

A Defense of Political Graft (1905)

HW Read by

~~T 12/11~~
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The most powerful political machine during the Gilded Age was Tammany Hall, an Irish-based organization that dominated New York City politics throughout the nineteenth century. It involved a network of Democratic politicians and party workers in alliance with various contractors who provided kickbacks in exchange for government favors. George Washington Plunkitt was district leader of Tammany Hall who took for granted the patronage system. In 1905 he participated in a series of interviews with a local reporter in which he defended the political machine against the criticisms of reformers.

From William Riordan, ed., *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall* (1905; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1963), 3-4, 11, 12-13.

Everybody is talkin' these days about Tammany men growin' rich on graft, but nobody thinks of drawin' the distinction between honest graft and dishonest graft. There's all the difference in the world between the two. Yes, many of our men have grown rich in politics. I did myself. I've made a big fortune out of the graft, and I'm gettin' richer every day, but I've

not gone in for dishonest graft—blackmailin' gamblers, saloonkeepers, disorderly people, etc.—and neither has any of the men who have made big fortunes in politics.

There's an honest graft, and I'm an example of how it works. I might sum up the whole thing by sayin': "I seen my opportunities and I took 'em."

Just let me explain by examples. My party's in power in the city, and it's goin' to undertake a lot of public improvements. Well, I'm tipped off, say, that they're going to lay out a park at a certain place.

I see my opportunity and I take it. I go to that place and I 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. Well, that's honest graft.

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Thinking Questions

* How does Plunkitt defend his actions?

* What are the pros + cons of political machines?

... This civil service law is the biggest fraud of the age. It is the curse of the nation. There can't be no real patriotism while it lasts. How are you goin' to interest our young men in their country if you have no offices to give them when they work for their party? Just look at things in this city today. There are ten thousand good offices, but we can't get at more than a few hundred of them. How are we goin' to provide for the thousands of men who worked for the Tammany ticket? It can't be done. These men were full of patriotism a short time ago. They expected to be servin' their city, but when we tell them that we can't place them [in government jobs], do you think their patriotism is goin' to last? Not much. They say: "What's the use workin' for your country anyhow? There's nothin' in the game [for us]." And what can they do? I don't know, but I'll tell

you what I do know. I know more than one young man in past years who worked for the ticket and was overflowin' with patriotism, but when he was knocked out by the civil service humbug he got to hate his country and became an Anarchist.

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When the people elected Tammany, they knew just what they were doin'. We didn't put up any false pretenses. We didn't go in for humbug civil service and all that rot. We stood as we always have stood, for rewardin' the men that won the victory. They call that the spoils system. All right; Tammany is for the spoils system, and when we go in we fire every anti-Tammany man from office that can be fired under the law. It's an elastic sort of law and you can bet it will be stretched to the limit. . . .

The civil service humbug is underminin' our institutions and if a halt ain't called soon this great republic will tumble down like a Park Avenue house when they were buildin' the subway, and on its ruins will rise another Russian government.