



The Great Tax Wars: Lincoln to Wilson--The Fierce Battles over Money and Power That Transformed the Nation

Steven R. Weisman

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A major work of history, "The Great Tax Wars" is the gripping, epic story of six decades of often violent conflict over wealth, power, and fairness that gave America the income tax. It's the story of a tumultuous period of radical change, from Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War through the progressive era under Theodore Roosevelt and ending with Woodrow Wilson and World War I. During these years of upheaval, America was transformed from an agrarian society into a mighty industrial nation as great fortunes were amassed, militant farmers and workers rebelled against concentrations of vast wealth and power, class war was narrowly averted, and America emerged as a global power. Award-winning journalist Steven R. Weisman begins his narrative with the Civil War, when Lincoln imposed the nation's first income tax to pay the Union Army and dampen dangerous resentment against bankers, merchants, and factory owners who profited from the war. Repealed by Congress after the war, the tax was reenacted in 1894 to deal with the nation's worst economic collapse until that time. By reducing the government's heavy reliance on tariffs for revenue, the tax benefited farmers in the West and South who were rebelling against the high cost of imports and goods manufactured in the North and East. But a year later, the Supreme Court declared the income tax unconstitutional, plunging the court into one of the worst controversies it has endured and once again pitting region against region and workers and farmers against industrialists. The court's decision also handed populist congressman William Jennings Bryan of Nebraska, who was a champion of the tax, a major issue in his unsuccessful campaign for president in 1896. The turn of the century brought an outpouring of progressive reforms under President Roosevelt. Toward the end of his term, T.R. proposed an income tax to help break the excessive power of the wealthy and the trusts and banks they controlled, but it took a deal between President William Howard Taft and Congress in 1909, and then ratification of the Sixteenth Amendment to the Constitution, to finally get the tax enacted in 1913. The tax took effect just as Wilson entered the White House and in time to finance America's involvement in World War I. "The Great Tax Wars" features an extraordinary cast of characters, including the powerful men who built the nation's industries and the politicians and reformers who battled them -- from J. P. Morgan and Andrew Carnegie to Lincoln, T.R., Wilson, Bryan, and Eugene Debs. From their ferocious battles emerged a more flexible definition of democracy, economic justice, and free enterprise largely framed by a more progressive tax system. Drawing on their words and on newspaper and magazine accounts of the time, Weisman shows how the ever-controversial income tax transformed America and how today's debates about the tax echo those of the past.

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