

HIST212
Assessment Unit 2: American Industrialization
Guide to Responding

1. The term “gilded” could apply to the very unequal distribution of wealth and to the politics of this era. This period experienced tremendous economic growth, but wealth over time became more concentrated in the hands of large corporations, which monopolized various industries. For example the Standard Oil “trust” under the leadership of one of the “Robber Barons,” John D. Rockefeller, dominated the oil industry. Another “Robber Baron,” the financier J. P. Morgan, created another trust, United States Steel. Meanwhile, millions of workers on railroads and in mines and factories worked for long hours with little pay in unsafe working conditions. The discontent of these workers was reflected in violent labor strikes and demonstrations such as the Railroad Strike of 1877, the Haymarket Riot in 1886, the Homestead Steel Strike in 1894, and the Pullman Strike of 1894. In the politics of the day, the country had the healthy appearance of a republic with citizens voting in large numbers in elections, but large businesses had greater influence with elected officials than the typical citizen. For example, presidential candidate James Blaine in 1880 reportedly had received favors from railroad companies and the “Robber Barons” won over elected officials with financial incentives in exchange for favorable legislation. However, it would be a mistake to characterize this entire era in a completely negative light, as this same period witnessed a host of new technical advances such as the invention of the telephone by Alexander Graham Bell (1876) and the light bulb by Thomas Edison (1879), as well as engineering feats such as the completion of the transcontinental railroad by 1869. With the passage of the Morrill Act of 1862, new “land-grant” colleges were founded which enabled more Americans to attend college than ever before. Also in this period, millions of new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe as well as China and Japan settled in this country and contributed to the country’s cultural diversity.
2. The United States did offer immigrants new opportunities to achieve a better life. The Homestead Act of 1862 offered free land out west to settlers who lived on claimed land for five years. Many immigrants moved out west and established homesteads; even more such as the Chinese found jobs out west building the railroads. Immigrants also found jobs in the east, working in factories and mines, since the economy was expanding rapidly in this period. However, working conditions were harsh and pay was low at this time. Immigrants in the big cities such as New York City often lived in run-down tenements which lacked proper sanitation and safe drinking water. Crime and disease ran rampant in many poor, urban immigrant communities. Immigrants were also subject to job discrimination and abuse by some native-born Americans, who, in some cases, viewed the immigrants with suspicion due to their differences. Many immigrants were from southern and eastern Europe and were Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Jewish, and therefore different from native-born Americans who

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were largely of the Protestant faith. Chinese and Japanese immigrants were of a different race than the majority of European Americans. Another source of friction between immigrants and native born Americans was job competition, especially when the economy was in a downturn such as after the Panic of 1873. In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which shut the door on future Chinese immigration, after native-born Americans complained that Chinese immigration was lowering wages.

