson.

In the late 1800s, Americans were finding out that whiskey was cheaper than most other drinks on the market which worked in their favor because most Americans were suffering from depression due to being overworked, having horrible work conditions, and from their

experiences at war. This mix of events caused many horrible things including domestic violence and death. The **Prohibition** movement was wanted by a lot of reformers because they felt that it could truly change America for the better. “Employers hoped it would create a more disciplined labor force. Urban reformers believed that it would promote a more orderly city environment... Women reformers hoped [Prohibition] would protect wives and children from husbands who engaged in domestic violence when drunk...” (Foner, 584). This quote provides context to some of the groups of people who supported Prohibition and it highlights the real dangers Americans were facing due to alcohol consumption. Prohibitionists were able to convince Congress that since the beer was being made by German- American breweries, that it was unpatriotic which was a big problem due to the war. No American wanted to be seen as unpatriotic. This led Congress to pass the **Eighteenth Amendment in 1919** that “prohibited the manufacture and sale of intoxicating liquor.” (Foner, 585) which overtime proved to be successful in reducing the overall consumption of alcohol and public drunkenness. (Foner, 621). But overall, the movement was unsuccessful because what the government found was that when you outlaw something, it increases the crime rate because people are going to do it anyway, hence the increase in organized crime. It also proved to be unsuccessful because people began to get desperate and create bootleg alcohol in their basements and sell it to buyers, some who ended up dying because the alcohol wasn't made with the correct and safe ingredients.

The complete lesson of this time period showcases many reforms that did well and were successful, but it also highlights the ones that did more damage than good. Overall, America had its fair share of attempts at reforms, some being good and others bad. Many reforms led to more reforms and overtime America's ideas and beliefs got better. “...ANYTHING YOU TRY WILL JUST MAKE THINGS WORSE.” is not the complete lesson, it is actually way more complex.

Works Cited

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