Gilded Age Politics:Crash Course US History #26

Crash Course: U.S. History
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=====Introduction=====

Hi, I'm John Green. This is Crash Course U.S. History, and today we're going to continue our look at the Gilded Age by focusing on political science.

Mr. Green! Mr. Green! So it's another history class where we don't actually talk about history?

Oh, me from the past. Your insistence on trying to place academic exploration into little boxes creates a little box that you yourself will live in for the rest of your life if you don't put your interdisciplinary party hat on!

So the Gilded Age takes its name from a book by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner that was called *The Gilded Age: a Tale of Today*. It was published in 1873, and it was not that successful. But while the Gilded Age conjures up visions of fancy parties and ostentatious displays of wealth, the book itself was about politics, and it gives a very negative appraisal of the state of American democracy at the time. Which shouldn't come as a huge surprise coming from Twain, whose comments about Congress included, "Suppose you were an idiot. And suppose you were a member of Congress. But I repeat myself." And also, "It could probably be shown by facts and figures that there is no distinctly native American criminal class except Congress."

So when faced with the significant changes taking place in the American economy after the Civil War, America's political system both nationally and locally dealt with these problems in the best way possible: by becoming incredibly corrupt.

[Crash Course intro]

Ohhh, Stan says I have to taken off my party hat. Ruh, ruhr ruhrrr.

=====The Urban Political Machine=====

So former House speaker Tip O'Neil once famously said that all politics is local, and although that isn't actually true, I am going to start with local politics today. Specifically, one of America's greatest inventions: the urban political machine. So a political machine is basically an organization that works to win elections so that they can exercise power. The most famous political machine was New York City's Tammany Hall, which dominated Democratic Party politics in the late 19th century, survived until the 20th, and is keenly associated with corruption.

=====The Mystery Document=====

Oh, it's already time for the mystery document? This is highly unorthodox, Stan. Well, the rules here are simple; I guess the author of the mystery document, I'm usually wrong, and I get shocked with the shock pen. All right, let's see what we got here.

Mystery document: "My party's in power in the city, and it's going to undertake a lot of public improvements. Well, I'm tipped off, say, that they're going to lay out a new park at a certain place and buy up all the land I can in the neighborhood. Then the board of this or that makes its plan public, and there is a rush to get my land, which nobody cared particular for before. Ain't it perfectly honest to charge a good price and make a profit on my investment and foresight. Of course it is. That's honest graft."

Stan, I know this one. It's about machine politics, it's from New York. It doesn't say it's from New York, but it is because it is George Plunkitt.

[Green check]

Yes! How do you like them apples? Oh, you want to know the name of the book? It's *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*. Stan, transition me back to the desk with a libertage please.

[Libertage: America! Corruption Eruption!]

=====Back to the Urban Political Machine=====

Plunkitt became famous for writing a book describing the way that New York City's government actually worked, but he was a small fish compared with the most famous shark-like machine politician of the day: William "Boss" Tweed, seen here with a head made of money.

"Boss" Tweed basically ran New York in the 1860s and early 1870s and his grandest feat of swindling helps explain how the machine system worked. It revolved around the, then new, county courthouse that now houses the New York City Department of Education. Building the courthouse was initially estimated to cost around $250,000, but ended up costing $13,000,000 by the time it was finished in 1871. Included in that cost was a bill of $180,000 for 3 tables and 40 chairs, $1.5 million for lighting fixtures, and $41,000 for brooms and cleaning supplies. A plasterer received $500,000 for his initial job and then $1,000,000 to repair his shoddy work. The standard kickback in these situations was that Tammany Hall received $2 for every $1 received by the contractor. That may seem like a bad deal for contractors, but remember, that plasterer still got to keep half a million dollars, which is worth about nine million dollars in today's money.

Now, of course, that makes it sounds like political machines were pure evil, especially if you were a taxpayer footing the bill for that courthouse. But machines also provided valuable services to immigrants and other poor people in cities. As Plunkitt explained, Tammany could help families in need: "I don't ask whether they are Republicans or Democrats, and I don't refer them to the Charity Organization Society, which would investigate their case in a month or two, and decide they were worthy of help about the time they are dead from starvation. I just get quarters for them, buy clothes for them if their clothes were burned up, and fix them up until they get things running again." In return for this help, Tammany expected votes, so that they could stay in power. Staying in power meant control of city jobs as well as city contracts. Plunkitt claimed to know "every big employer in the district- and in the whole city, for that matter- and they ain't in the habit of saying no to me when I ask them for a job."

But with all the corruption, sometimes even that wasn't enough. Fortunately, Tammany politicians could always fall back on fraud. Tammany found bearded men to vote, then took them to the barber to shave off the beard but left the mustache so that they could vote a second time, and then they would shave off the stache so they could vote for a third. And then, of course, there was always violence and intimidation. By the end of the century, a Tammany regular lamented the good ol' days when quote, "It was wonderful to see my men slug the opposition to preserve the sanctity of the ballot."

But corruption wasn't limited to big cities like New York and Chicago; some of the biggest boondoggles involved the United States Congress and the executive branch under President Ulysses

Grant. The first scandal, dubbed "The King of Frauds" by T*he New York Sun*, involved Credit Mobilier, the construction company that did most of the road building for the Union Pacific Railroad. This two-pronged accusation involved first, overcharging the public for construction costs and siphoning off profits to Credit Mobilier and second, bribery of Congressmen. Now the second charge was, of course, much juicer and also more partisan because only Republican Congressmen, including the Speaker of the House, were implicated in it. Eventually, Massachusetts Congressman Oakes Ames was found guilty of giving bribes, but no one was ever found guilty of receiving those bribes. As you can imagine, that did wonders for the reputation of Congress.

The second major scandal involved the so called "Whiskey Ring," which was a group of distillers in Saint Louis who decided they didn't like paying excise taxes on their product, perhaps a slightly more noble cause than that of the 2009 Bling Ring, who just wanted to dress like Paris Hilton.

John McDonald, a Grant administration official, helped distillers reduce their taxes by intentionally under-counting the number of kegs of booze. But then in 1875 the tax evasion grew out of control and McDonald eventually confessed and was convicted, thereby tainting the presidency with corruption just as Credit Mobilier had tainted Congress. That leaves the Supreme Court untainted, but don't worry, the Dred Scott Decision is worth at least, like, eighty years of tainting.

=====The Gilded Government=====

So with all this distrust in government, after Grant served two terms, presidential elections featured a series of "one-termers": Hayes, Garfield (whose term was filled out by Chester Arthur after Garfield was assassinated), Cleveland, Benjamin Harrison, and then Cleveland again, McKinley (who was elected twice, but then he was assassinated).

As for their parties, Gilded Age Republicans favored high tariffs, low government spending, paying off national debt, and reducing the amount of paper money, or greenbacks in circulation. Democrats opposed the tariffs and were often linked to New York bankers and financiers. In short, both parties were "pro-business", but they were "pro-different-businesses."

Despite that and the widespread corruption, some national reform legislation actually did get passed in the Gilded Age. The Civil Service Act of 1883, prompted by Garfield's assassination by a disgruntled office-seeker, created a merit system for 10% of federal employees, who were chosen by competitive examination, rather than political favoritism.

But this had an unintended effect; it made American politicians much more dependent on donations from big businesses rather than small donations from grateful political appointees. But, you know, nice idea.

And then in 1890 the Sherman Antitrust Act forbade combinations and practices that restrained trade, but again, it was almost impossible to enforce this against the monopolies like U.S. Steel. More often, it was used against the labor unions which were seen to restrain trade in their "radical" lobbying for, like, health insurance and hardhats.

But all and all the national Congress was pretty dysfunctional at the end of the 19th century, stop me if that sounds familiar, so state governments expanded their responsibility for public health and welfare. Cities invested in public works like transportation and gas, and later electricity and the movement to provide public education continued. Some northern states even passed laws limiting the work day to 8 hours. “What is this, France?” is what courts would often say when striking those laws down. Reform legislation was less developed in the south, but they were busy rolling back Reconstruction and creating laws that limited the civil rights of African Americans known as “Jim Crow Laws.” In the west, farmers became politically motivated over the issue of freight rates. Wait, are we talking about railroads? Let’s go to the Thought Bubble.

=====Thought Bubble=====

In the 1870s, farmers formed the Grange Movement to put pressure on state governments to establish fair railroad rates and warehouse charges. Railroads in particular tended to be pretty monopolistic. They owned the track going through town after all, so it was hard for farmers to negotiate fair shipping prices. The Grange Movement eventually became the Farmer’s Alliance Movement which also pushed for economic cooperation to raise prices, but was split into Northern and Southern wings that could never really get it together.

The biggest idea to come out of the Farmer’s Alliance was the Sub-Treasury Plan. Under this plan, farmers would store grain in government warehouses and get low rate government loans to buy seed and equipment using the stored grain as collateral. This would allow farmers to bypass the banks who increasingly came to be seen, along with the railroads, as the source of all the farmers troubles.

Eventually these politically motivated farmers and their supporters grew into a political party, the People’s Party, or Populists. In 1892 they held a convention in Omaha and put forth a remarkably reform-minded plan, particularly given that this was put forth in Omaha, which included: the Sub-Treasury Plan, which didn’t exactly happen, although the deal farmers ended up with was probably better for them; government ownership of railroads, which sort of happened if you count Amtrak; graduated income tax, which did happen after the passage of the 16th Amendment; government control of the currency, which happened with the creation of the Federal Reserve System; recognition of the right of laborers to form unions, which happened both at the state and federal level; and free coinage of silver to produce more money, which we'll get to in a second.

The People’s Party attempted to appeal to a broad coalition of producing classes, especially miners and industrial workers and it was particularly successful with those groups in Colorado and Idaho. As the preamble to the party platform put it: “Corruption dominates the ballot box, the legislatures, the Congress and touches even the ermine of the bench... from the same prolific womb of governmental injustice we breed the two great classes - tramps and millionaires.” Thanks Thought Bubble.

=====The Populist Party=====

So some Western states were so Populist they even granted women the right to vote in the 1890s which added tremendously to the Populist’s electoral power, but most American voters stuck with the two main parties, industrial workers never really joined in large numbers because the Populists calls for free coinage of silver would lead to inflation, especially in food prices and that would hurt urban laborers. But if it hadn’t been for that threat of silver inflation, we might have three major political parties in the U.S. today, or at least two different ones. Stupid inflation, always ruining everything.

Populist leaders also struggled to unify because racism. Some Populist leaders, like Tom Watson, argued that black and white poor farmers were in the same boat, but Southern populists were not inclined to take up the fight against segregation and even Watson himself began spouting anti-Semitic rhetoric. But in the Halcyon Populist days of 1892 their presidential candidate, James Weaver, gained 1 million votes as a third party candidate. He carried five western states and got 22 electoral votes, which is better than Mondale did. But the best known Populist candidate was actually the Democratic nominee for president in 1896, William Jennings Bryan. Bryan, who once spoke of America of being crucified on a cross of gold, firmly supported free coinage of silver in hopes of increasing the amount of money in circulation would raise prices for farmers and make it easier for people to pay off their debts.

William Jennings Bryan is probably better known for the anti-evolution stance in the famous Scopes Monkey Trail, where he was up against none other than Clarence Darrow, but he did almost become president. So, the Populist were really wary of Bryan as a Democrat because they feared their ideas would be reduced simply to simply, free silver, but they voted for him anyway. But Bryan still lost the 1896 election to William McKinley in what has become known as the first modern political campaign because the business classes gave McKinley's campaign an unprecedented 10 million dollars, which these days will buy you 9 ads in Iowa, but back then won you an entire presidential election. He won the electoral college in a landslide, 271 to 176. Bryan's defeat in 1896 effectively put an end to the Populist Party.

The corruption in government, both federal and local, continued and new journalists, called Muckrakers, began exposing it in the press. And even though they were defeated at the polls, Populist ideas, especially direct election of senators and a progressive income tax, quickly became mainstream. Now these days we don't necessarily associate those ideas with Populists, which suggests that maybe they were right to worry about hitching their wagon to Bryan's star.

But in the end, would you rather have your name survive or see your ideas enacted? But of course many of the problems the Populists were concerned with persisted, as did the scourge of Jim Crow. We'll discuss those next week when we look at the Progressive Era. Thanks for watching.

=====Conclusion=====

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, our script supervisor is Meredith Danko, the associate producer is Danica Johnson, the show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer, Rosianna Rojas, and myself, and our graphics team is Thought Cafe. Okay, I'll make a transition but I think you'll wanna keep filming this. Every week there's a new caption for the Libertage, if you'd like to suggest one in comments you can do so, or you can also ask questions about today's video that will be answered by our team of historians. Thank you for watching Crash Course, and as we say in my hometown, Don't Forget To Be Awesome.