

Unit 6: 1865-1898

Covers the industrial transformation of the United States, from western expansion and the New South through industrial capitalism, labor, immigration, reform, and Gilded Age politics. CED topics 6.2 through 6.13.

AP U.S. History

1865-1898

10-17% of the exam

About 14 minutes to read

How to use this guide

Read straight through the first time, in order. The main subject is industrial transformation and the responses it provoked. The West gets railroads and reservations, the South gets a New South program, industry consolidates into trusts, workers organize, immigrants arrive and are debated, a middle class forms, reformers propose alternatives, and politics argues about what government should do. Every topic is either part of the transformation or a response to it, so as you read, sort each section into one of those two groups.

After that first read, spend more time on the responses than on the transformation alone. The trap boxes flag a common confusion in each section, especially paired ideas that students often mix up, such as the two uses of assimilation, the three ideas about wealth and inequality, and trusts compared with unions. Use the tables to keep those pairs apart. Then close the guide and answer the two practice questions without looking back. After that, write a Brain Dump on one response to industrialization and finish with the six-question recall check.

What this unit is worth. Unit 6 makes up 10-17% of the AP U.S. History exam. The exam also uses this unit to test whether you can link economic change to social, cultural, and political responses. That skill shows up in document-based and long-essay questions across the whole test.

6.2 Westward Expansion: Economic Development

The West's economic development depended on three things happening at the same time.

Transcontinental railroads were built, mineral discoveries drew people and capital, and government policies promoted growth, and together they created new communities and centers of commercial activity. None of the three worked alone. Railroads without mines had little to carry, mines without railroads had no way to ship, and both moved faster with public backing.

The backing took specific forms. **Government subsidies** supported transportation and communication systems, helping open new markets in North America. **Mechanization** improved farm production substantially, which increased output and contributed to declines in food prices. And as agricultural markets consolidated and farmers grew dependent on the evolving railroad system, many farmers created **cooperative organizations**, local and regional, to defend their interests.

Trap: mechanization and falling food prices cut against the simple story of western prosperity. More production meant cheaper food, which squeezed the farmers producing it. Read the cooperatives as a defensive response to consolidation and railroad dependence, not as a sign that farmers were thriving.

This topic matters because it shows how the Gilded Age economy developed in the West. Subsidies, railroads, minerals, and machines made the West more productive, and that productivity created both new towns and new grievances. You will see those grievances again in 6.13, when farmers turned to party politics.

The pressure on farmers runs through the rest of the unit, so it is worth following step by step. Mechanization raised output, higher output lowered food prices, lower prices squeezed indebted farmers, and squeezed farmers built cooperatives to respond to consolidation and railroad dependence. The cooperatives in this topic came before the Populist Party in 6.13, and the Populists later took similar grievances into party politics.

6.3 Westward Expansion: Social and Cultural Development

Western growth caused serious harm. The decimation of the **American bison** intensified competition for land and resources among white settlers, American Indians, and Mexican Americans, and contributed to increased violent conflict in the West. Because bison were central to life on the Plains, losing them made that competition more severe.

The U.S. government violated its treaties with American Indians and responded to resistance with military force, then confined American Indians to **reservations**, lands that denied **tribal sovereignty**, the authority of Native nations to govern themselves.

Alongside confinement came **assimilation**, which in this topic means government policies aimed at absorbing American Indians into the dominant American culture. Many American Indians resisted by preserving their cultures and tribal identities and by attempting to develop self-sustaining economic practices. That resistance included cultural persistence as well as armed conflict.

Trap: assimilation in this topic was a government policy imposed on American Indians, and the framework stresses the resistance it met. Do not confuse it with the 6.9 assimilation, which was a public debate about immigrants. The exam expects you to keep the two uses apart because they describe different situations.

6.4 The "New South"

After 1877, Southern leaders promoted the **New South**, a program of Southern industrialization. The program did not remake the region's economy. Agriculture based on **sharecropping** and **tenant farming** continued as the South's primary economic activity. In sharecropping, farmers worked land owned by others for a share of the crop. In tenant farming, they rented the land.

Politically, many of the gains from Reconstruction were reversed. **Plessy v. Ferguson** was the Supreme Court decision that upheld racial segregation, known as **Jim Crow**, and it helped mark the end of most

of the political gains African Americans had made during Reconstruction. Alongside segregation, African Americans faced increased violence, discrimination, and scientific theories of race. The framework names the theories without describing their content, so describe only the confrontation, not the claims.

Trap: the framework equates Jim Crow with the segregation Plessy upheld. They are one system with two names, not two separate developments to count twice. When you describe the New South, pair its industrialization program with the fact that sharecropping and tenant farming remained dominant.

This topic matters because it shows how the limits of Reconstruction became lasting arrangements. Reconstruction's gains, already undermined by 1877, were further weakened by court decisions and labor systems that kept Black Southerners from political power and land ownership. The exam treats 6.4 as a long-term consequence of 5.11.

6.5 Technological Innovation

This topic gets one paragraph in the course framework, and the paragraph stays general. It says that technological innovations drove industrial change in this period. Some examples help explain what that means. Cheap steel from the Bessemer process made skyscrapers and longer rail lines possible, the telephone and the telegraph made business communication faster over long distances, electric light and power stretched the working day past sunset, and new machines such as the typewriter, the cash register, and the refrigerated railcar reorganized offices and the food supply. The framework names no specific inventions and no inventors, so on the exam you should describe innovation as a general force behind the industrial transformation that topics 6.6 and 6.7 describe in economic and human terms.

Trap: the exam tests innovation as a general force, so your answers should describe that force rather than recite a list of inventions. It still helps to learn examples such as steel, telephones, electric light, and railroad technology, because picturing what changed makes it easier to explain why it mattered.

6.6 The Rise of Industrial Capitalism

Industrial capitalism was the system of large-scale industrial production, accompanied by massive technological change, expanding international communication networks, and pro-growth government policies, that generated rapid economic development and business consolidation from 1865 to 1898. Together, those factors produced an economy that grew quickly and also became more concentrated.

Business leaders used specific structures to consolidate control. They consolidated corporations into **trusts**, large business combinations that further concentrated wealth. They also used **holding companies**, corporate structures for consolidating control over corporations, which further concentrated wealth. The framework treats trusts and holding companies as distinct structures, so learn them as a pair with separate names.

Trap: the framework gives both structures the same effect, concentrated wealth, which tempts students to merge them into one term. Keep the labels distinct. Trusts were the business combinations, and holding companies were the corporate structures. The exam can ask for either by name.

The paired terms in the trap boxes also appear as flashcards in the Unit 6 deck under AP U.S. History. Drilling them there helps keep the labels separate when you meet them again.

This topic is central to the rest of the unit. Labor organizes against this system in 6.7, reformers propose alternatives to it in 6.11, politicians argue about government's role in it in 6.12, and a new party demands intervention in it in 6.13. If industrial capitalism is unclear, the topics that follow will be harder to understand.

THE TRANSFORMATION	THE RESPONSES
Business consolidation into trusts and holding companies	Labor unions battling management over wages and conditions.
Rising inequality	Social Darwinism justifying it; the Gospel of Wealth and Social Gospel answering it.
Mass immigration	Public debate over assimilation; settlement houses easing the transition.
The government-role question	Laissez-faire defenders versus the Populist call for regulation.

6.7 Labor in the Gilded Age

The **Gilded Age** was the era from 1865 to 1898 marked by industrial capitalism. During this period, the price of many goods decreased and workers' real wages and standards of living rose, even as the gap between rich and poor grew. Workers could buy more at the same time that wealthy people pulled further ahead.

Workers did not take industrial conditions passively. They formed **labor unions**, local and national organizations, to battle management over wages and working conditions, sometimes directly confronting business leaders. **Child labor** also increased as industry expanded.

Trap: the era's rising real wages do not disprove its inequalities, and its inequalities do not disprove its rising real wages. Questions exploit students who pick one half of the paradox and discard the other, so you should keep both facts in mind when you answer.

The framework describes business leaders consolidating corporations into trusts and holding companies while workers formed local and national unions to battle management over wages and conditions, sometimes confronting business leaders directly. That conflict between concentrated business and organized labor is important for understanding the reform topics that follow.

6.8 Immigration and Migration in the Gilded Age

This topic has no named terms in the course framework, so you should study it as a described pattern rather than as a vocabulary list. Immigrants arrived from Asia and from southern and eastern Europe, and African Americans migrated within and out of the South. The motives the framework names are poverty, religious persecution, and limited social mobility. In the cities, newcomers formed urban neighborhoods based on particular ethnicities, races, and classes.

Trap: the framework never uses the label New Immigrants for the southern and eastern European arrivals. Describe the pattern, origins, motives, and ethnic neighborhoods, without reaching for a label the course does not supply.

This topic describes many of the people who supplied labor for industrial growth. The next topic covers the debates that followed their arrival.

6.9 Responses to Immigration in the Gilded Age

Immigration led to public argument. **Assimilation**, the process by which immigrants adopted American culture, drew increasing public debate as international migration grew. **Americanization**, the process of immigrants adapting to U.S. language and customs, was its own debate topic, and many immigrants negotiated compromises between the cultures they brought and the culture they found in the United States.

Social Darwinism provided a justification for inequality. It was a set of theories advocated by social commentators that justified the success of those at the top of the socioeconomic structure as both appropriate and inevitable. That view treated the gap between rich and poor as something that did not need to be corrected.

Other reformers responded by providing direct help. **Jane Addams** was a reformer who, with other women, worked in **settlement houses**, neighborhood centers where reformers helped immigrants adapt to U.S. language and customs.

Trap: Social Darwinism justified inequality; it did not challenge it. Students sometimes file every ism of the period under reform. Social Darwinism defended the existing order rather than calling for reform.

Social Darwinism and settlement houses were different responses to immigration and inequality. Social Darwinism argued that the existing order was appropriate and inevitable. Settlement houses, associated with Jane Addams and other women reformers, helped immigrants adapt to American language and customs. On the exam, you should be able to explain how each response treated inequality.

6.10 Development of the Middle Class

Industrialization contributed to the growth of a new social class. The **middle class** was the distinctive social class that grew as corporations needed managers and male and female clerical workers and as

access to educational institutions increased. These new jobs and wider access to schooling produced a class between labor and capital.

The **Gospel of Wealth** was the idea, articulated by some business leaders, that the wealthy had a moral obligation to help the less fortunate and improve society. They made philanthropic contributions that enhanced educational opportunities and urban environments. That emphasis on obligation was different from Social Darwinism, which presented success at the top as inevitable.

Growing amounts of leisure time helped expand **consumer culture**, a culture of purchasing goods for personal and household use. Department stores, national brands, and advertising were part of that culture. The framework says only that leisure time expanded consumer culture, so on the exam you should focus on the connection between increased leisure time and expanded consumer culture.

Trap: the Gospel of Wealth and Social Darwinism both talk about the wealthy, and students merge them. They make different moral claims. The Gospel of Wealth said the wealthy had an obligation to help others, while Social Darwinism said success at the top was inevitable. If a question asks which idea justified the gap, the answer is Social Darwinism, never the Gospel of Wealth.

6.11 Reform in the Gilded Age

Some movements proposed alternatives to industrial capitalism. The **Social Gospel** was a movement whose advocates championed alternative visions for the economy and U.S. society in response to the rise of industrial capitalism. Alongside them, the framework names three more sets of critics, **agrarians**, **utopians**, and **socialists**, who likewise championed alternative visions.

Trap: the framework names the three critic categories together without distinguishing them, so do not invent differences the framework never draws. Some examples can help you remember the labels. Agrarian critics included the Grangers and the farm activists who became Populists. Utopians built experimental communities meant to model a better order. Socialists like **Eugene Debs** argued the whole system needed replacing. Study them as a set of critics who proposed alternative visions.

This topic belongs with the responses to industrial capitalism, along with labor's unions in 6.7 and settlement houses in 6.9. On the exam, it helps to distinguish the industrial transformation itself from the responses it produced.

6.12 Controversies over the Role of Government in the Gilded Age

People in this period disagreed about the role of government in the economy. **Laissez-faire** meant policies of minimal government intervention in the economy. Supporters argued that laissez-faire policies and competition promoted economic growth in the long run, and they opposed government intervention during economic downturns.

That position had opponents, and the next topic names the most organized of them. One side argued that competition would produce growth over time. The other side argued that the economy needed a

stronger governmental role. The framework presents this as an ongoing controversy rather than a settled question.

Trap: laissez-faire's supporters opposed intervention even during downturns. Students sometimes soften the position into intervention only in emergencies. The framework describes minimal intervention even during hard times.

6.13 Politics in the Gilded Age

Economic instability pushed farmers' grievances into politics. The **People's (Populist) Party** was the political party created by agrarian activists, inspired by economic instability, which called for a stronger governmental role in regulating the American economic system. Earlier, farmers in 6.2 had formed cooperatives to respond to economic pressure. The Populists took related grievances into party politics.

Cities had a different political form. **Political machines** were urban political organizations that thrived where access to power was unequally distributed, in part by providing immigrants and the poor with social services. Machines traded services for loyalty, which helps explain why they endured in the unequal cities the framework describes.

Trap: the framework's machines are not only about corruption. They provided real social services to immigrants and the poor, and that service was part of why they thrived. The Populists wanted more government involvement in the economy, which was the opposite of laissez-faire. Political machines operated mainly in cities, while the Populists drew support mainly from farming areas.

This topic matters because it shows political responses to industrial capitalism. Unions, reformers, and settlement houses responded in different ways, and political responses included a new party that called for regulation and urban organizations that worked within unequal cities.

The unit's two political forms responded to different problems. Political machines operated where access to power was unequally distributed, and they traded social services for loyalty. The Populists responded to economic instability among farmers and demanded a stronger governmental role in regulating the economy.

Your 20-minute plan for this unit

- Minutes 0-5. Open your Rycal flashcards for Unit 6 and run the due cards, oldest first. For paired terms (the two assimilations, trusts versus holding companies), recite the difference, not just the definition.
- Minutes 5-10. Do a Brain Dump on responses to industrial capitalism. Write every response you can remember, including labor, reform, political, and cultural responses, then check the 6.7 through 6.13 sections for ones you missed.
- Minutes 10-16. Work the AP-style questions for this unit in Rycal, then answer this guide's two practice questions on paper without peeking. For every miss, write the trap in one sentence.

- Minutes 16-20. Run one FRQ drill on Gilded Age inequality or the role of government, then answer the six self-check questions out loud. Anything you cannot say fluently goes back into tomorrow's flashcard queue.

Where students lose points

The unit's errors come from blurring paired ideas the framework keeps separate.

THE MIX-UP	THE FIX
Merging the two assimilations into one idea.	6.3 assimilation was government policy imposed on American Indians, met with resistance. 6.9 assimilation was public debate about immigrants, who negotiated cultural compromises.
Merging the Gospel of Wealth with Social Darwinism.	The Gospel of Wealth demanded the wealthy help the less fortunate. Social Darwinism declared top-level success appropriate and inevitable.
Collapsing trusts and holding companies into a single term.	Both concentrated wealth, but trusts were the business combinations and holding companies were the corporate structures. Keep the labels distinct.
Inventing differences among agrarians, utopians, and socialists.	The framework names them together as critics with alternative visions and distinguishes none of them. Study them as a set rather than as separate categories.
Using the label New Immigrants for the southern and eastern European arrivals.	The framework never uses the label. Describe origins, motives, and ethnic neighborhoods instead.
Treating Jim Crow and Plessy v. Ferguson as two separate developments.	Jim Crow is the segregation system Plessy upheld, so the two terms describe the same system.
Reading political machines as pure corruption.	The framework says they thrived partly by providing immigrants and the poor with social services. The services explain the endurance.
Assuming the New South industrialized the Southern economy.	Leaders promoted industrialization, but sharecropping and tenant farming stayed dominant.

Practice Questions

Original questions written for this guide in the style of the AP exam. Answers and explanations follow. Do not peek.

1. A student writes: 'The Gilded Age must have been terrible for all workers, because the gap between rich and poor grew.' What is wrong with this reasoning?
 - A. It ignores that falling prices raised workers' real wages and living standards even as the rich-poor gap grew.
 - B. It is correct, because the rich-poor gap did not actually grow.
 - C. It is correct, because falling prices meant falling wages too.
 - D. It is correct, because rising child labor proves all workers were worse off.

2. Which pairing correctly matches each idea to its claim about wealth and inequality?

- A. The Gospel of Wealth said the wealthy had a moral obligation to help the less fortunate; Social Darwinism said success at the top was appropriate and inevitable.
- B. The Gospel of Wealth said success at the top was appropriate and inevitable; Social Darwinism said the wealthy had a moral obligation to help the less fortunate.
- C. The Gospel of Wealth justified the wealthy's success as appropriate and inevitable.
- D. Social Darwinism called on the wealthy to fund education and improve cities.

Answer Key

1. A. A is correct because the framework holds both facts at once. Falling prices raised workers' real wages and standards of living, while the gap between rich and poor grew. B is wrong because the framework explicitly says the gap grew. C is wrong because wages rose in real terms as prices fell, not the reverse. D is wrong because child labor was real and growing, but that fact does not erase the framework's broader claim about rising real wages.

2. A. A is correct because it matches the framework's definitions. The Gospel of Wealth assigned the wealthy a moral obligation to the less fortunate, while Social Darwinism treated top-level success as appropriate and inevitable. B reverses the two claims. C assigns the wrong claim to the Gospel of Wealth, because justifying success as inevitable was Social Darwinism's position. D assigns philanthropy to Social Darwinism, when philanthropy belonged to the Gospel of Wealth's moral demand.

If you missed a question, add the trap behind it as a flashcard and drill it spaced out over several days. One short review at a time holds better than rereading the answer key in one sitting.

Six questions to answer without looking

Say each answer out loud or write it down. Peeking first turns this into rereading, and rereading builds recognition of the page instead of recall of the ideas.

Anything you cannot say out loud without help goes back into the deck. Put it in the queue and meet it again over the next few days.

1. How did railroads, mineral discoveries, and government policies work together in western economic development?
2. Explain the chain from the bison's decimation to violent conflict in the West.
3. What did the New South promise, and what stayed the same in the Southern economy?
4. Who used trusts and holding companies, and to what end? Who formed labor unions, and to what end?
5. State the Gospel of Wealth and Social Darwinism in one sentence each, as opposites.
6. What did the People's Party want government to do, and how did that differ from laissez-faire?

Questions students ask about Unit 6

How is the APUSH exam structured?

Section I: 55 multiple-choice questions in 55 minutes (40% of the score), then 3 short-answer questions in 40 minutes (20%). Starting with the May 2027 exam, all 3 short-answer questions are required, no choosing, and each includes a specified kind of source. Section II: one document-based question with 7 documents in 60 minutes, including a 15-minute reading period (25%); the 2027 DBQ draws evidence from a wider stretch of the course. Then one long essay in 40 minutes (15%), a single required prompt instead of a choice of three. Total exam time is 3 hours 15 minutes.

How much of the exam is Unit 6?

Unit 6 is 10-17% of the AP U.S. History exam, tied for the heaviest weight on the test. It is the industrialization unit, and the exam uses it to test whether you can connect economic change to social, cultural, and political responses.

Should I memorize inventors like Edison for the innovation topic?

You should learn some examples, but your exam answers should focus on the general pattern. The real innovations included cheap Bessemer steel, the telephone and telegraph, electric light and power, and railroad and office machinery, and knowing them can help you picture the transformation. The framework describes innovation in general terms as a driver of industrial change without naming any specific inventions. Because the exam is built from the framework, the main point to explain is that innovation drove consolidation and growth.

The guide has two assimilations. What's the difference?

In 6.3, assimilation was a set of U.S. government policies aimed at absorbing American Indians into the dominant culture, and many American Indians resisted it. In 6.9, assimilation was a public debate about immigrants adopting American culture, alongside the related idea of Americanization, and immigrants negotiated compromises between old and new cultures. The first case involved policy imposed by the government, and the second involved public debate and negotiation.

How do I keep Social Darwinism, the Gospel of Wealth, and the Social Gospel straight?

These ideas gave different answers to inequality, and the framework presents them that way. Social Darwinism said the success of those at the top was appropriate and inevitable, which justified the gap. The Gospel of Wealth said the wealthy had a moral obligation to help the less fortunate, which demanded philanthropy. The Social Gospel was a separate movement championing alternative visions for the economy and society in response to industrial capitalism.

What's the difference between agrarians, utopians, and socialists in the Gilded Age?

The framework does not distinguish them beyond naming all three as critics who championed alternative visions for the economy and society in response to industrial capitalism. Study them as a set of critics of the new order, without inventing differences the framework never draws.

Where to go next

Start with what you missed. Turn every missed item from the practice questions and the recall check into a flashcard and drill those cards spaced out over several days instead of in one sitting. The Unit 6 deck under AP U.S. History covers the terms in this guide, and the practice questions in Rycal work on the same traps named in the trap boxes and the error table. Working through the deck and a short set of questions on different days makes the paired ideas easier to keep apart.

You can also use Test Planner to schedule the next reviews before an exam and Brain Dump to test what you can write without looking. Use the planner to spread the work and the Brain Dump to find the next gap.

Key terms for this unit

Transcontinental railroads, Government subsidies (western transportation), Farmers' cooperative organizations, Mechanization (agriculture), American bison (decimation), Reservations (American Indian), Assimilation (American Indians), Tribal sovereignty, New South, Tenant farming, Plessy v. Ferguson, Jim Crow, Scientific theories of race, Industrial capitalism, Trusts, Holding companies, Gilded Age, Labor unions, Child labor, Assimilation (immigrants), Americanization, Social Darwinism, Jane Addams, Settlement houses, Middle class, Consumer culture, Gospel of Wealth, Social Gospel, Agrarians, Utopians, Socialists, Laissez-faire, People's (Populist) Party, Political machines.