

Becoming a Modern Society

America in the Gilded Age, 1877–1900

“The day seems brought distinctly nearer when the nation, equipped with the latest implements furnished by science, shall master and use as never before its rich domain.”

REV. RICHARD STORRS, speech at the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge

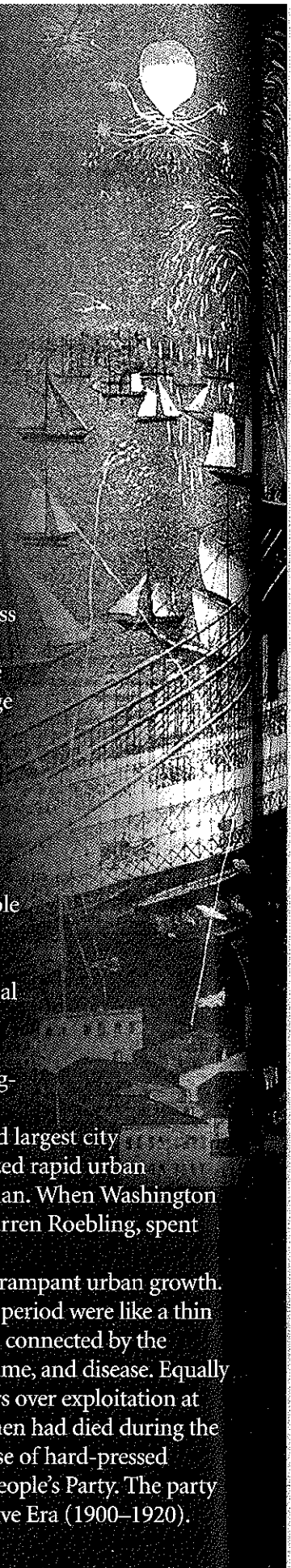
Hundreds of thousands of people, including President Chester A. Arthur and countless dignitaries, participated in the joyful ceremonies marking the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge on May 23, 1883. As this painting of the event demonstrates, Americans in the late nineteenth century celebrated the onset of the urban age. An astonishing sight and the very

embodiment of the modern age, it was the world’s largest suspension bridge, a style made possible by the one product that in many ways defined the industrial revolution—steel. The bridge’s designer, German immigrant John Roebling, emphasized this transition to the modern age by using a stark contrast: he constructed the bridge’s twin towers out of the ancient building material (stone) and formed them into gothic archways, a style reminiscent of the great medieval cathedrals of Europe.

The Brooklyn Bridge embodied the new urban and industrial era in ways beyond its cutting-edge technology and symbolic design. Workers who were either immigrants or the children of immigrants constructed the bridge. By connecting the nation’s largest city (New York) and third largest city (Brooklyn), a prelude to their consolidation into one city in 1898, the new bridge also symbolized rapid urban growth. Finally the bridge hinted at the emergence of a new, more independent American woman. When Washington Roebling (who succeeded his father as chief engineer) fell gravely ill in 1872, his wife, Emily Warren Roebling, spent the next eleven years as the project’s onsite manager.

The enthusiasm that attended the bridge’s opening masked the grave problems that attended rampant urban growth. Indeed the era’s name, the Gilded Age, reflected this notion that the amazing achievements of the period were like a thin gold layer that covered many unresolved social problems. The sections of New York and Brooklyn connected by the bridge, for example, were vast working-class immigrant districts beset by high rates of poverty, crime, and disease. Equally unseen in the immediate glow of the fireworks was the rising discontent among American workers over exploitation at the hands of employers and alienation from an unresponsive political system. Indeed dozens of men had died during the bridge’s construction, and on several occasions workers went on strike. These sentiments and those of hard-pressed American farmers in the heartland would explode in the 1890s, leading to the emergence of the People’s Party. The party eventually faded away, but not before establishing a reform agenda that would shape the Progressive Era (1900–1920).

How did the term Gilded Age reflect both the optimism and anxiety of the late nineteenth century?





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The Rise of the City



The United States experienced explosive urban growth in the second half of the nineteenth century. Industrialization and mass immigration transformed both older cities, such as New York and Philadelphia, and newer ones, such as Denver and Chicago, into major metropolises. Their growth was often chaotic and attended by significant increases in crime, poverty, and disease epidemics. City political machines emerged in this period and grew powerful, providing relief to the vulnerable and promoting urban growth, but in the process earning a reputation for corruption.

To the Cities

The urban population of the United States grew at an astonishing rate between 1860 and 1900. In 1860 one in five Americans lived in urban areas. Forty years later the figure had doubled to two in five. In that same period the number of cities with populations greater than 100,000 jumped from nine to thirty-eight. Among these were New York (3.4 million), Chicago (2.7 million), and Philadelphia (1.3 million). Joining these cities in 1900 were seventy-eight more with 50,000 or more inhabitants.

A significant portion of this new urban population came from rural areas within the United States. As agriculture became more mechanized (see Chapter 15), thereby lowering demand for farm labor, increasing numbers of men migrated to urban areas. Similarly the rise of American manufacturing eliminated the need for rural women to make clothes and other household goods, leading many to seek economic opportunity in cities. These men and women found a wide array of job opportunities in the city, ranging from low-paid work as factory operatives, laborers, and domestic servants to more desirable positions as skilled artisans and clerks.

They also faced a significant challenge in adjusting to an utterly new lifestyle.

Another rural-to-urban internal migration involved African Americans leaving the Jim Crow South. Seeking to escape the poverty, racism, and violence of the South (see Chapter 14), a growing stream of African Americans began moving to northern cities. Drawn by word of better jobs and greater freedoms, some 300,000 migrated to northern cities between 1890 and 1910. Chicago's African American population jumped from 15,000 in 1890 to 110,000 in 1920. This trend marked the beginning of what became known as the Great Migration, the relocation of some 7 million African Americans from the South to the North between 1890 and 1970.

By far, however, the greatest source of urban population growth was mass immigration from Europe, with significant numbers also from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia. Before 1880 the majority of immigrants to the United States came from England, Ireland, Germany, and Scandinavia. But after 1880 the sources of immigration shifted to nations in southern and eastern Europe such as Russia, Italy, Greece, and Austria-Hungary (17.1).

17.1 Immigration to the United States, 1880–1920
Before 1880 the majority of immigrants to the United States came from northern and western Europe, but after 1880 most were from southern and eastern Europe.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census.

	1880-1889	%	1890-1899	%	1900-1909	%	1910-1919	%
Austria-Hungary	314,787	6.0	534,059	14.5	2,001,376	24.4	1,154,727	18.2
German Empire	1,445,181	27.5	579,072	15.7	328,722	4.0	174,227	2.7
Greece	1,807	.1	12,732	.3	145,402	1.8	198,108	3.1
Ireland	764,061	12.8	405,710	11.0	344,940	4.2	166,445	2.6
Italy	276,660	5.1	603,761	16.3	1,930,475	23.5	1,229,916	19.4
Russia	182,698	3.5	450,101	12.7	1,501,301	18.3	1,106,998	17.4
Scandinavia	761,783	12.7	390,729	10.5	488,208	5.9	238,275	3.8
United Kingdom	810,900	15.5	328,579	8.9	469,578	5.7	971,878	5.8
Totals	5,248,568		3,694,295		8,202,388		6,347,380	

All told the United States accepted fourteen million newcomers between 1860 and 1900, followed by another fourteen million between 1900 and 1920.

As with all immigrants before and since, some of these newcomers chose immigration to escape problems ranging from poverty, warfare, political and religious persecution, and natural disasters. But most were drawn by the promise of economic opportunity and upward mobility in America. Some migrated to rural areas and became farmers, but the great majority headed for America's cities and the ever-expanding number of jobs in industry, construction, service, and entrepreneurship found there.

Cities already characterized by ethnic, racial, and religious diversity brought by earlier arrivals of Irish, German, and other immigrants, as well as African Americans, now saw their diversity reach unprecedented levels. By 1910 immigrants or the American-born children of immigrants comprised an astonishing 78.6 percent of New York's population of 4.8 million residents. Chicago (77.5 percent), Milwaukee (78.6 percent), San Francisco (68.3 percent) and most medium to large cities boasted similarly astounding numbers of immigrants and American-born children of immigrants. Overall the foreign-born comprised 14.8 percent of the national population in 1910.

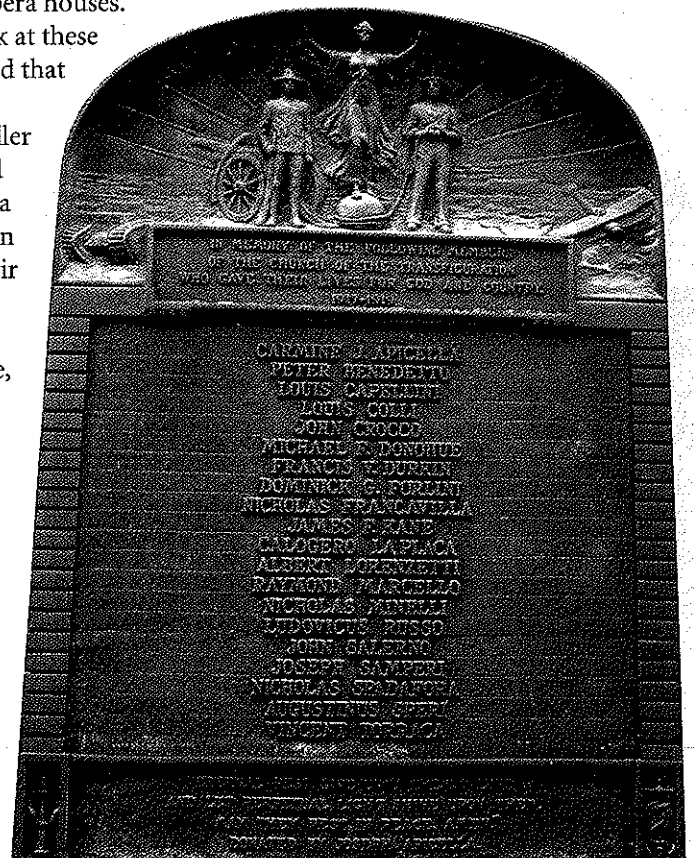
The Emergence of Ethnic Enclaves

These new immigrants spurring the growth of cities, like the Irish and Germans before them, soon formed concentrated ethnic enclaves in the cities. Often they moved into neighborhoods previously dominated by immigrants who had arrived before the Civil War. As a result in New York, for example, the Lower East Side enclaves of Little Ireland, Little Germany, and Little Africa became by the 1890s Little Italy, Chinatown, and the Jewish East Side. This process of ethnic succession is captured in a World War I memorial plaque affixed to the façade of the Church of the Transfiguration on New York's Lower East Side (17.2). A community of native-born Americans built the church in 1801 as the English Lutheran First Church of Zion, but they sold it in

the 1840s to Irish Catholics who renamed it Church of the Transfiguration. In the 1890s a massive influx of Italians and outflow of Irish to other parts of the city turned the neighborhood into Little Italy and Transfiguration into a mostly Italian Catholic church. (Mother Cabrini, later canonized a saint, worked in the church caring for Italian immigrants.) The plaque provides a snapshot of the transformation from Little Ireland to Little Italy. Of the twenty names of parishioners who died in World War I, seventeen are Italian and only three—Donahue, Durkin, and Kane—are Irish. Today the neighborhood is part of Chinatown and most of the parishioners are Chinese.

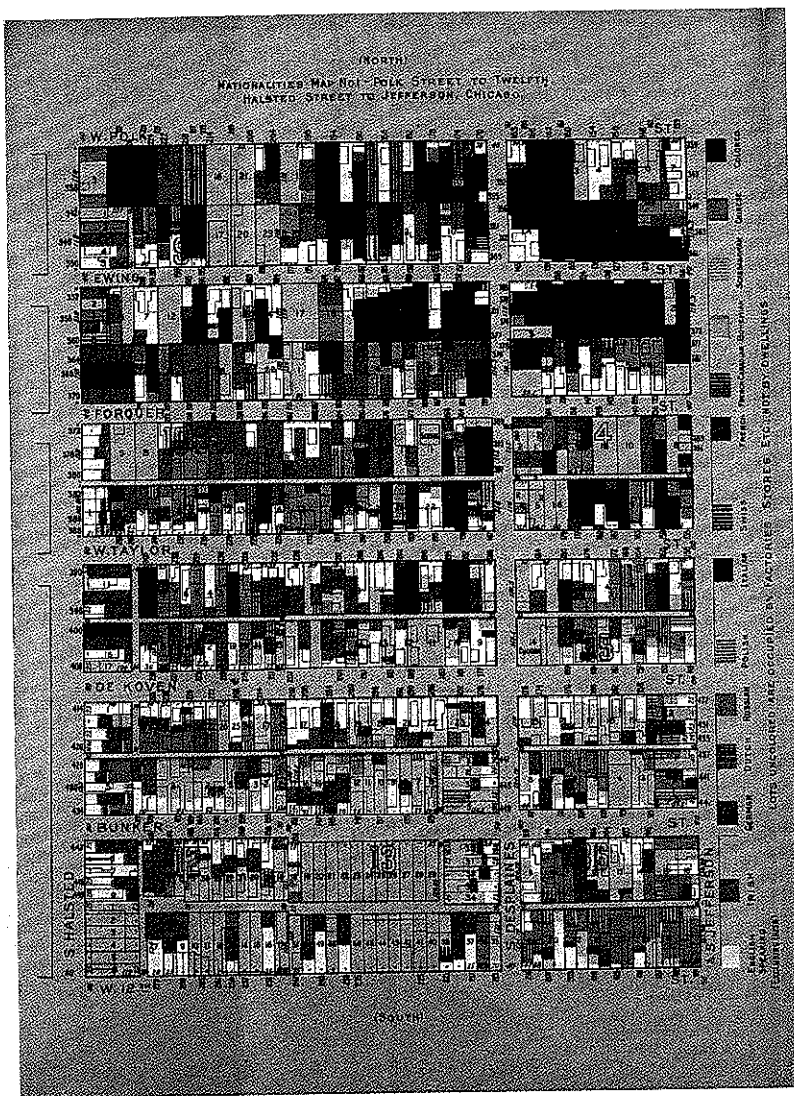
Immigrant groups formed ethnic enclaves in part because they faced hostility and discrimination from Americans and other immigrant groups. But the primary cause was their recognition that grouping together created important advantages that enhanced their chances of success in America. Italian immigrants living in Chicago's Little Italy, for example, enjoyed the comfort and practical benefits of residing among people who spoke their language. There they could find help getting a job from an immigrant aid association, fellowship in an Italian fraternal society, or solace in an Italian Catholic church. They also found things that reminded them of home: Italian food, books, newspapers, churches, theaters, and opera houses.

A closer look at these enclaves revealed that they usually comprised smaller units composed of people from a particular region or village of their home country. New York's Jewish East Side, for example, included large concentrations of Jews from Hungary, Romania, Galicia, Russia, and Levantine.



17.2 Evidence of Ethnic Succession

This 1919 plaque lists seventeen Italian and three Irish names, indicating that the neighborhood once known as Little Ireland had become Little Italy.



17.3 Mapping the Diversity of Ethnic Chicago

This 1895 map of the twelve-block area surrounding Hull House demonstrates the diversity of the immigrant neighborhood.

Italians living in Boston's North End clustered on certain streets depending on whether they came from Sicily, Campania, Abruzzi, or Liguria. Yet as this 1895 map (17.3) of the neighborhood surrounding Chicago's famous Hull House, which provided that city's immigrants with social and educational services, vividly demonstrates, immigrants—even those in ethnic enclaves—shared their neighborhoods with people of diverse origins. This twelve-block section of the city included immigrants from Ireland, Germany, Italy, Russia, Poland, Switzerland, France, Canada, Bohemia, Scandinavia, China, and the Netherlands, not to mention African Americans.

The Troubled City

Many Americans in the late nineteenth century saw cities as exciting places filled with opportunity,

cultural diversity, entertainment, and new technology such as electric lighting and skyscrapers. Yet many more viewed cities as places of crowding, turmoil, filth, and despair. Both images were accurate, but the latter generated the most commentary and concern. One of the most striking features of modern urban life was the emergence of densely-packed "slums." In one ward on New York's Lower East Side in 1890, population density reached 334,000 people per square mile, numbers never seen before in history. Most of the people living in these densely packed districts were immigrants who labored for low wages as day laborers and factory operatives. Few men earned enough money to support their families and so they relied on their wives and children to produce additional income (see Chapter 16).

Squalid housing exacerbated the poverty of urban workers. Tenements, or multiple family dwellings of four to six stories housing dozens of families, became the most common form of housing for poor city dwellers by the 1860s. Most tenement apartments consisted of just two or three dimly lit and poorly ventilated rooms.

Tenement districts in every city suffered from high rates of disease and death, much of it caused when drinking water became contaminated by disease-causing bacteria due to primitive systems for removing sewage waste. Another source of disease were horses. In 1900 New York's 120,000 horses dropped six million pounds of manure on the city's streets every day! In most cities, as shown in this photograph (17.4), street cleaning was inadequate in working-class neighborhoods. Note that in this filthy working-class street in New York, vendors sell all manner of goods on the sidewalks, including food. These conditions contributed to frequent epidemics. In Chicago in 1891, for example, 2,000 people died from typhoid fever and 4,300 from bronchitis and pneumonia. Annually in the same city in the early 1890s some 10,000 to 12,000 children under the age of five died.

Despite the dreadful condition of many tenements, the surging population of American cities kept the demand for housing high, causing rents to rise continually. In New York an 1883 survey of bricklayers, among the city's best-paid wageworkers, determined that they paid 28 percent of their annual income to their landlords. Another survey a few years later revealed that cloakmakers devoted 38 percent of their income to rent. As a result evictions for falling behind in rent occurred frequently. New York averaged more than 16,000 evictions per year in the early 1880s and more than 23,000 by 1892.

“Thousands of small houses and cottages arranged for one family are now packed with a family in each room.”

Chicago Board of Health report

Late-nineteenth-century cities also suffered from high rates of crime, especially in the tenement districts. Some crime was driven by poverty or despair. Women, for example, usually turned to prostitution as a last resort means of survival. Immigration also played a role as it resulted in a disproportionately high population of young single men (typically an age cohort with higher than average crime rates). The overall growth, diversity, and mobility of urban populations also contributed to the rising crime rate because these populations fostered a greater sense of anonymity and undermined the ability and will of communities to keep a watchful eye on potential criminal activity.

“Boss Rule”: The Political Machine

Another unsettling feature of urban life, in addition to poverty, crime, and disorder, was the emergence of political machines. Most often associated with the Democratic Party, these organizations became powerful in nearly every large American city by mobilizing large blocs of working-class and immigrant voters while developing favorable relationships with real estate and business interests. Some machines controlled small sections of big cities. Martin Lomasney, for example, was “boss” of Boston’s Eighth Ward in the West End. Others, such as New York’s Tammany Hall came to rule the entire metropolis by the 1860s. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, several machines extended their power to the state level.

Several trends coincided to account for the rise of political machines in American cities. First the spread of universal white male suffrage in the 1820s (see Chapter 8) meant that political success depended less on a candidate’s family name or wealth and more on his ability to whip up popular

17.4 Mired in Muck

Late-nineteenth-century American cities, especially in working-class neighborhoods, suffered from inadequate street cleaning, leading to public health problems.



What factors contributed to high rates of crime in cities?

enthusiasm for candidates and get out the vote on election day. Rapid urban growth also produced unprecedented opportunities for politicians and their machines to reward supporters with construction contracts and jobs such as police officers and building inspectors. Machines also garnered support from immigrants by denouncing nativism and stymieing anti-immigrant legislation such as proposals to deny public jobs to the foreign

“Tammany Hall bears the same relation to the penitentiary as the Sunday-school to the church.”

A reformer, 1876

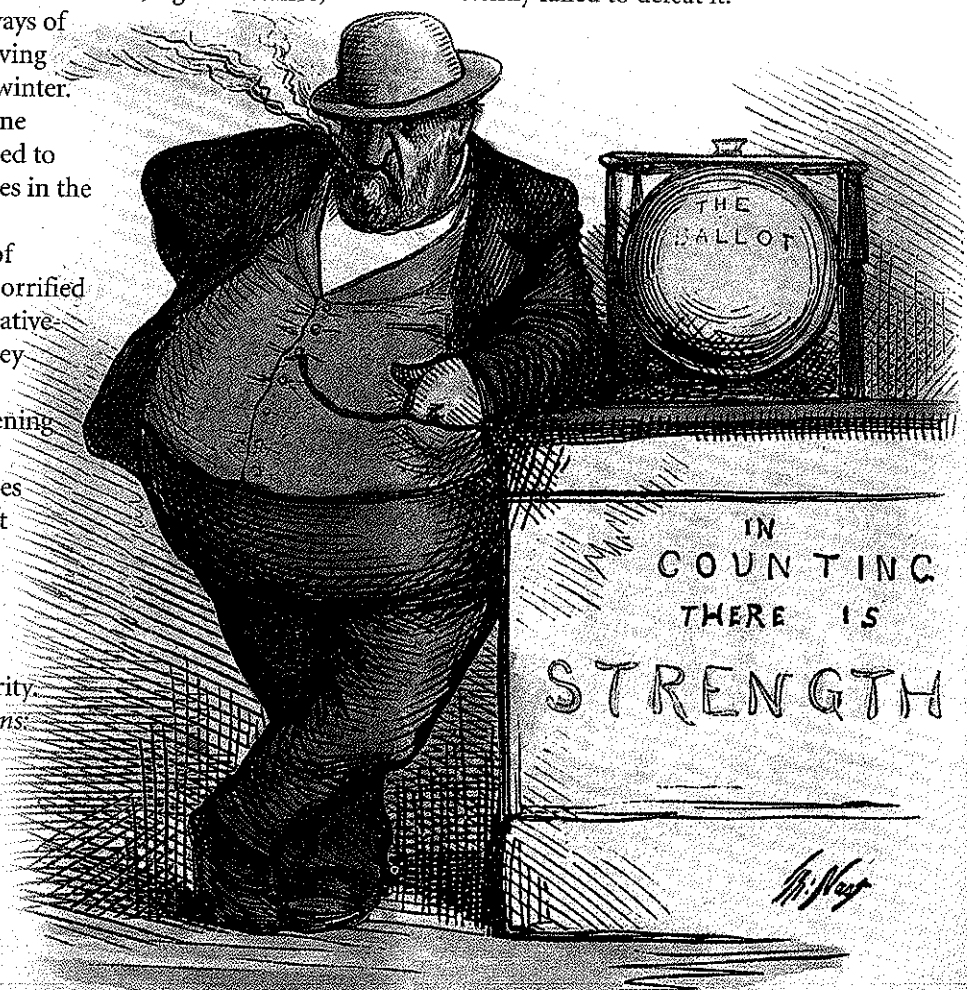
born. Finally, the growing numbers of the poor provided a needy constituency for which the machines supplied not only jobs but also a whole range of services and favors including cash handouts, payments for funerals, legal assistance, and seasonal giveaways of turkeys at Thanksgiving and bags of coal in winter. Recipients of machine largesse were expected to vote for its candidates in the coming election.

The emergence of political machines horrified many wealthy and native-born Americans. They found rule by the foreign-born threatening and the rough and corrupt style of bosses offensive. One aspect of machine politics, however, aroused especially bitter criticism: the no-questions-asked charity (see *Competing Visions: How Best to Help the Poor?*).

17.5 Winning By Any Means

Political machines often resorted to voter intimidation and election fraud. As the motto “In Counting There is Strength” suggests, vote counts were manipulated to ensure victory.

Political machines acquired and retained power not only by providing services to their constituents but also, as suggested by this political cartoon of boss William Tweed, the notoriously corrupt head of Tammany Hall, by engaging in voter intimidation and election fraud (17.5). This image shows that the ballot “box” in many cities was actually a transparent glass ball that allowed the political machine’s “shoulder hitters” to intimidate voters by letting them know they were watching to see how they voted. The motto “In Counting There Is Strength” refers to the tactic of political machines to use their influence with the police department and local boards of elections to manipulate the vote count to ensure a victory for their party. Equally important was the enormous amount of money machines garnered by selling patronage jobs, demanding kickbacks from city contractors, and collecting protection fees from a vast economy of vice the machine-controlled police allowed to flourish. Reformers railed against the machine, but consistently failed to defeat it.



“THAT’S WHAT’S THE MATTER.”

BOSS TWEED. “As long as I count the Votes, what are you going to do about it? say?”

How did political machines gain the support of working-class and immigrant voters?

Competing Visions

HOW BEST TO HELP THE POOR?

The following documents by George Washington Plunkitt, a member of New York's Tammany Hall machine, and Josephine Shaw Lowell, founder of the Charity Organization Society, offer sharply contrasting views on how best to help the urban poor. How do they differ in their understanding of the causes of poverty? How do these views shape their approach to helping the poor?

In *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall* (1905), George Washington Plunkitt explains the many kinds of aid he dispensed to his mostly poor, working-class constituents in the course of a typical day.

2 a.m.: Aroused from sleep by the ringing of his doorbell; ... found a bartender, who asked him to go to the police station and bail out a saloon-keeper who had been arrested. ... Furnished bail and returned to bed at three o'clock.

6 a.m.: Awakened by fire engines passing his house. Hastened to the scene of the fire.... Met several of his election district captains who are always under orders to look out for fires, which are considered great vote-getters. Found several tenants who had been burned out, took them to a hotel, supplied them with clothes, fed them, and arranged temporary quarters for them...

8:30 a.m.: Went to police-court to look after his constituents. Found six "drunks." Secured discharge of four by a timely word with the judge, and paid the fines of two.

9 a.m.: Appeared in the Municipal District Court. Paid the rent of a poor family about to be dispossessed [evicted] and gave them a dollar for food.

11 p.m.: At home again.... Spent nearly three hours fixing things for four men [looking for jobs], and succeeded in each case.

3 a.m.: Attended the funeral [procession] of an Italian as far as the ferry. Hurried back to make his appearance at the funeral of a Hebrew constituent...

7 p.m.: Went to district headquarters and presided over a meeting of election district captains...

8 p.m.: Went to a church fair. Took chances on everything, bought ice cream for the young girls and the children. Kissed the little ones, flattered their mothers and took their fathers out for something down at the corner [at a saloon].

9 p.m.: At the clubhouse again. Spent \$10 on tickets for a church excursion and promised a subscription for a new church bell.... Listened to the complaints of a dozen pushcart peddlers who said they were persecuted by the police and assured them he would go to Police Headquarters in the morning and see about it.

10:30 P.M.: Attended a Hebrew wedding reception and dance.

12 P.M. [sic]: In bed.

In "The Bitter Cry of the Poor in New York," (1885), Josephine Shaw Lowell explains her belief that excessive charity harms the poor.

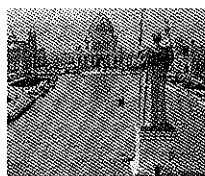
[I]t appears that there have been, during the past three years, in New York, 220,976 persons who have asked for outside charity in one form or another.... What, then, is the secret of this ... disgraceful showing? ...

One ... is that instead of having been encouraged and helped to be honest, upright, independent, noble, they have been tempted to lie, to cheat, to cringe, to beg; and by whom has this cruel wrong been done? By the churches; by the benevolent people of this city. It is the work of those who think and say that they want to help the poor, but ... [t]hey forget the horrible temptations they are presenting to their fellow creatures. They give, without consideration, one dollar, two dollars, five dollars, never stopping to think how many hours' work it takes to *earn* such sums. Imagine how utterly discouraged and disgusted must be the woman who brings home her dollar earned by a hard day's work over the washtub, when her neighbor shows her an order for a dollar's worth of groceries obtained by a trip to ... the office of some relief society. She naturally will cease to struggle so hard to earn her pittance, and will take her neighbor's advice and seek the next dollar she wants where her neighbor has found it so easy to get one.... It is like a contagion.... [H]ere is a neighbor who tells them they can get their rent, can get city coal, can get grocery orders, by going to the right sources of supply. Who could resist the temptation? And so they give up their work, and set forth on their degrading journey.... [T]hey learn to be idle, to be beggars.



Out on the Sidewalk
Eviction was an ever-present fear for many poor and working-class city dwellers.

A Search for Solutions



The dark side of urbanization in the late nineteenth century prompted a wide range of competing views and responses. Some Americans concluded that the problem of urban poverty and all the troubling crime, disease, disorder, and corruption that accompanied it was the urban poor, in particular, the foreign-born. Their solution was heightened nativism and a demand for immigration restriction. Other Americans, however, worked to develop government agencies to address the emerging challenges of urban life. Still others established private institutions like settlement houses that reflected a new attitude toward the immigrant poor.

The Nativist Impulse

The rise of the modern American city was accompanied by a revival of nativism, or anti-immigrant views and sentiments. Suspicion of and hatred for the foreign-born had flared up during the Know-Nothing movement (see Chapter 12) in the 1850s, which targeted Irish and German immigrants. In the Gilded Age nativism took aim primarily at the so-called new immigrants, or those coming from southern and eastern Europe. As this 1899 image (17.6) illustrates, opponents of immigration in this period decried the newcomers as bearers of a wide range of unwanted habits and ideas. The immigrant, show here in racist caricature of eastern Europeans,

(often involving large numbers of foreign-born workers) became more violent, nativists like Josiah Strong called all the more loudly for the sharp restriction of immigration.

In 1882 Congress responded to pressure by American workers and passed the Chinese Exclusion Act (see Chapter 16), a law that barred Chinese immigration to the United States. Five years later in 1887 a group of nativists who were especially fixated on the dangers posed by the rising immigration of Catholics formed the American Protective Association (APA) to lobby for immigration restriction. The organization grew to 500,000 members by the end of 1893. Its main base of strength lay in middle-class Protestants in the Midwest, but chapters also sprang up in most cities in the east.

The city has become a serious menace to our civilization.... It has a peculiar attraction for the immigrant.... Here is heaped the social dynamite; here roughs, gamblers, thieves, robbers, lawless and desperate men of all sorts, congregate; men who are ready on any pretext to raise riots for the purpose of destruction and plunder.

— JOSIAH STRONG, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (1885)

Rising concerns over immigration led Congress to enact legislation in 1890 making oversight of immigration a federal responsibility and establishing immigration depots in most major port cities to screen all immigrant arrivals to weed out and deport those with incurable diseases, radical beliefs, criminal backgrounds, or so little money and skills they seemed likely only to add to the ranks of the urban poor. The largest and most famous of these facilities, Ellis Island, opened in 1892.

Many nativists, considering this new system too lenient, called for additional restrictions on immigration. In 1894 three Harvard graduates founded the Immigration Restriction League, an organization dedicated to lobbying for a literacy test for all would-be immigrants (requiring they demonstrate the ability to read and write in any language). Presidents Cleveland, Taft, and Wilson vetoed the immigrant literacy test bill, but Congress overrode the veto and it became law in 1917.

carries according to his labels poverty, anarchy, superstition, intemperance, and Sabbath desecration (working or recreating on a Sunday). Note further Uncle Sam's disdainful reaction, but also the sarcastic inscriptions on the gateway—"admittance free," "walk in!" and "welcome"—meant to convey nativists' anger over what they considered lax immigration laws. As slums grew larger and strikes

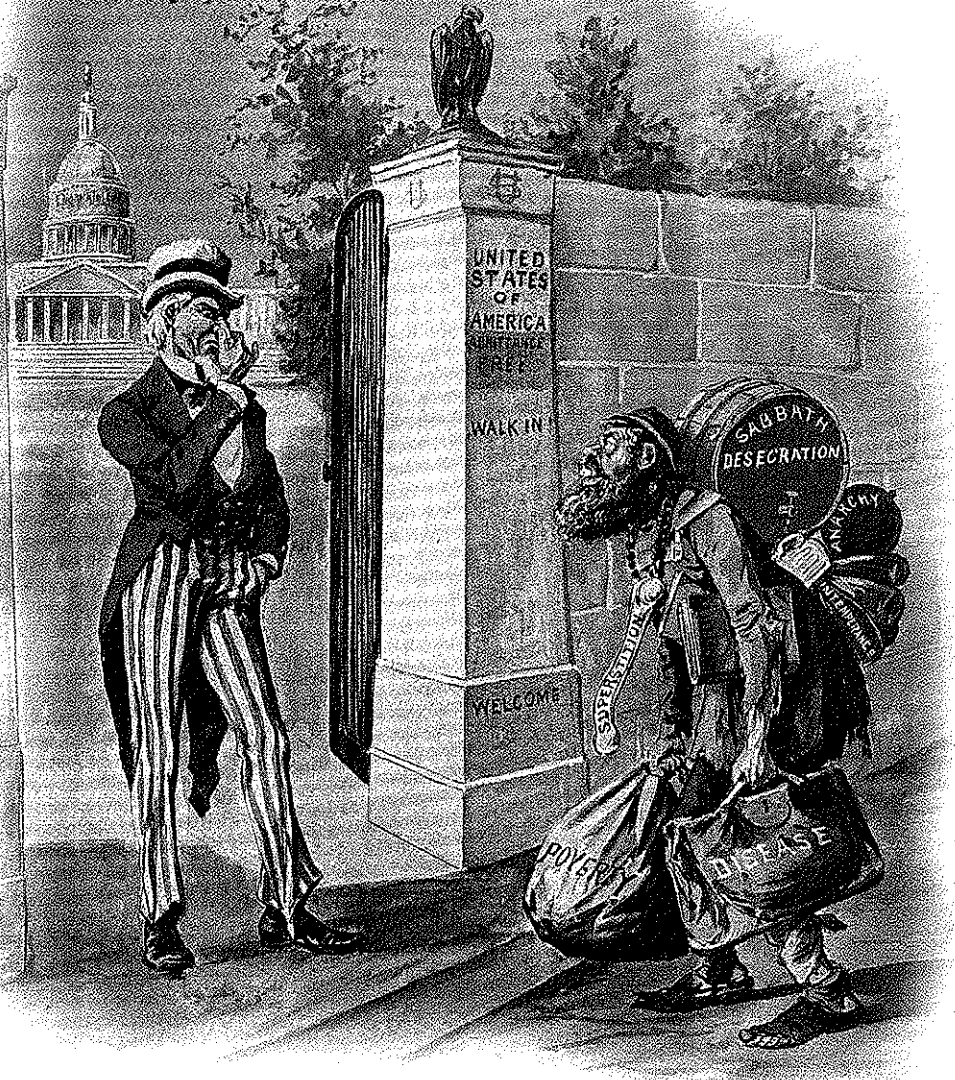
A Different View: Urban Reforms

While some Americans believed urban poverty, crime, disease, and overcrowding could be eliminated simply by restricting immigration, others developed a wide range of innovative policies and institutions to solve, or at least minimize, these problems. To meet the problem of rising crime, most cities followed the lead of New York when in 1845 it replaced the traditional night watch of a few untrained and unarmed men and established a paid professional police department. Similarly large cities disbanded their volunteer fire companies and invested in new technology, such as steam pumpers, and adopted tougher building codes.

More dangerous to a city than fire—at least to its inhabitants—were the frequent outbreaks of cholera, diphtheria, typhoid fever, and other maladies. Drawing on increasing knowledge about germ theory, cities established boards of health and took steps to improve water quality, waste removal, and street cleaning.

The latter half of the nineteenth century also witnessed a movement to build urban parks to provide the beauty and serenity of nature and to offer wholesome and healthy recreation space (as opposed to alleys and saloons) for all. New York City's Central Park, built in the 1850s and 1860s, proved so successful that nearly every large city commenced its own park projects. Because most of the grand parks were located far from the slums, however, reformers in the 1890s pushed urban governments to condemn whole blocks of tenements and build parks within working-class neighborhoods.

Urban reformers also expanded public education. Compulsory education laws (usually requiring schooling until age fourteen) and a massive building campaign saw the number of public school enrollments surge from 6.9 million to 17.8 million between 1870 and 1910. Millions more students attended parochial schools established by the Catholic church. This effort reflected the traditional belief that education made for a productive and informed citizenry. But as the photograph (17.7) of children reciting the Pledge



of Allegiance illustrates, advocates saw expanded urban public schooling as a means of Americanizing the immigrant masses, teaching them English and respect for democracy and the law. The pledge was first published in a youth magazine in the fall of 1892 as part of an effort to promote patriotism and civic pride among school children on the eve of the four hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in the New World. Educators quickly adopted the pledge, making its recitation a daily ritual in schools across the country. This earlier style, which required people to end the pledge by extending their arms out straight, was done away with in the 1930s because of its similarity to salutes used in fascist Germany and Italy.

17.6 Fear of Foreigners on the Rise
Decrying the so-called "new immigrants" from southern and eastern Europe as bearers of a wide range of unwanted habits and ideas, nativism surged in the Gilded Age.



17.7 Promoting Loyalty and Patriotism

Advocates of public education viewed it as a means of Americanizing the urban immigrant masses. Soon after its introduction in 1892, educators quickly made the Pledge of Allegiance a daily ritual in schools.

Capturing a New View of Poverty

Reformers in the Gilded Age also developed a new way of thinking about poverty and its causes. Most Americans at this time held to the traditional view that poverty was caused by personal or moral failures such as laziness or drunkenness. The poor, as Horatio Alger and others argued so persuasively in popular literature (see Chapter 16), needed only to abandon their dissolute ways and seize the opportunities for success that abounded in American life.

But toward the end of the nineteenth century, reformers began to challenge this view of poverty by arguing that factors beyond the control of the poor caused a significant portion of poverty. A key figure

in this new outlook was photojournalist Jacob A. Riis, who emigrated from Denmark to New York in 1870. After spending his first years in America struggling in poverty, he gained a foothold in journalism. By the mid-1880s he had earned a reputation as a reporter covering the city's crime beat. But Riis was deeply troubled by the poverty and suffering he saw and decided to publicize the problem in the hopes of gaining public support for reform measures. In 1887 he started taking photographs of slum life to spark public awareness, and by 1888-1889 he began showing his photographs while giving lectures before reform societies and church groups. Spurred by the positive reaction to these talks, especially to the photographs (see *Images as History: Seeing the Poor*), he wrote the book *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the*

Images as History

SEEING THE POOR

Riis presented a shocking exposé account of the dreadful conditions in which the poor lived. But unlike most Americans writing about urban poverty in that era, who attributed these problems to the moral failures of the poor, Riis argued that the poor were *victims* of unhealthy and unregulated tenements for which they were forced to pay most of their earnings. Adding to the book's impact were his photographs and drawings made from photographs. His carefully composed photograph, "An Italian Rag-Picker in Jersey Street," shows the viewer her desperate situation.



Filippo Lippi, *Madonna and Child* (1445) [Source: Filippo Lippi, "Madonna and Child," 1440/1445. Tempera on panel, .797 x .511 (31 3/8 x 20 1/8); framed: 1.172 x .854 x .095 (46 1/8 x 33 5/8 x 3 3/4). Samuel H. Kress Collection, Photograph © 2001 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington. 1939.1.290.(401)/PA]

Riis convinced many of his readers that the growing numbers of impoverished slum dwellers were trapped in circumstances beyond their control largely due to unhealthy and expensive tenement housing. He called for improved tenements that would free the poor from their debilitating circumstances and allow them the chance to succeed. As a result of *How the Other Half Lives* and several more books, not to mention many magazine articles and speeches, Riis's work led many cities to launch investigations and eventually pass tougher laws regarding room size, windows, running water, and toilets.

The ladder suggests her "apartment" is little more than a dingy, windowless basement room with only one piece of furniture (the chair on which she sits).

Riis presents her not as filthy or drunk; despite the dreadful circumstances, she and her baby are dressed in clean clothes.

Riis often included babies and innocent-looking children in his photographs to prompt the viewer to wonder—and worry—about their fate if action is not taken to alleviate the plight of the poor.



The man's hat on the wall prompts the viewer to wonder if this desperate woman has a husband, or if she's been abandoned.

Although poor this woman is a hard worker. A rag-picker collected discarded rags and other fabric (see sacks), laundered them on a stovetop tub, and then sold them to paper manufacturers for pennies per pound.

The mother's heavenward gaze was intended to spur sympathy in the minds of middle- and upper-class viewers by conjuring up the familiar religious imagery of the Madonna and Child.

Jacob A. Riis, "Italian Mother and Her Baby in Jersey Street" (1889) [Source: Jacob A. Riis "Italian Mother and Her Baby in Jersey Street", in the home of an Italian rag-picker, Jersey Street, circa 1890. Museum of the City of New York, The Jacob A. Riis Collection (#157)]

Tenements of New York, which he published in 1890. Books providing shocking accounts of prostitution, drunkenness, and violence in America's slums had appeared as early as the 1840s. Riis's book was different and it caused a sensation.

Living among the Poor: Settlement Houses

Riis was not alone in promoting a more progressive and sympathetic view of poverty and remedies to it. In the early 1880s middle-class and college-educated women began establishing in immigrant neighborhoods settlement houses, or institutions dedicated to helping the urban poor by providing a wide range of social and educational services. Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr founded the most famous and influential settlement house, Hull House, in Chicago in 1889. Born to wealthy Illinois families, they had met in college and toured Europe together in 1888, where they were inspired by a visit to Toynbee Hall, a settlement house in London's poor East End. There they saw highly educated and wealthy young men from Oxford enter the East End to offer direct assistance to the poor. They vowed to establish a similar institution in Chicago upon their return.

With financial backing from wealthy reformers, Addams and Starr rented an old mansion on Chicago's Near West Side. The neighborhood was overwhelmingly foreign born, with immigrants from dozens of countries and regions. Most lived in poverty in dreary, run-down tenements. The neighborhood also suffered from poor sanitation and high rates of crime. Unlike socially conscious elite women of earlier generations who simply raised money for the poor or lobbied the state legislature for laws against child labor, Addams, Starr, and the many women workers they subsequently attracted to Hull House consciously chose to live among the poor to get to know them and understand their needs—even learn from them.

The staff at Hull House first offered educational classes in literature and art. When these proved popular they began to offer classes on more practical subjects, such as cooking, sewing, hygiene, civics, the English language, and vocational training. They also opened their doors to fledgling labor unions, recognizing the vital role unions could play in elevating the earnings of workers, especially the foreign born.

Within a decade Hull House was a flourishing institution offering a wide array of services to the

poor of Chicago. Addams and other Hull House workers like Florence Kelley also became activists to prod city authorities to improve tenement laws, increase street cleaning and garbage removal, and expand public education. They also lobbied state officials for laws against child labor and for improved factory safety. Hull House was not the first settlement in America, but it soon became its most famous, inspiring hundreds of successful imitators, including Denison House in Boston (1889) and Henry Street Settlement in New York (1893).

The White City

The optimistic vision of modern urban life articulated by reformers like Jane Addams and Jacob Riis found vivid expression in the *City Beautiful Movement*. Taking form in the late 1880s, it brought together architects, landscape architects, and urban planners who believed the many problems afflicting American cities could be ameliorated, even eliminated, through the comprehensive planning and grand redesign of urban space. City Beautiful proponents like Daniel Burnham and Frederick Law Olmsted argued for the creation of large parks and public squares linked by grand boulevards. Equally important was their emphasis on classical architectural styles for both public and private buildings.

Burnham, Olmsted, and others first demonstrated these ideas at the 1893 Chicago World's Exposition, an extraordinary event planned as a grand celebration of the four hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in the New World in 1492 and of Chicago's recovery from its devastating fire in 1871. Like the many world's fairs that preceded it, the Chicago Exposition was a celebration



of technology, culture, and commerce. It contained thousands of exhibits on science, machinery, art, history, ethnic heritage, music, and theater. But its greatest significance was its impact on architecture, design, and urban planning. Given nearly 700 acres of waterfront property along Lake Michigan, Burnham and the extraordinary team he assembled, including landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted and architect Louis Sullivan, eventually developed a master plan that called for beautifully landscaped grounds featuring waterways and reflecting pools.

Around the waterways, (17.8), Burnham placed fourteen main buildings designed in the Beaux-Arts architectural style, which emphasized logic, harmony, and uniformity. The Court of Honor buildings, shown in the image, lined the Grand

Basin that formed the centerpiece of the exposition grounds. Covered in bright white stucco that gave them a shimmering whiteness, the buildings of the White City astonished the estimated 27 million visitors who entered through the main gates.

Yet as this image indicates, Burnham and his team sought not simply to wow the public with grand architecture. They wanted to make a statement on the potential glory of the modern city. All cities could be—should be—as impressive as the White City. All that was needed was strong civic leadership and enlightened urban planning. This grand vision never fully caught on, but many of the City Beautiful ideals and concepts exhibited in the White City influenced a generation of urban planners and architects committed to making American cities more beautiful, healthy, and efficient.

17.8 The White City
Designed by some of the nation's leading architects and landscape architects, the White City consisted of fourteen main buildings designed in the Beaux-Arts style, set in beautifully landscaped grounds featuring waterways and reflecting pools.



How did the White City reflect an optimistic vision of the future of urban life?

New Habits, Roles, and Lifestyles



17.9 Reaching for the Sky

The completion of the Home Insurance Building in Chicago in 1885 marked the arrival of the skyscraper. Designed with an internal steel skeleton, it rose ten stories high and led to a boom in tall building construction in downtowns across the country.

The development of vast working-class districts was but one aspect of a broad trend that reshaped urban life in the late nineteenth century. Urban and subsequent suburban growth also led to the development of middle-class and elite residential neighborhoods, as well as urban central business districts dedicated almost exclusively to commerce. Middle-class neighborhoods increasingly reflected the new values of the urban middle class, including a growing interest in leisure activities. The growth of leisure time allowed women to take on increasingly significant roles in public life through memberships in socially and politically active clubs.

The New Urban Landscape

The evolution of mass transit systems like horsecars, steam railroads, and trolleys, led to explosive urban growth and the formation of specialized districts dedicated to specific functions. Most cities, for example, developed central business districts where

almost no residents lived. Instead the high-value real estate in downtowns from Baltimore to Chicago to San Francisco was dedicated to commerce: banks, department stores (see Chapter 16), and the offices of corporations, accountants, lawyers, and other professions. Each day mass transit systems carried thousands of shoppers and workers to central

business districts from sections of cities now dedicated almost exclusively to residential use, or from residential neighborhoods just beyond the city limits.

Soaring real estate values and new technology led to another distinct feature in central business districts: skyscrapers. Before the Civil War few buildings exceeded six stories, but the invention of the elevator and new building materials like cast iron led to ten- and twelve-story buildings by the early 1880s. The big breakthrough in tall building construction came in 1885 with the completion of the Home Insurance Building in Chicago (17.9). It was remarkable not for its height (ten stories), but for its internal steel skeleton that allowed for thin walls and large windows. The first true skyscraper led to a boom in tall building construction in downtowns across the country. By 1900 lower Manhattan alone featured twelve buildings of 300 feet or more in height.

Equally significant, although less dramatic, than the upward reach of city skylines was the outward sprawl of urban areas due to mass transit. Suburbs, or residential communities established just beyond a city's boundary but connected to the urban center by mass transit, attracted middle-class families that could afford to buy a house and pay the cost of commuting to the city for work. Middle-class families found suburbs attractive for their serenity, cleanliness, and greenery—aspects that stood in sharp contrast to the crime, disease, violence, and



How did new modes of transportation promote the development of specialized urban and suburban districts?

noise of the inner city. Given the prevalence of racist and nativist attitudes in Gilded Age American society, suburbs also attracted people unwilling to live with newly arrived immigrants and African Americans.

The creation of middle-class communities of like-minded people of similar ethnic and religious backgrounds fostered the development of new middle-class values, tastes, and social patterns. Middle-class families had fewer children and higher incomes than their working-class counterparts.

“Since water hems in the business center on three sides and the nexus of railroads on the south, Chicago must grow upward.”

Real estate columnist, *Chicago Tribune*, 1888

Greater wealth and fewer mouths to feed allowed them to purchase an ever-increasing array of consumer products, most often by women who rode trolleys or commuter lines to the central business district. Many of these products were everyday items that came with increasingly recognizable names like Ivory Soap and Coca-Cola. Others were more substantial, such as small pianos that could be purchased on credit. The great popularity of pianos in the late nineteenth century reflected not merely the rising wealth of middle-class families, but also the significant amount of leisure time they enjoyed and their desire to develop refined tastes.

New Roles and Expectations for Women

Lower birth rates and a growing trend of hiring servants to perform duties like cooking, cleaning, and laundry left middle-class women with more free time. The dominant notions about gender roles, however, emphasized the need for women to remain in the home, focusing on creating a moral and nurturing environment for their husbands and children. According to this view the outside world of business and politics was the male sphere, full of corruption, dishonesty, immorality, and violence that threatened virtuous womanhood.

Yet two trends in the late nineteenth century led directly to new, more public roles for middle-class women. The first was a significant rise in education, especially at the college level. By 1900 women constituted nearly 20 percent of college graduates, up from just 13 percent in 1890. Education allowed women, if only temporarily, to leave the domestic sphere to interact with other young women and encounter emerging ideas of women's rights. Not surprisingly nearly every leader in the women's rights movement in the late nineteenth century had received at least some college education.

A second significant trend that reshaped the outlook, expectations, and public influence of American women in the period was their increased involvement in a growing number of clubs dedicated to charity and social reform. The General Federation of Women's Clubs, established in 1890,

counted 160,000 members in more than five hundred clubs by 1900. The largest and best known organization was the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Activism in clubs gave women the opportunity to exert political influence, build leadership skills, and learn from networks of activist, reform-minded women.

By the 1890s many of these activist women joined the women's suffrage movement, or the effort to obtain voting rights for women. The movement had split into rival factions in 1869 in the debate over the Fourteenth Amendment (see Chapter 14), but in 1890 they reunited to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). It helped win suffrage in Colorado in 1893 and Idaho in 1896 (Utah and Wyoming had previously approved it), but voting rights for all women would not occur until ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 (see Chapter 18).

Racism led white women to exclude black women from their clubs and the suffrage movement. Nonetheless African American women established their own clubs to pursue goals such as temperance and women's suffrage. Most of these clubs affiliated with the National Association of Colored Women, an umbrella group. Some black women pursued goals of particular concern to African Americans. Ida B. Wells launched a national campaign against lynching in the 1890s

that drew many African American women and men into public activism for reform, especially civil rights.

By the 1890s Americans had begun to use the term "New Woman" to describe middle-class women who pursued higher education, engaged in political activism, delayed marriage, and bore fewer children. The New Woman had a distinct look, donning the clothing, hair style, and air of the so-called Gibson Girl. A creation of illustrator Charles Dana Gibson in 1890s popular magazines, the Gibson Girl was tall and beautiful, with a tightly cinched waist that accentuated her bosom and hair piled high on her head.

Offsetting these traditionally feminine characteristics, however, was an outgoing, even mischievous spirit that reflected the greater independence and activism of younger American women. Symbolic of this attitude was the degree to which young women took part in the great national enthusiasm for bicycling in the 1890s. Note

the striking contrast between these two images. The first from 1886 (17.10) shows

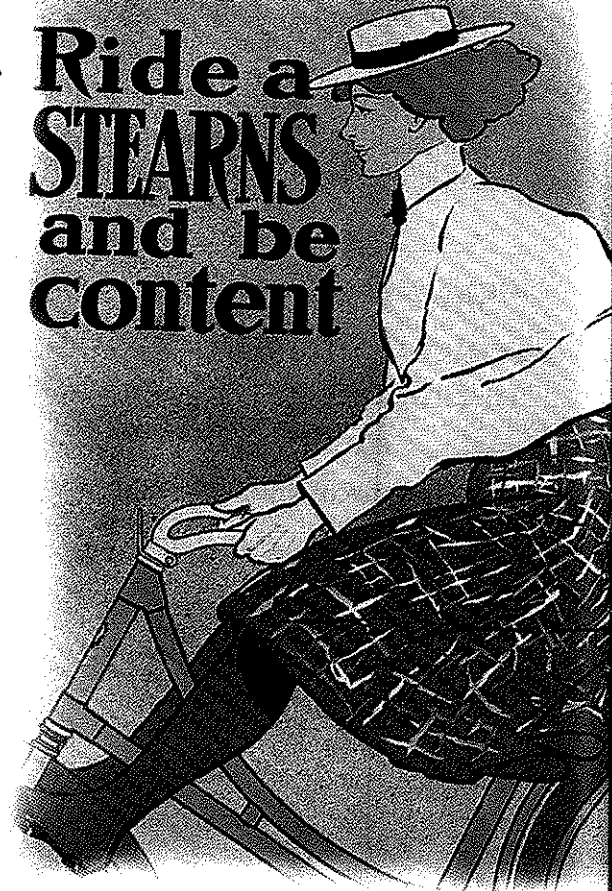


17.10 The Traditional Woman
Reflecting Victorian values, this conservatively dressed woman in 1886 enjoys a bicycle ride only as the passenger of her husband.

17.11 The New Woman

Many Americans saw a connection between the growing independence, activism, and outgoing spirit of young women and their participation in the great national enthusiasm for bicycling in the 1890s.

Ride a
STEARNS
and be
content



a traditional Victorian-era wife in formal attire being carried as a passenger by her husband. The second image, an 1896 advertisement poster for the Stearns Bicycle Company (17.11), shows a self-confident and carefree woman drawn in the Gibson Girl style breezing along on her own bicycle. Many conservative Americans condemned the bicycling craze as unnatural and immoral because it allowed young women and men the freedom to pedal off unchaperoned, away from the watchful eyes of parents and other guardians of respectability.

“Bicycling has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world. I stand and rejoice every time I see a woman ride by on a wheel. It gives women a feeling of freedom and self-reliance.”

SUSAN B. ANTHONY, 1896

New Forms of Leisure and Popular Culture

As industrial life created sharp distinctions between time spent at work and time doing everything else, Americans in the Gilded Age developed the concept of leisure time. This trend was at the heart of the labor movement's persistent demand for the eight-hour day as both a call for shorter hours of toil and an insistence on the right to leisure time. Many city dwellers spent their leisure time in informal activities in their neighborhood such as walking about, playing games in streets and local parks, and socializing with their neighbors. For many working-class men, the local saloon was the preferred place of leisure.

Increasingly popular, however, were more formal leisure opportunities such as amusement parks and organized spectator sports. Amateur, semiprofessional, and professional baseball teams, for example, drew large crowds. Entrepreneurs soon came to see baseball as a business, despite its popular reputation as the “national pastime.” They built large baseball stadiums near one or more streetcar lines and sold patrons not merely tickets but also food, beer, trinkets, and scorecards. By the 1880s baseball stars like Mike “King” Kelly and Adrian “Cap” Anson had emerged as high-paid celebrities. Corporations, especially true of the booming tobacco industry, quickly realized the value of celebrity endorsements for their products and in the 1880s created the original baseball cards like the one shown here (17.12). To legitimize tobacco use companies such as Old Judge portrayed players like Kelly as ideal men—the perfect blend of athletic masculinity and refined, almost gentlemen-like bearing. In an era when the press rarely reported on the bad behavior of athletes or politicians, few Americans could have known that the real Mike Kelly was a violent alcoholic who would drink himself to death in 1894 at the age of thirty-seven.

Other spectator sports likewise enjoyed great popularity in the late nineteenth century.

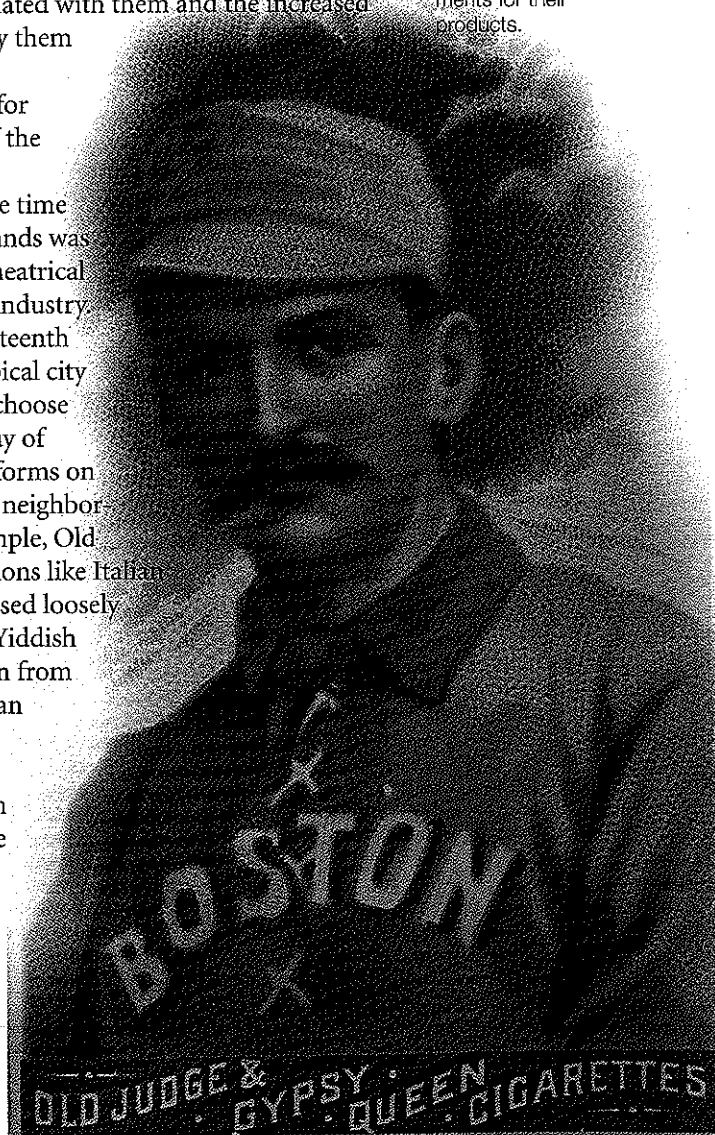
Professional boxing, horseracing, track and field competitions, and bicycle races drew large crowds to venues such as Madison Square Garden in New York City, the Chicago Coliseum, and the Boston Arena. By the 1890s college football games in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago often drew more than fifty thousand fans. Baseball, football, and other urban spectator sports proved consistent money-makers for promoters, but they also attracted criticism from ministers and some public officials who decried the violence, alcohol consumption, and gambling associated with them and the increased tendency to play them on Sundays.

Competing for the attention of the American with increased leisure time on his or her hands was a burgeoning theatrical entertainment industry. By the late nineteenth century, the typical city resident could choose from a vast array of entertainment forms on stage. In ethnic neighborhoods, for example, Old World productions like Italian melodramas based loosely on operas and Yiddish comedies drawn from eastern European traditions flourished.

Elsewhere in the city in more mainstream venues, people flocked to musical comedies, a distinctly

17.12 Selling Celebrity

The booming tobacco industry created the original baseball cards to capitalize on the value of sports celebrity endorsements for their products.



American innovation pioneered by the duo of Edward Harrigan and Tony Hart. They were succeeded by others such as George M. Cohan and Irving Berlin, whose popular songs like “Give My Regards to Broadway” and “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” became enduring hits.

Also popular was vaudeville, a kind of variety show featuring acts from jugglers, musicians, acrobats, and family routines, to singers, wild animal acts, ribald comedians, and scantily clad women and

aimed at a working-class audience. With its low admission fees and democratic approach, vaudeville was geared for the masses. A typical vaudeville production featured a series of acts by entertainers—anything. At its peak circa 1900, vaudeville shows drew two million patrons a day. Many of the great American stage and film performers from the early twentieth century, such as James Cagney, Mae West, and Al Jolson, began their careers in vaudeville.

Wealthier and better-educated city residents rejected vaudeville and the more raucous forms of musical comedy as undignified and coarse. Instead they went to opera houses to hear European classics and to what they considered legitimate theater to see productions of Shakespeare and the classics.

While these varied forms of entertainment were developed and popularized in America’s large cities, they quickly spread via published sheet music and touring companies to communities of every size across the nation. The result was the beginning of a national popular culture, one that would flourish more fully with the arrival of movies, radio, and television in the twentieth century.

17.13 Imagining an American Aristocracy

Wealthy Americans in the Gilded Age competed to throw the most expensive and decadent ball, wedding, or party. At Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt’s 1883 ball, New York’s elite arrived in costumes depicting figures of European royalty.

[Source: Collection of The New-York Historical Society, Box 1.f 10. Negative no. 80433d]



How did varied forms of leisure reflect class differences?

Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous

Another feature of urban life that became a defining feature of the Gilded Age (so much so that it informed the era's name) was the advent of lavish displays of wealth by the rich. Dubbed "conspicuous consumption" by sociologist Thorstein Veblen in 1899, this trend involved most prominently the construction of opulent mansions in elite urban districts such as New York's Fifth Avenue, Chicago's Lake Shore Drive, and San Francisco's Nob Hill, as well as in exclusive summer retreats like Newport, Rhode Island. Wealthy families like the Vanderbilts and Astors competed to see who could throw the most extravagant ball, weddings, and parties.

One of the most famous was a ball hosted by Alva Vanderbilt, wife of tycoon William K. Vanderbilt, on March 26, 1883, to celebrate the opening of their new \$3 million mansion on upper Fifth Avenue. The elite of New York arrived in costume (17.13). Many dressed as Marie Antoinette, Queen Elizabeth, and Louis XV. This choice of an ostentatious theme of royalty reflected the widely shared belief among the nation's wealthy elite that they constituted an American

aristocracy—a notion that ran counter to the longstanding American tradition of fear and loathing for such undemocratic pretensions (see Chapters 4 and 5). Some labor activists and social critics castigated the ball and high society's rejection of republican simplicity, but Mrs. Vanderbilt's guests paid no heed. They reveled past dawn in a party that cost \$250,000—that in an age when an average worker could expect to earn less than \$700 per

year. By the mid-1880s most newspapers featured "Society" columns that devoted extensive coverage to the lives of the wealthy.

While Americans followed the exploits of the rich with a certain level of wonder, the public would accept only so much extrav-

agance before expressing revulsion. That finally occurred in February 1897, when the Bradley Martin family hosted a \$400,000 party in which eight hundred society guests arrived in costumes depicting European royalty. One society reporter described "a gorgeous, superb, and wonderful spectacle." But in 1897, when the nation was suffering from a severe economic depression, public criticism of the ball poured in from all quarters, including public officials, clergymen, and workers. The Bradley Martins fled to Europe and settled permanently in England, ending the days of diamond-necklace party favors.

**"There is many a palace
in Europe that would hide
its diminished roof beside
the sheer luxury of
Fifth Avenue homes."**

EDGAR SALTUS

**"[Y]ou rich people put next to
nothing in the collection plate, and
yet you'll spend thousands
of dollars on Mrs. Bradley Martin's
ball."**

Sermon of a minister outraged over the
Bradley Martin Ball

The Challenge from Below



The revulsion expressed over the Bradley Martin Ball in 1897 reflected the rising discontent of the era. Many farmers and industrial workers felt increasingly exploited by powerful corporations. When they turned to elected officials to address these problems, they found them unresponsive. Most politicians remained committed to a laissez-faire philosophy, which argued against government intervention in the economy. As a result the period was marked by some of the most bitter and violent strikes in American history and the rise of a third party comprised mainly of farmers, workers, and reformers—the People’s Party—to challenge the two major parties, the Republicans and Democrats.

“The popular mind is agitated with problems that may disturb social order, and among them all none is more threatening than ... the concentration of capital into vast combinations. ... Congress alone can deal with them and if we are unwilling or unable there will soon be a trust for every product and a master to fix the price for every necessity of life.”

Senator JOHN SHERMAN of Ohio, introducing his anti-trust bill, 1888

17.14 Deadlocked Presidential Politics in the Gilded Age
With an electorate evenly divided between the two parties, Gilded Age politics were often marked by stalemate and inaction on key social and economic issues.

Year	Candidate	Party	Popular Vote	Electoral Vote
1876	Rutherford B. Hayes*	Republican	4,036,298 (48%)	185
	Samuel J. Tilden	Democrat	4,300,590 (51%)	184
1880	James Garfield	Republican	4,454,416 (48.5%)	214
	Winfield S. Hancock	Democrat	4,444,952 (48.1%)	155
1884	Grover Cleveland	Democrat	4,874,986 (48.5%)	219
	James G. Blaine	Republican	4,851,334 (48.2%)	182
1888	Benjamin Harrison*	Republican	5,439,853 (47.9%)	233
	Grover Cleveland	Democrat	5,540,309 (48.6%)	168
1892	Grover Cleveland	Democrat	5,556,918 (46%)	277
	Benjamin Harrison	Republican	5,176,108 (43%)	145
	James B. Weaver	People's	1,041,028 (9%)	22

Winner in bold

* = winner despite losing popular vote

Why were election results in the Gilded Age so close?

Out of Touch Politics

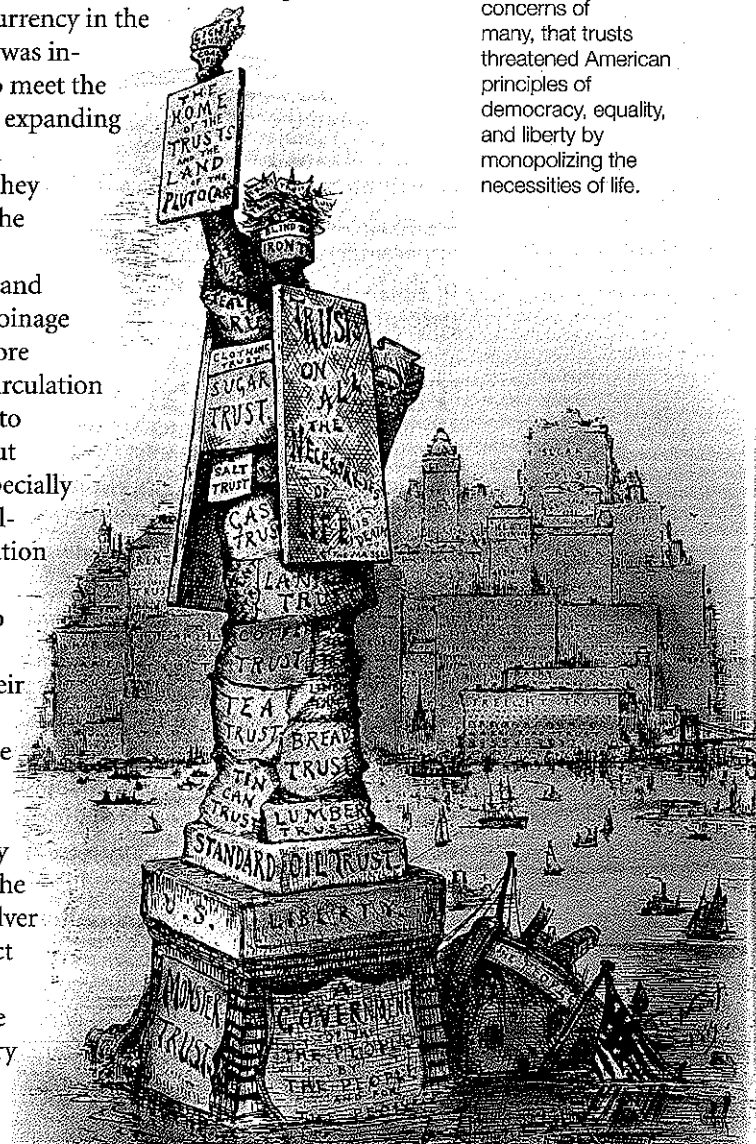
Popular enthusiasm for politics reached extraordinary heights in the Gilded Age. Indeed American voters turned out in astonishing numbers, averaging 72 percent between 1876 and 1896 (as compared with between 50 and 60 percent in recent decades). Despite such intense interest and participation in politics, politicians made little progress in resolving the major issues that dominated national politics in this period. This political stalemate stemmed from several factors. First, as indicated in (17.14), the electorate was evenly divided between the two parties, resulting in remarkably close elections. For example, the five presidential elections between 1876 and 1892 were decided by razor-thin margins. Indeed the contests in 1876 and 1888 saw the candidate with the highest popular vote total lose because his opponent tallied more electoral votes. No incumbent president won reelection, and only twice (each time for just two years) did one party control both houses of Congress and the presidency.

Political inaction in the Gilded Age also reflected the conservatism of most politicians who clung to longstanding political traditions that celebrated small, nonintrusive government, especially at the federal level. For many leaders government regulation of business appeared socialistic and potentially harmful to both the economy and republican principles. Political paralysis stemmed from the power of corporate interests to stymie legislation they deemed harmful to their financial interests. They did so through huge donations to political parties and outright bribery. To cite but one example, big business interests succeeded in maintaining a very high tariff, which protected their manufactures from foreign competition. The record for 1890, the year Congress took up the big issues of tariff, currency reform, and corporate regulation, provides a particularly vivid example of this ineffective political system. Support for corporate regulation reflected rising concern from many corners of American society. Industrial workers saw themselves as victims of corporate power that demanded long hours of dangerous toil for low wages. Many other Americans, as suggested by this 1889 Thomas Nast cartoon, *The Rising of the Usurpers and the Sinking of the Liberties of the People* (17.15), viewed trusts as a threat to the principles of democracy and equality. By monopolizing the necessities of life, trusts literally threatened to smother American liberty. The Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890 promised to empower the federal

government to crack down on business practices that diminished competition (see Chapter 16), but opposition among pro-business legislators weakened the law to such a point that it did little in the coming years to slow the growth of big business. Indeed the 1890s saw record numbers of mergers and big business used the Sherman act to weaken labor unions by arguing that strikes amounted to restraint of trade.

Similarly, Congress also took up the contentious issue of currency reform to determine what constituted the proper basis for American currency. Advocates of “hard money,” a group that included most Republicans, businessmen and the wealthy, argued for basing currency on actual gold and silver in the U.S. Treasury. They opposed the issuance of paper money, popularly known as “greenbacks,” arguing that it contributed to inflation and lowered interest rates. “Soft money” proponents like farmers, workers, and Democrats, however, argued that the supply of currency in the Gilded Age was insufficient to meet the needs of an expanding commercial economy. They advocated the issuance of greenbacks and expanded coinage of silver. More money in circulation would lead to inflation, but debtors, especially farmers, welcomed inflation because it promised to raise the prices of their goods and diminish the burden of their debts. In 1890 they supported the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890. It required the U.S. Treasury to purchase

17.15 Liberty Suffocated by Big Business
This 1889 Thomas Nast cartoon captured the concerns of many, that trusts threatened American principles of democracy, equality, and liberty by monopolizing the necessities of life.



4.5 million ounces of silver every month and issue notes (paper money) redeemable in either silver or gold.

Republicans opposed the bill but wanted to enact a higher tariff. Democrats opposed a higher tariff, arguing that it amounted to a huge subsidy paid by American consumers to business, so both sides compromised and the bills became law. Neither bill, however, had the desired effect. The higher tariff caused a surge in consumer prices, producing a widespread discontent. The silver program caused the price of silver to fall and so most of the people holding the notes redeemed them for gold, a trend that caused a severe depletion of the nation's gold reserves, which in turn contributed to the Panic of 1893 and subsequent four years of severe economic depression.

The one notable exception to the politics of stalemate was the passage of a civil service law to make certain government jobs open only to people who demonstrated their competency on a civil service exam rather than people who merely possessed strong political connections. Neither political party favored the law since it threatened to undermine their ability to reward friends and campaign contributors. It took the assassination of President James A. Garfield in 1881 by a frustrated and apparently deranged office seeker to gain passage of the Pendleton Act in 1883, a law that placed 10 percent of federal jobs under civil service.

The People's Party

Anger and resentment against the mainstream political system over its corruption and failure to act on critical issues like corporate regulation and currency and tariff reform gradually produced a popular reaction. In the late 1870s farmers' alliances, successors to the Granger movement (see Chapter 15), formed to alleviate the plight of farmers beset by rising costs and falling prices for their products. The Southern Farmers' Alliance (established in 1877) and Northern Farmers' Alliance (1880) grew steadily in the 1880s to a combined membership of more than 5 million. Excluded by the segregationist doctrines of the post-Reconstruction South (see Chapter 14), black farmers formed the Colored Farmers' Alliance in 1886 and soon drew a membership of more than 1.25 million.

The alliances argued that the economic woes of the American farmer were due to exploitive bankers who charged farmers exorbitant interest rates for

farm mortgages, railroads that charged them extortionate rates to transport farm produce to market, and commodity brokers on Wall Street who bought their crops at rock bottom prices and then turned around and resold them at many times the original price paid. To combat this injustice the alliances promoted the establishment of cooperatives that combined the buying and selling power of farmers to gain them better prices for their produce and lower rates for loans and crop insurance. They also promoted education on agricultural topics.

In 1889 the Northern Farmers' Alliance and Southern Farmers' Alliance united to form the National Alliance. One year later, convinced that their only way to combat the power of the monopolies and trusts was to transform the National Alliance into a political movement to put pro-farmer candidates into office, delegates gathered in Ocala, Florida, and drew up a manifesto listing their grievances and proposed reforms. That fall National Alliance-backed candidates won complete or partial control of twelve state legislatures and elected six governors. They also sent fifty representatives and three senators to the U.S. Congress. Because most were Democrats, Republicans lost control of the House. These positive electoral results convinced many National Alliance activists like Ignatius Donnelly of Minnesota and Tom Watson of Georgia that they needed to form a third party and run a slate of candidates in the upcoming 1892 presidential contest.

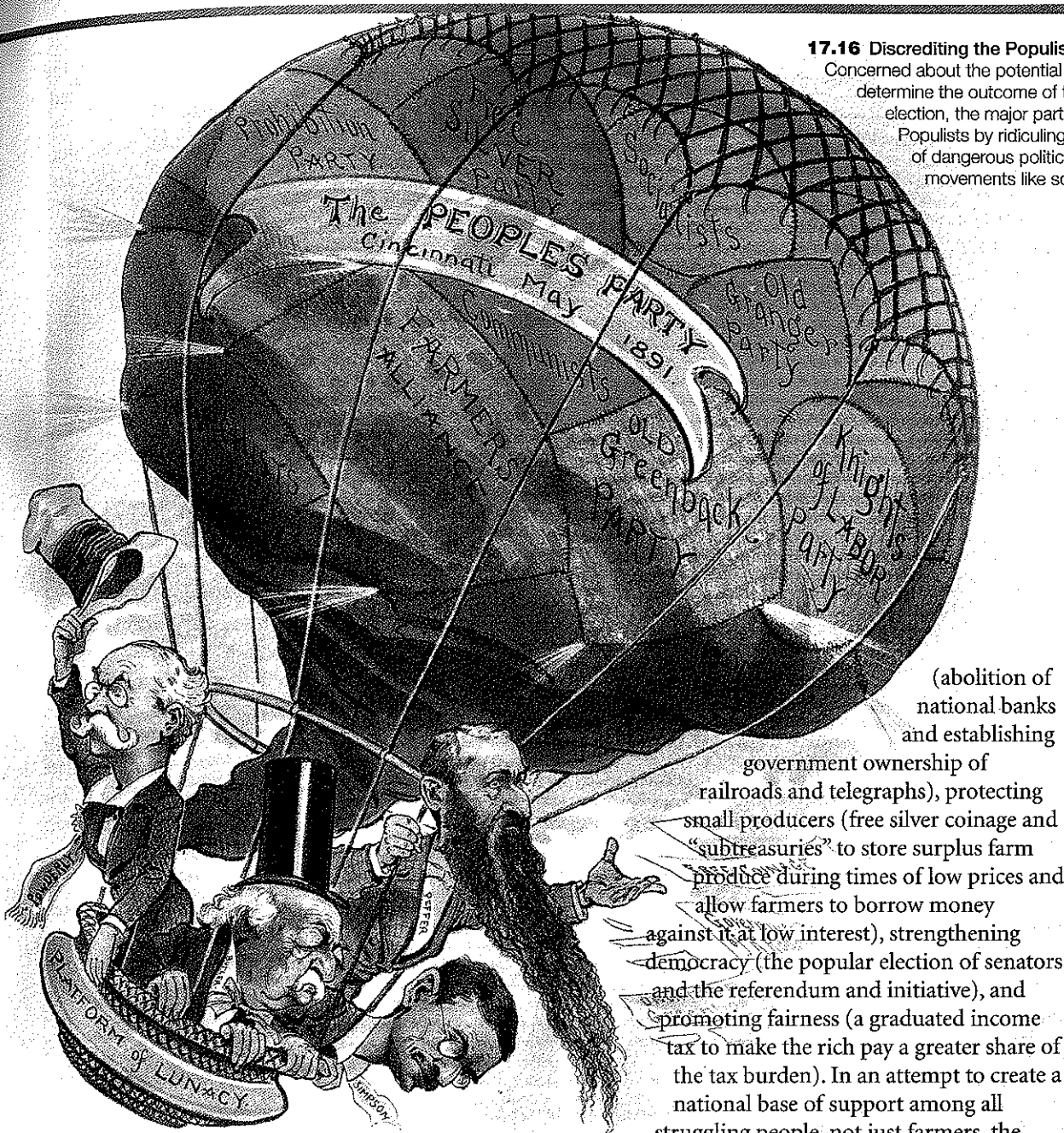
A National Alliance convention held in St. Louis in early 1892 led to the formal creation of the People's Party (its followers would be known as "Populists") and the adoption of a preamble to the party's platform that set forth the plight of the American farmer and worker in forceful prose:

[W]e meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin.... The fruits of the toil of millions are boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes for a few ...

By now the strength of the People's Party movement had begun to alarm the leaders of the mainstream political parties. Worried about its potential to win enough votes in the upcoming 1892 election to determine the winner by taking votes from the major parties, they launched a campaign to discredit the Populists. In this political cartoon (17.16), which appeared on the cover of *Judge*, a pro-Republican magazine, the artist tries to

17.16 Discrediting the Populists

Concerned about the potential of the People's Party to determine the outcome of the 1892 presidential election, the major parties tried to discredit the Populists by ridiculing them as a "patchwork" of dangerous political and ideological movements like socialism and prohibition.



(abolition of national banks and establishing government ownership of railroads and telegraphs), protecting small producers (free silver coinage and "subtreasuries" to store surplus farm produce during times of low prices and allow farmers to borrow money against it at low interest), strengthening democracy (the popular election of senators and the referendum and initiative), and promoting fairness (a graduated income tax to make the rich pay a greater share of the tax burden). In an attempt to create a national base of support among all struggling people, not just farmers, the platform also included several planks that expressed sympathy with industrial workers.

discredit the Populists by ridiculing them as a "patchwork" of strange and dangerous political and ideological movements like socialism and prohibition. The balloon's basket, labeled "Platform of Lunacy," carried the party leaders, depicted as eccentric fools.

Populists gathered for a national convention in July 1892 in Omaha and nominated Union Army veteran James B. Weaver for president and Confederate veteran General James G. Field of Virginia for vice president. The convention adopted a platform aimed at eliminating monopolies

In the end, the People's Party was no match for the established parties. Democrat Grover Cleveland won the election with 46 percent of the vote to Republican incumbent, Benjamin Harrison's 43 percent. Yet the Populists polled more than one million votes (9 percent) and Weaver won Kansas, Colorado, Idaho, and Nevada. Results on the local and state levels were even more impressive, as Populists elected fifteen hundred candidates to state legislatures, three governors, and five senators and ten representatives to Congress.

People's Party leaders hoped to build on this achievement, but defeating the major parties in 1896 would depend on the party's ability to overcome several challenges. Election results showed that it had performed poorly among midwestern farmers and industrial workers who opted to stay with either the Republican or Democratic parties. Finally, a successful campaign by conservatives to equate support for the People's Party with attacking white supremacy severely weakened the party in the South.

Industrial Conflict and Depression

Several events soon transpired that highlighted the unchecked power of big business and the severe consequences of a laissez-faire economy. Many People's Party activists hoped the anger and suffering produced by the Homestead strike and Panic of 1893 would prompt workers and farmers to reject the mainstream political parties and join the Populists. Workers at the Homestead Steel Works, a mammoth plant near Pittsburgh and owned by Andrew Carnegie, for years enjoyed a strong union (the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers), high wages, and decent living conditions. But in 1892

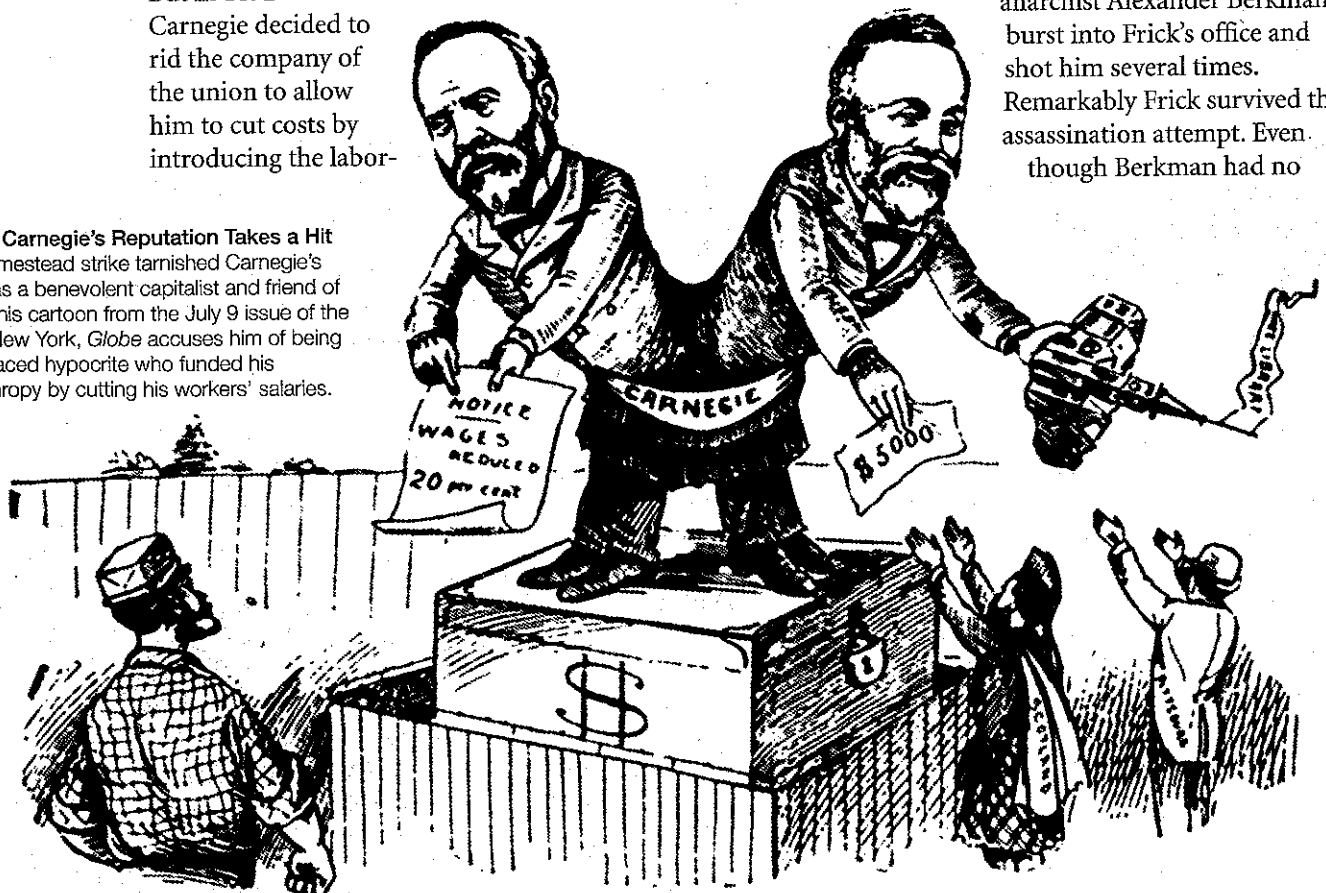
Carnegie decided to rid the company of the union to allow him to cut costs by introducing the labor-

saving machinery and reducing wages. To protect the public persona of a benevolent capitalist that he had worked for years to develop (see Chapter 16), Carnegie left the country for a vacation in Scotland, leaving his hard-nosed business partner, Henry Clay Frick, behind to take care of the dirty work.

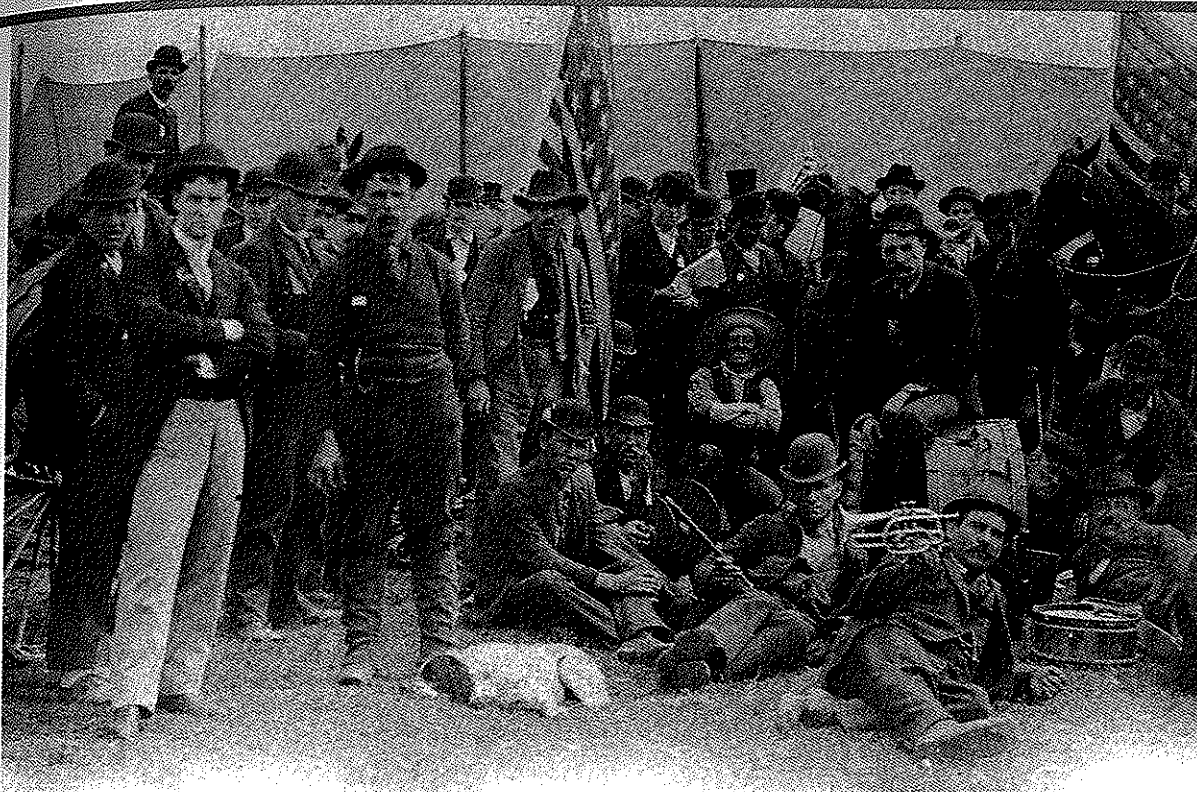
On June 29 Frick announced a lockout and closed the mills. After a week the standoff turned violent when workers exchanged gunfire with a group of heavily armed professional strikebreakers of the Pinkerton Detective Agency, whom Frick had brought by boat to the Homestead complex. The clash claimed the lives of six strikers and five Pinkertons. The national press gave extensive coverage to the strike, and its tone in many instances was surprisingly pro-worker, probably due in part to the negative reputation of the Pinkertons. Carnegie, despite his attempt to separate himself from the conflict, drew some of the harshest criticisms. Carnegie's critics challenged his reputation as the great philanthropist who handed out libraries to communities in the United States and Europe by depicting him as a two-faced hypocrite who funded his philanthropic largesse by grinding down his workers with wage cuts (17.17).

But the tide of public opinion soon shifted against the strikers, for on July 23 anarchist Alexander Berkman burst into Frick's office and shot him several times. Remarkably Frick survived the assassination attempt. Even though Berkman had no

17.17 Carnegie's Reputation Takes a Hit
The Homestead strike tarnished Carnegie's image as a benevolent capitalist and friend of labor. This cartoon from the July 9 issue of the Utica, New York, *Globe* accuses him of being a two-faced hypocrite who funded his philanthropy by cutting his workers' salaries.



Why did Carnegie's actions in the Homestead strike prompt critics to accuse him of hypocrisy?



17.18 Coxey's Army Emphasizes Its Patriotism

Aware that critics denounced them as violent radicals, Coxey and his "army" of protesters emphasized their patriotism and moderation by marching with American flags.

connection to Homestead workers, his actions brought widespread condemnation down upon the strikers. In September state officials arrested thirty-three members of the union's leadership and charged them with treason against the state. Two months later, on November 20, 1892, with nearly all the jobs at Homestead filled by replacement workers, the union formally ended the strike.

Six months later, on May 5, 1893, a financial crisis rocked the nation, leading to the most severe economic depression in American history to that time. Within a year the Panic of 1893 led to the failure of thousands of farms and businesses, including seventy-four railroads, and six hundred banks closed, throwing millions out of work and pushing the unemployment rate to 20 percent. The depression produced two vivid images of the widespread suffering endured by millions of Americans and the seeming indifference of public officials to do much about it. The first came from an Ohio Populist named Jacob Coxey who advocated that the government abandon its commitment to laissez-faire and create public works projects such as road building to alleviate mass unemployment and stimulate the economy (programs that the federal government adopted in the Great Depression of the 1930s). To draw attention to this idea, he organized one hundred unemployed men in Massillon, Ohio, to march to Washington, D.C. (the first such march on the capital). Setting out on March 25, 1894, they

were joined by various groups along the route. As this photograph (17.18) and nearly every other one taken of the march shows, Coxey and his followers sought to portray an image of patriotism, earnestness, and moderation. Dressing as decently as their poverty permitted and marching with dozens of American flags, Coxey and his men rejected the accusations of their critics that they were violent radicals determined to attack the government. Rather, they asserted, theirs was a campaign to save the republic from the clutches of trusts and laissez-faire policies.

Coxey's Army, as it came to be known, numbered about five hundred by the time it reached Washington on April 30, 1894. Denied entry into the Capitol, Coxey delivered an impassioned address on the building's steps.

We stand here to-day in behalf of millions of toilers whose petitions have been buried in committee rooms, whose prayers have been unresponded to, and whose opportunities for honest, remunerative, productive labor have been taken from them by unjust legislation, which protects idlers, speculators, and gamblers.

Coxey and several other activists were arrested for "disturbing the peace," but eventually they were convicted only for walking on the lawn of the

Capitol grounds. Other groups of unemployed workers staged similar protest marches, but all met with frustration and inaction.

A second image of government indifference in the face of widespread suffering arose in Chicago. The World's Columbian Exposition had opened on May 1, 1893, just four days before the panic on Wall Street. The fair's emphasis on American progress and prosperity, symbolized by the opulence and beauty of its huge complex of white neoclassical buildings, soon stood in stark contrast to the growing despair of the city's tenement districts a few blocks away. When the fair closed in October, thousands of homeless people moved into the vacant buildings that had only recently housed elaborate displays of prosperity. That winter of 1893-1894, as many as sixty thousand Chicagoans per day received a free meal from soup kitchens and missions.

Some of the hardest hit workers during the depression were employees of the Pullman Palace Car Company, located just outside Chicago. Founded by George Pullman in 1867, the company flourished as a manufacturer of luxury railroad cars. Pullman was an idealist who believed that workers and employers could work together in harmony for mutual benefit. Acting on this idea he established the town of Pullman in 1880, a **company town** built and owned by the Pullman corporation for its employees, who rented homes and patronized stores owned by the company. As this 1881 depiction of the town demonstrates (17.19) Pullman, like Carnegie, prided himself on being a model capitalist who earned a vast fortune but still managed to provide a decent living for his workers. This sensibility informs this drawing of Pullman's vision of the future town (since it was still

under construction in 1881) as a model community of neat houses, schools, churches, stores, open spaces, and, of course, the factories that made it all possible.

So long as Pullman remained profitable, its employees considered themselves fortunate. But the depression in 1893 hit the railroad industry especially hard, and Pullman laid off hundreds of workers and announced to the rest a wage cut of 30 percent. On top of this devastating news, workers learned that Pullman would not reduce their rents, which were deducted automatically from their paychecks. Some workers soon began receiving checks for less than one dollar per week to cover the cost of food, heat, and clothing.

On May 11, 1894, Pullman's hard-pressed workers went out on strike. After a six-week standoff during which Pullman refused to negotiate, Eugene Debs, the leader of the

“We are born in a Pullman house, fed from the Pullman shop, taught in the Pullman school, catechized in the Pullman church, and when we die we shall be buried in the Pullman cemetery and go to the Pullman Hell.”

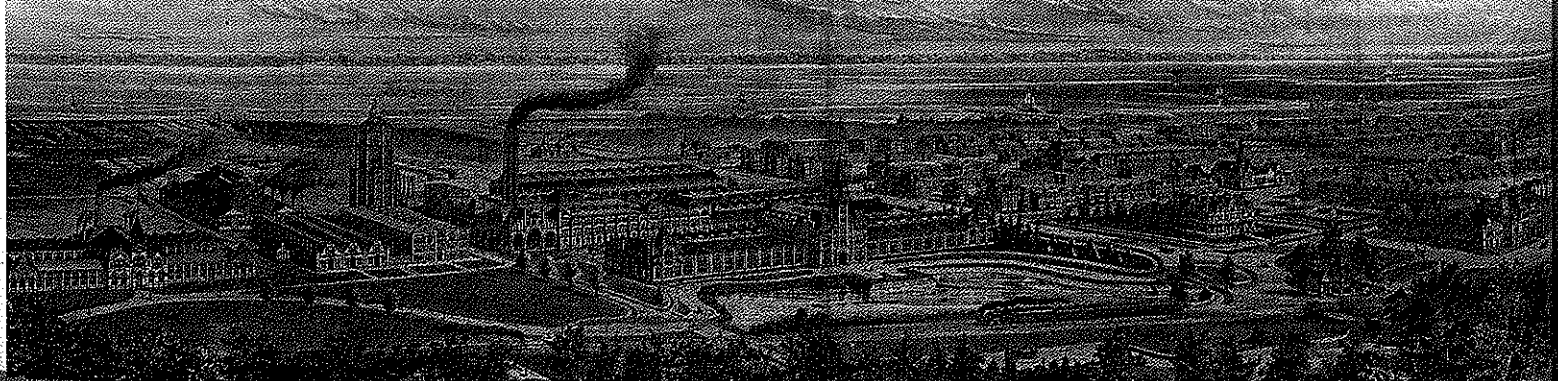
Pullman worker

American Railway Union (ARU) announced all of the union's 125,000 members across the country, as an act of solidarity with the Pullman workers, would refuse to handle Pullman cars. Within days of the start of the boycott, the Pullman strike caused the nation's railroad system to slow to a crawl.

The heads of more than two dozen railroads moved to support Pullman and break the ARU by hiring thousands of strikebreakers, pressuring the governor of Illinois, Richard Altgeld, to send in the state militia. When he refused out of sympathy for the strikers and a desire to avoid violence, the railroads turned to Washington, D.C., for help, asking President Grover Cleveland to send in federal troops. (see *Choices and Consequences: The Pullman Strike*)

17.19 Capitalism and Community

George Pullman's vision of himself as an enlightened and benevolent capitalist was captured in these plans for Pullman, a company town of neat houses, schools, churches, stores, open spaces, and factories.



What actions by Pullman prompted his workers to strike?

Choices and Consequences

THE PULLMAN STRIKE

Grover Cleveland was not the first president to face the choice of whether to send federal troops to quell a labor dispute. President Andrew Jackson dispatched troops in 1834 to end a strike by canal workers. President Rutherford B. Hayes had sent troops to crush the great railroad strike of 1877. Despite these precedents, however, Cleveland was aware that many considered the use of the army against American citizens a violation of the key republican principles of sharply limited federal power. Cleveland also worried that the public would condemn such use of federal power if violence ensued as it did in 1877. He spent several days in late June and early July of 1894, consulting with advisors and mulling over his options.

Choices

- 1 Take no action, allowing the state of Illinois and its pro-labor governor to handle the matter.
- 2 Intervene as a neutral and insist that both sides negotiate an equitable settlement.
- 3 Send in the U.S. Army to break the strike and allow the railroads to use strikebreakers to operate the trains.

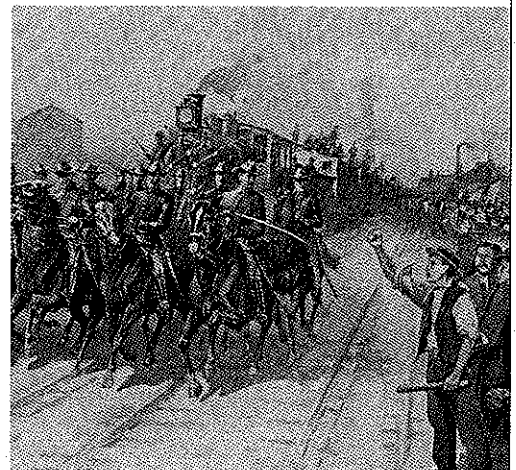
Continuing Controversies

When is the use of federal troops in a strike compatible with republican principles?

Subsequent presidents, including President Woodrow Wilson, ordered military intervention during labor disputes. In 1916 the National Security Act included a provision empowering the president to federalize a state's national guard to quell a disturbance like a natural disaster, riot, or strike. The two most notable uses of this law, however, came in 1957 (Little Rock, Arkansas) and 1963 (Tuscaloosa, Alabama) to enforce federal desegregation orders.

Decision

Despite some misgivings Cleveland was a pro-business conservative. He authorized his attorney general, Richard Olney, a man with extensive ties to the railroad industry, to obtain a court injunction declaring the ARU boycott of Pullman cars a "conspiracy in restraint of trade" that unlawfully blocked the U.S. mail. When the ARU defied the injunction, Cleveland ordered the army in to end the boycott and get the trains moving again. Eugene Debs and several other ARU leaders were arrested and the boycott ended by mid-July.



Federal troops sent by President Cleveland to break the Pullman strike escort the first meat train out of the Chicago stockyards.

Consequences

Cleveland's decision touched off extensive violence as workers destroyed railroad property and soldiers responded with rifle fire that left thirteen workers dead and scores wounded. The boycott collapsed in mid-July and with it the ARU. The Pullman strike ended in early August in complete defeat for the workers. Public opinion, however, turned against Pullman for his obstinate refusal to negotiate with his workers. A government investigation later criticized Pullman and argued that labor unions and government regulation were needed to curb the power of corporations. Yet in 1895 the Supreme Court (*In re Debs*) upheld the use of injunctions to end strikes.

Thorns" and "You shall not crucify mankind upon a Cross of Gold." A youthful Bryan flanked by his wife and children tops the poster, while images of a worker and farmer flank the speech text.

That left the People's Party facing a huge dilemma. Most of its activists had expected the Democrats to follow the Republicans and support the gold standard, leaving the silver issue to the Populists. Now the People's Party had to decide whether to nominate their own candidate and divide the rising support for the silver issue with the Democrats, or, as was common practice among small parties in the nineteenth century, to nominate Bryan as their candidate, a move that would diminish their standing as an independent party concerned with other issues beyond silver. In July the People's Party chose the latter option and nominated Bryan. But their ticket differed from the Democrats in choice of vice president, Populist leader Tom Watson of Georgia.

Despite longstanding tradition in American politics that argued that it was unseemly for presidential candidates to campaign, Bryan embarked on one of the remarkable campaigns in American history, traveling more than 18,000 miles through twenty-seven states and delivering more

than six hundred stump speeches to audiences totaling three million people.

Bryan's campaign generated a lot of commentary and excitement, but not enough votes on election day. McKinley won with 51 percent of the vote to Bryan's 47 percent (17.15). The most significant outcome of the contest was a new and enduring political alignment. The Republican Party became strongest in the Midwest and Northeast and dominated national political power for the next three decades. Republicans would portray themselves as the party of economic prosperity (the economy recovered under McKinley) and international power. The Democrats became the party of the South and West. They would retain the Populist belief that government needed to do more to secure the well-being of the average citizen and to limit the power of big business. Given its base in the South, however, the Democratic Party also upheld a states' rights philosophy that protected white supremacy.

The People's Party disintegrated after 1896, but many of their core ideas, such as the graduated income tax and the direct election of senators, remained popular and eventually gained adoption during the next two decades, a period known as the Progressive Era.

Conclusion

The period 1877–1900 came to be known as the Gilded Age because in part it was a golden era of tremendous economic growth and dazzling innovations, such as skyscrapers and electricity, and exciting new developments in popular culture and leisure. Yet many Americans perceived these trends as superficial—just as a gilded piece of jewelry has only a thin layer of gold on its surface. Beneath the wealth and excitement that

marked the rise of modern America, they argued, lay the harsh realities of urban squalor, political corruption, and worker and farmer exploitation. These problems explain the many strikes that rocked the era, as well as the emergence of the People's Party and efforts to alleviate poverty, improve public health, and curb corruption, efforts that would later form the basis of the Progressive Era.