CHAPTER 23

Political Paralysis in the Gilded Age, 1869–1896

# focus questions

1. Why were the times so prone to political corruption in the post–Civil War Era?

2. What were the main issues surrounding the election of 1876? Did the Compromise of 1877 resolve those issues?

3. What were the biggest challenges facing the post–Reconstruction South?

4. What were the main reasons for Chinese immigration in the second half of the nineteenth century?

5. What were some of the reasons for the depression of 1893 and how did Cleveland deal with it?

# Chapter Themes

**Theme:** Even as post–Civil War America expanded and industrialized, political life in the Gilded Age was marked by ineptitude, stalemate, and corruption. Despite their similarity at the national level, the two parties competed fiercely for offices and spoils, while doling out “pork-barrel” benefits to veterans and other special interest groups.

**Theme:** The serious issues of monetary and agrarian reform, labor, race, and economic fairness were largely swept under the rug by the political system, until revolting farmers and a major economic depression beginning in 1893 created a growing sense of crisis and demands for radical change.

**Theme:** The Compromise of 1877 officially ended reconstruction, and white Democrats resumed political power in the South. Blacks, as well as poor whites, found themselves forced into sharecropping and tenant farming; what began as informal separation of blacks and whites in the immediate postwar years evolved into systematic state-level legal codes of segregation known as Jim Crow laws.

# chapter summary

After the soaring ideals and tremendous sacrifices of the Civil War, the post–Civil War era was generally one of disillusionment. Politicians from the White House to the courthouse were often surrounded by corruption and scandal, while the actual problems afflicting industrializing America festered beneath the surface.

The popular war hero Grant was a poor politician and his administration was rife with corruption. Despite occasional futile reform efforts, politics in the Gilded Age was monopolized by the two patronage-fattened parties, which competed vigorously for spoils while essentially agreeing on most national policies. Cultural differences, different constituencies, and deeply felt local issues fueled intense party competition and unprecedented voter participation. Periodic complaints by “Mugwump” reformers and “soft-money” advocates failed to make much of a dent on politics.

The deadlocked contested 1876 election led to the sectional Compromise of 1877, which put an end to Reconstruction. An oppressive system of tenant farming and racial supremacy and segregation was thereafter fastened on the South, enforced by sometimes lethal violence. Racial prejudice against Chinese immigrants was also linked with labor unrest in the 1870s and 1880s.

Garfield’s assassination by a disappointed office seeker spurred the beginnings of civil-service reform, which made politics more dependent on big business. Cleveland, the first Democratic president since the Civil War, made a lower tariff the first real issue in national politics for some time. But his mild reform efforts were eclipsed by a major economic depression that began in 1893, a crisis that deepened the growing outcry from suffering farmers and workers against a government and economic system that seemed biased toward big business and the wealthy.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* Analyze the corruption of the Gilded Age in relation to the increasingly low moral and political standards of the time. Contrast the quality of politicians with those of the previous age—Clay, Jackson, Webster, and Lincoln.

REFERENCE: Mark Summers, *The Era of Good Stealings* (1993).

* Examine the impact of the new political alignments in the South. Consider the role of “redeemers,” poor whites, and blacks in the post–Reconstruction era.

REFERENCES: Otto Olsen, *Reconstruction and Redemption in the South* (1980); Michael Perman, *The Road to Redemption* (1984).

* Consider the link between racial and labor conflict, especially in places like California, where the “racially different” Chinese were seen as threats to the advances of white (often Irish or other immigrant) working people.

REFERENCE: Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (1975).

* Examine the depression of the 1890s as the immediate context for the growing sense of class crisis in America. Consider the different but related grievances of western and southern farmers and (largely) northern and eastern industrial workers.

REFERENCES: Charles Hoffman, *The Depression of the Nineties* (1970); Paul Krause, *The Battle for Homestead, 1880–1892* (1992); Robert McMath, *American Populism* (1993).

# for further interest: additional class topics

* Focus on the Tweed scandal as both event and symbol of the generally corrupt atmosphere of the times. Thomas Nast political cartoons make a good starting point.
* Discuss Grant’s failures as president in contrast with his success as a general. Contrast his performance with that of other general-presidents such as Washington or Jackson who were successful politicians.
* Consider the Compromise of 1877 in relation to race and sectional conflict. Ask whether a Republican unwillingness to compromise by ending Reconstruction might have led to renewed sectional violence.
* Examine the “corrupt” J.P. Morgan gold deal of 1895 as a symbol of what many Americans saw as the capture of the federal government by big business. Consider Morgan himself as an important political as well as economic figure, and ask whether he deserved the villainous treatment he received from critics and protestors.
* Have students read the following novel: Erik Larson, *The Devil in the White City – Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America*, New York: Vintage Books, 2003. A true story about the lives of two men—the architect behind the 1893 World Fair in Chicago and the serial killer who used the World Fair to lure his victims to their death. #1 National Bestseller and National Book Award Finalist.
* Have the students read Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner’s novel *The Gilded Age* (1873). Use the novel to illustrate the level of political corruption in the post–antebellum era.
* Conduct a class debate on a topic such as Excluding Chinese Immigrants Runs Counter to the Spirit of America; primary source readings will come from the following book *Opposing Viewpoints in American History—Volume II: From Reconstruction to the Present*, San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 1996. Another good source of debate topics is Larry Madaras and James M. SoRelle, *Taking Sides—Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in American History, Volume II: Reconstruction to the Present*, Connecticut: McGraw-Hill, 2000.

# character sketches

## William Marcy Tweed (1823–1878)

Tweed was the New York political boss whose grand-scale corruption symbolized the low political standards of the Gilded Age.

He got his start in politics with volunteer fire companies, which were closely tied to Tammany Hall, and he soon learned tricky devices such as running “dummy” candidates to divide the opposition. The City Council during his service was known as the “Forty Thieves.”

Tweed offered $5 million to the *New York Times* if it would not print the information on his corruption and $500,000 to Nast if he would stop his anti-Tweed cartoons. Tweed was treated luxuriously in prison, even being allowed to take carriage rides. He escaped and fled to Cuba and Spain disguised as a sailor but was recognized and returned to harsher jail treatment.

Always genial and friendly, Tweed held no personal grudges against Thomas Nast and others who brought him down. He said he was only surprised that they wouldn’t take his bribes.

**Quote:** (When asked how his ring had managed to keep the scandals hidden for so long): “Well, we used money wherever we could.” (1869)

REFERENCE: Alexander Callow, *The Tweed Ring* (1966).

## Horace Greeley (1811–1872)

Greeley was the most famous newspaper editor of the nineteenth century, whose eccentric involvements in reform and politics made him an object of humor and anger.

He started on a Vermont newspaper at age fourteen and in 1841 launched the *New York Tribune* in close association with Whig politicians Thurlow Weed and William Seward.

At various times, he supported Fourierism, ending capital punishment, prohibition, cooperative labor unions, women’s rights (though not suffrage), and homesteading. He once spent a few months in an unsuccessful farming venture and then published a book called *What I Know of Farming.*

He had a high, squeaky voice and whiskers and always wore a broad-brimmed hat and white socks. He tried numerous times for political office, but except for a few months in Congress, he always failed. He had often been satirized but took personally the attacks on him in the 1872 campaign: one cartoon depicted him shaking hands with Booth over Lincoln’s body. He already showed signs of mental instability before the election and died shortly thereafter.

**Quote:** “We are henceforth to be one American people. Let us forget that we fought. Let us remember only that we have made peace.” (1872)

REFERENCE: Lurton D. Ingersoll, *The Life of Horace Greeley* (1974).

## James G. Blaine (1830–1893)

Blaine was the colorful Republican politician, presidential candidate, and secretary of state during the Gilded Age.

Blaine married his wife secretly because she was a schoolteacher who was supposed to remain single. She came from a well-off Maine family, and they helped him get his start in politics there.

Although he had the grand platform manner of earlier politicians, Blaine excelled at personal contact and humorous banter. He could easily remember thousands of names and connect each of them with an anecdote about the person.

By dramatically producing and reading the “Mulligan letters,” which supposedly proved his involvement in railroad corruption, he convinced many people of his innocence. Although never charged with crime, he became wealthy by trading favors with the owners of railroads and other interests.

**Quote:** “This letter requires no answer. After reading it file it away in your most secret drawer or give it to the flames.… Do not say a word…no matter who may ask you.” (Letter to Sherman, 1884)

REFERENCE: R. Hal Williams, *Years of Decision* (1978).

# questions for class discussion

1. Why did politics in the Gilded Age seemingly sink to such a low level? Did the Gilded Age party system have any strengths to compensate for its weaknesses?

2. Was the Compromise of 1877 another cynical political deal of the era or a wise adjustment to avoid a renewal of serious sectional conflict?

3. What were the short- and long-term results of the “Jim Crow” system in the South? Why was the sharecropping system so hard to overcome? Were blacks worse off or better off after the Civil War?

4. Why was the political system so slow to respond to the economic grievances of farmers and workers, especially during the hard economic times of the 1890s? Were the Populists and others more effectively addressing the real problems that America faced, or was their approach fatally crippled by their nostalgia for a simpler, rural America? (See boxed quotes on pages 492 and 508.)

## CONTENDING VOICES: GEORGE WASHINGTON PLUNKITT VS. THEODORE ROOSEVELT

## Questions for Class Discussion

1. How did Plunkitt argue that patronage and political parties were key to effective government?

2. How did Roosevelt offer a contrary view of the effect of patronage on effective government?

# makers of america: the chinese

## Questions for Class Discussion

1. How was the Chinese immigrant experience similar to that of such European groups as the Irish (Chapter 14), and how was it different? What effect did the racial distinctiveness of the Chinese have on their experience in America?

2. What were the greatest problems the Chinese-Americans experienced? How did they attempt to overcome them?

## Suggested Student Exercises

* Consider various prejudicial stereotypes of Chinese-American immigrants from the movies or elsewhere (for example, Charlie Chan). Compare these images with the actual experiences of Chinese-Americans.
* Consider how the history of California and the West Coast was significantly affected by the presence of even the relatively small number of Chinese immigrants. Examine whether that history has a new significance today, when modern China has again become a great power and new generations of Asian-American immigrants have arrived.

# varying viewpoints

## Expanding the View

* Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (1955).

A view of the Populists as backward-looking and irrational reactionaries:

“In the attempts of the Populists … to hold on to some of the values of agrarian life, to save personal entrepreneurship and individual opportunity and the character type they engendered, and to maintain a homogeneous Yankee civilization, I have found much that was retrograde and delusive, a little that was vicious, and a good deal that was comic. … Such tendencies in American life as isolationism and the extreme nationalism that often goes with it, hatred of Europe and Europeans, racial, religious, and nationalist phobias, resentment of big business, trade-unionism, intellectuals, the Eastern seaboard and its culture—all these have been found not only in opposition to reform but also at times oddly combined with it.”

* Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (1976).

A view of the Populists as forward-looking and rational:

“For the triumph of Populism—its only enduring triumph—was the belief in possibility it injected into American political consciousness.… Tactical errors aside, it was the élan of the agrarian crusade, too earnest ever to be decisively ridiculed, too creative to be permanently ignored, that lingers as the Populist residue.… The creed centered on concepts of political organization and uses of democratic government that—even though in a formative stage—were already too advanced to be accepted by the centralizing, complacent nation of the Gilded Age.… The issues of Populism were large. They dominate our world.”

# Questions for Class Discussion

1. What does each of these historians see as the essential character of populism?

2. How does the holder of each of these viewpoints see the relationship between populism and the new corporate industrial order of the late nineteenth century?

3. How would each of these historians likely interpret the fact that populism disappeared as a political force but has remained a strong undercurrent in American political thinking?