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# The Lost World of Gilded Age Politics

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The rambunctious world of Gilded Age politics, with its boisterous partisan rallies and three-hour long declamations on the finer points of tariff schedules and monetary policy, passed from the scene of American politics rather abruptly about a century ago. Despite its superficial similarities with politics today – sex scandals, corporate influence, and partisan gridlock in Washington – the spirit and substance of Gilded Age politics was quite different from political discourse today. Politics was a national obsession to nineteenth century Americans. Partisanship was open and vigorous because common people believed the issues were important and political parties represented divergent viewpoints. Men (and in a few places women) of every ethnic and racial background, and from every walk of life, overwhelmingly participated in America's democratic experiment. This made Gilded Age politicians some of the greatest heroes and villains of the era.<sup>1</sup>

The popular stereotype of Gilded Age politics, that corruption, demagoguery, and meaningless issues were its primary characteristics, came from both contemporary sources and the professional scholarship of the early twentieth century. Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner's *The Gilded Age*, which lent its name to this period, emphasized get rich quick schemes, vote buying, and every imaginable corruption.<sup>2</sup> It seemed that those credited with noble deeds of sacrifice during the Civil War suddenly turned into greedy, unprincipled scoundrels afterward. Another critic of the era, the acerbic Henry Adams concluded that "one might search the whole list of Congress, Judiciary, and Executive during the twenty-five years 1870 to 1895, and find little but damaged reputation." In what other era of American

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<sup>1</sup>Walter Dean Burnham, "The Appearance and Disappearance of the American Voter," in *Electoral Participation: A Comparative Analysis*, ed., Richard Rose (Beverly Hills, 1980): 44-46; Richard L. McCormick, "Public Life in Industrial America, 1877-1917," in *The New American History*, ed., Eric Foner (Philadelphia, 1990): 95-96.

<sup>2</sup>Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* (Hartford, 1873).

history might one hear a United States Senator credited with defining an honest politician as “one who when he is bought will stay bought”?<sup>3</sup>

Gilded Age politics fared little better at the hand of the Progressive historians of the early twentieth century. Matthew Josephson, in *The Politicos*, claimed that there were no significant differences between the major parties. Both eagerly served corporate interests. Partisanship devolved into sham battles over meaningless issues designed to divert the masses from the very real problems emerging from industrialization. Vernon Louis Parrington called it the “Great Barbecue,” to which all were invited, except for inconspicuous persons like farmers and laborers.<sup>4</sup> Historians, of course, are heavily affected by the events of their own lives. Josephson was a Marxist writing during the depths of the Depression of the 1930s when establishment politicians, and even capitalism itself, appeared to have failed. Parrington was an ex-Populist refighting the epic battles of his youth.

The trend in historical scholarship on Gilded Age politics over the past three or four decades has begun to balance the image left for us by Progressive historians. Revisionists acknowledge the greed, corruption, and even crassness of the era. But, they have changed the emphasis from such considerations to the very real fact that Gilded Age politicians and parties truly engaged the American public on fundamental issues concerning the direction of the nation and the role government should play in national life.<sup>5</sup>

From the 1830s to the 1890s, political parties dominated American politics. Voters believed that there were important ideological differences between the major parties. The Gilded Age Republican Party billed itself as the party of nationalism, prosperity, and moralism. Compared to its Democratic counterpart, the GOP was the party of activist, big government. It had saved the Union during the

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<sup>3</sup>Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography* (Boston, 1918), 294; Leland D. Baldwin, ed., *The Flavor of the Past: Readings in American Social and Political Portraiture* (New York, 1968), 162.

<sup>4</sup>Matthew Josephson, *The Politicos, 1865-1896* (New York, 1938); Vernon Louis Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought*, vol. III, *The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America, 1860-1920* (New York, 1930), 23.

<sup>5</sup>Usable modern surveys of Gilded Age politics include H. Wayne Morgan, *From Hayes to McKinley: National Party Politics, 1877-1896* (Syracuse, 1969); Morton Keller, *Affairs of State: Public Life in Late Nineteenth Century America* (Cambridge, MA, 1977); Robert W. Cherny, *American Politics in the Gilded Age: 1868-1900* (Wheeling, IL, 1997).

Civil War and Reconstruction. Likewise, it promoted a prosperous national economy through neo-mercantilist legislation. Because Republicans relied substantially upon the support of White Anglo-Saxon northern Protestants, it was the party of America's "host culture," a status which supporters believed conferred upon it the proprietary right to define true Americanism and proper conduct. The Democratic Party, in turn, was the party of Jeffersonian small government, non-interventionist laissez faire economic policies, states' rights, and personal liberties. Its adherents endorsed the Jacksonian concept that government activism primarily helped the few at the expense of the many and that local government served the interests of citizens better than centralized national power. Democrats received most of their support from a diffuse range of ethnic and cultural "outgroups," such as recent immigrants and white southerners. These groups felt threatened by the homogenizing influence of federal authority. Party loyalty for both Democrats and Republicans became an act of group identity. The strong ideological stances of Gilded Age parties had been developed during the middle years of the century and were later solidified by the events of the Civil War.<sup>6</sup>

Nineteenth century American political parties shaped campaigns into popular spectacles with speakers, parades, and other celebrations that provided voters with a substantial portion of their political education and popular entertainment. Campaigning seemed perpetual as local, state, and national elections followed rapidly upon the heels of each other. Parties employed armies of workers to propagandize potential supporters and get out the vote. The labor involved came largely from beneficiaries of the spoils system, patronage appointees holding minor public offices. Likewise, campaign expenses, such as providing campaign literature, printing ballots, and subsidizing friendly newspapers, were largely drawn from assessments on officeholder's salaries. The result was enormous popular participation in politics. Voter turnout rivaled that of western European democracies in the twentieth century, about twenty-five percent higher than in America today. Differences in wealth, education, and ethnicity have significantly affected twentieth century American voter participation, but had no

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<sup>6</sup>Richard L. McCormick, *The Party Period and Public Policy: American Politics from the Age of Jackson to the Progressive Era* (New York, 1986), 200-02, 207, 213; Robert S. Salisbury, "The Republican Party and Positive Government: 1860-1890," *Mid-America* 68 (January 1986): 17-18; Cherny, *American Politics in the Gilded Age*, 13.

impact on turnout during America's Gilded Age, or in other western democracies today.<sup>7</sup>

At the national level, the Gilded Age was a period of party equilibrium, or stalemate. Between 1876 and 1892, no president received a majority of the popular votes. Either the loser got more, or a third party received enough votes to prevent a majority victory. Both occurred in 1888. Between 1875 and 1897, the same party controlled the presidency and both houses of Congress for only four years: Republicans from 1889 to 1891 and Democrats from 1893 to 1895. Both mandates were sharply reversed at the next congressional election. The sustained political equilibrium of the period suggests Americans were sharply divided, but engaged and committed to the democratic process. The common voter understood that his ballot really mattered.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the partisan stalemate of Gilded Age politics, Republicans seemed in charge of the national government most of the time. Economic policy making lay at the center of political contention.

Republicans had set the agenda on economic policy during the Civil War. When southern Democrats withdrew from Congress in 1861, Republicans moved forward with an economic program similar to that of the defunct Whig Party's American System. The Morrill Tariff of 1861 established the principle of protectionism that dominated America until the 1930s. In 1862, Republicans passed the Homestead Act, which sped up the exploitation of America's vast natural resources. The same year, Congress passed the Land-Grant College Act, which helped bring within reach of most young Americans the inexpensive college education necessary for an industrial society to thrive. Federal authorities also provided land subsidies to western railroads, which greatly expanded commercial activity in the region. The National Banking Acts of 1863 and 1864, and an 1865 law that placed a prohibitive 10% tax on state bank notes, created a uniform national monetary system that greatly facilitated commercial exchange.

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<sup>7</sup>Charles W. Calhoun, "Late Nineteenth-Century Politics Revisited," *History Teacher* 27 (1997): 333; R. Hal Williams, "The Politics of the Gilded Age," in *American Political History: Essays on the State of the Discipline*, eds., John F. Marszalek and Wilson D. Miscamble (Notre Dame, IN, 1997): 110-13; G. Bingham Powell, Jr., "Voting Turnout in Thirty Democracies: Partisan, Legal, and Socio-Economic Influences," in Rose, *Electoral Participation*, 5-34.

<sup>8</sup>Williams, "The Politics of the Gilded Age," 114; Robert Kelley, "The Democracy of Tilden and Cleveland," in *Democrats and the American Idea: A Bicentennial Appraisal*, ed., Peter B. Kovler (Washington, DC, 1992): 148.

Implementation of the American System marked a significant centralizing and nationalizing of federal authority.<sup>9</sup>

Progressive historians of the early twentieth century sharply criticized Gilded Age politicians for ignoring the mounting problems arising from Gilded Age development. To be sure, the period experienced its share of demagoguery. The Civil War was the central event in the lives of most Americans at the time. The South's reluctance to acquiesce in northern leadership during Reconstruction caused many Republicans to fear that Democrats wished to divert the nation from the economic course set for it by the GOP. Because there were far more Union than Confederate veterans, verbally reviving Civil War animosities, or "Waving the Bloody Shirt of Rebellion," was politically astute and became one of GOP spokesmen's favorite pastimes. Democrats, of course, countered the "Bloody Shirt" by denouncing the GOP as the "Party of Negro Domination," a reference to the false assumption that African-Americans had dominated Reconstruction. Although "Waving the Bloody Shirt" would recede in importance as memories faded and veterans died, the race issue did just the opposite. Republican efforts to protect African-American rights during the Gilded Age usually were either ineffective or quickly subverted. Relatively high levels of African-American voting in the 1870s began to decline by the 1880s as an intense wave of racism swept the South. Eventually, the result would be lynchings, disfranchisement, and statutory segregation. The Federal Elections Bill of 1890, more popularly known as the Lodge Force Bill, was the GOP's last formal attempt to defend African-American voting rights during this era. Although the bill had the support of many prominent Republicans, adamant Democratic opposition and the defection of some western Republicans in the Senate eventually killed the measure.<sup>10</sup>

Gilded Age presidents spent more time on patronage than any

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<sup>9</sup>Kelley, "The Democracy of Tilden and Cleveland," 147-48. Also see Richard Franklin Bensel, *Yankee Leviathan: The Origins of Central State Authority in America, 1859-1877* (New York, 1990).

<sup>10</sup>Cherny, *American Politics in the Gilded Age*, 26 and 108; McCormick, "Public Life in Industrial America, 1877-1917," in Foner, *The New American History*, 98; Morgan, *From Hayes to McKinley*, 340; Keller, *Affairs of State*, 456. For disfranchisement and segregation, see J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880-1910* (New Haven, 1974) and C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York, 1974), respectively.

other item during their first year in the White House. Postmasters, revenue officials, and pension officers made up the vast majority of such appointments. The spoils system, as it was called, was the most effective method of securing the committed cadre of party workers necessary to organize rallies, propagandize potential supporters, and distribute ballots on election day. It worked well enough so long as no great amount of proficiency was needed. Civil service reformers, on the other hand, found the exchange of public office for partisan service unseemly, and proposed to abolish assessments, appoint qualified persons to public office, and grant them tenure. Both the Liberal Republicans who broke with the Grant Administration in 1872 and the Mugwumps who deserted the GOP for Grover Cleveland in 1884 supported the idea of a merit civil service. Reformers, of course, expected civil service reform to favor the best educated Americans, namely themselves. It offered them some hope of social control and predictable growth. Reformers' elitist assumptions, however, hurt their crusade because of the intensely democratic spirit of the times.<sup>11</sup>

Presidents usually deferred to state or local party leaders for appointments within their jurisdiction. Presidents Rutherford B. Hayes and James A. Garfield, however, made major inroads against the spoils system by insisting that certain positions were too important to allow senators the courtesy of naming the recipient. In order to secure Senate approval of his nominee for customs collector of New York City in 1881, President Garfield withdrew all other nominations, essentially holding them hostage, until the Senate ratified his choice. The offended Senator, Roscoe Conkling of New York, a leader of the Stalwart wing of the GOP, resigned from his Senate seat in protest. Seven weeks later, a man claiming to be a Stalwart assassinated President Garfield. The incident gave civil service reformers the opening they needed. Most Republicans and about half of the Democrats in Congress supported the Pendleton Act of 1883, which allowed presidents to classify individual federal offices for merit appointments. In the short run, this meant a president could perpetuate his appointees in office after his term. But, in the long run, it created a more professional civil service. By 1900, about 40% of all civil servants were merit appointees. The Pendleton

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<sup>11</sup>Cherny, *American Politics in the Gilded Age*, 13-17; Morgan, *From Hayes to McKinley*, 27-31. Also see Ari Hoogenboom, *Outlawing the Spoils: A History of the Civil Service Reform Movement, 1865-1883* (Urbana, 1961) and John G. Sproat, *The Best Men: Liberal Reformers in the Gilded Age* (New York, 1968).

Act was the root from which America's twentieth century bureaucratic state grew.<sup>12</sup>

Gilded Age politicians probably strained more vocal chords over the protective tariff than any other political issue of the era. Senator James G. Blaine of Maine emerged as the Republican Party's premier exponent of protectionism in 1880. That year, his native state of Maine, which held federal elections in September rather than November, surprisingly fell into the Democratic column. The stunned Blaine carefully examined the results and discovered that the GOP had actually gained votes in industrial towns. He attributed this to laborers associating protectionism with job security. Republicans then hastily pushed the tariff issue in the Midwest and eventually carried the national election.<sup>13</sup>

According to historian Richard L. McCormick, government's primary role during the nineteenth century was to distribute resources and privileges to identifiable groups. At the state level, incorporation privileges, tax exemptions, and the right of eminent domain were the major distributionist items available. The protective tariff, subsidies, and dispersal of the public domain filled this role at the federal level. Whether distributive policies were a proper role for government, however, was a hotly debated issue. Most Democrats opposed the tariff as a special privilege to the few, although the Northeastern wing of the party was divided on the issue. Republicans were more united. They frequently wrapped themselves in a blanket of patriotism by claiming protection promoted a national economy in which foreign competition could not injure infant American enterprises and wages could be kept high.<sup>14</sup>

James G. Blaine became the GOP's presidential nominee in 1884. He claimed that the protective tariff was the key to maintaining harmony between labor and capital. Although he was a strong, charismatic leader, Blaine suffered from nagging doubts about his ties to big business and his possible involvement in the *Crédit Mobilier*

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<sup>12</sup>Morgan, *From Hayes to McKinley*, 133-37.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>14</sup>McCormick, "The Party Period and Public Policy," 208; Salisbury, "The Republican Party and Positive Government," 20; Cherny, *American Politics in the Gilded Age*, 18; Lewis L. Gould, "Party Conflict: Republicans versus Democrats, 1877-1901," in *The Gilded Age: Essays on the Origins of Modern America*, ed., Charles W. Calhoun (Wilmington, DE, 1996): 215-16.

scandal of the early 1870s. The moralistic Mugwump faction of the GOP immediately bolted his nomination. On the opposite end of the party, Stalwarts also were cool to Blaine's candidacy. When asked to help with the campaign, Roscoe Conkling tersely replied, "Gentlemen, you have been misinformed, I have given up criminal law."<sup>15</sup>

Democrats argued that the protective tariff was a consumer tax that encouraged monopoly and foreign retaliation. Their nominee in 1884 was Governor Grover Cleveland of New York. He was a protégé of Samuel Tilden, the man who had rebuilt the Democratic Party after the Civil War. Both advocated minimum government and a tariff for "revenue only." Cleveland enjoyed the moral high-ground until newspapers credited him with having an illegitimate child. Then, the campaign degenerated into one of the dirtiest in American history.<sup>16</sup>

Blaine broke with the tradition that presidential nominees stayed at home, gave brief speeches to well-wishing visitors, and looked presidential. In September, 1884, he embarked upon a speaking tour to spread protectionism's appeal. At a visit to New York City two weeks before election day, Blaine met with a group of local clergymen led by Reverend Samuel Burchard. During his greeting, Burchard uttered the infamous phrase, "We are Republicans, and we don't propose to leave our party and identify ourselves with the party whose antecedents have been rum, Romanism, and rebellion." Blaine, tired from his trip and apparently not paying attention, failed to respond to the slur that would surely offend Irish voters. Because Blaine's mother was Catholic, he had some appeal among New York's Irish community. While the evidence for Republican Catholics abandoning the GOP over this incident is poor, Burchard's remarks certainly made last minute conversions unlikely and probably helped mobilize Catholic Democrats behind Cleveland. Blaine subsequently lost New York state, and thus the presidency, by less than 1,200 votes.<sup>17</sup>

One of the Progressive historians' most telling criticisms of

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<sup>15</sup>Morgan, *From Hayes to McKinley*, 223; Gould, "Party Conflict: Republicans versus Democrats," 221.

<sup>16</sup>Kelley, "The Democracy of Tilden and Cleveland," 154-56.

<sup>17</sup>Morgan, *From Hayes to McKinley*, 226-32. A number of other factors, including the defection of the Mugwumps, the emergence of the Prohibition Party, and a highly publicized fund-raising dinner at the lavish Delmonico's Restaurant for the nation's richest movers and shakers the evening of the Burchard incident also contributed to Blaine's narrow defeat in New York. See Mark Wahlgren Summers, *Rum, Romanism, & Rebellion: The Making of a President, 1884* (Chapel Hill, 2000), 280-87, 296.

Gilded Age politics was the lack of attention politicians gave America's growing social divisions. Although they primarily referred to problems of economic inequality, Reverend Burchard's comment reveals an ethnic social division that Progressive historians largely neglected. There was a massive wave of immigration to America during the mid- and late-nineteenth century. German and Irish migrants became noticeable before mid-century. Immigration from eastern and southern Europe began about 1880. Most settled in the urban centers of the economically dynamic Northeast and Midwest. White Anglo-Saxon Protestants constituted the host culture in these regions and largely supported the GOP. As the party of nationalism and active government, Republicans periodically attempted to legislate rapid assimilation. This translated into English language laws, enforced Sabbath observance, reading from the King James version of the Bible in public schools, and prohibition.<sup>18</sup>

Beginning in the 1960s, historians searching for the social underpinnings to politics concluded that ethnicity, and especially religion, were the major determinants of partisan choice during the Gilded Age, and that local considerations were far more important to voters than national politics. Pietist religious groups were said to stress correct behavior, wished to force their vision of morality upon others, and supported the GOP. Liturgicals, on the other hand, emphasized correct belief, championed parochial schools as obstacles to heretical indoctrination, and supported the Democracy. While there clearly was a significant ethnic clash during the Gilded Age, not all have embraced the ethnocultural insistence on religion's primacy and its corollary that voters considered local politics most important. There was a substantial overlap in ethnic, religious, and economic circumstances during the Gilded Age. Business leaders and middle class professionals in the Northeast and Midwest, for instance, were largely Old Stock Protestants, while the working class was heavily ethnic. Likewise, voter turnout normally was higher in state and national races.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Kelley, "The Democracy of Tilden and Cleveland," 150. Also see Ronald P. Formisano, "The Invention of the Ethnocultural Interpretation," *American Historical Review* 99 (April 1994): 453-77 and Richard Jensen, *The Winning of the Midwest: Social and Political Conflict, 1888-1896* (Chicago, 1971).

<sup>19</sup>James E. Wright, "The Ethnocultural Model of Voting: A Behavioral and Historical Critique," *American Behavioral Scientist* 16 (May/June 1973): 662-63; Cherny, *American Politics in the Gilded Age*, 27-29; Charles W. Calhoun, "The Political Culture: Public Life and the Conduct of Politics," in Calhoun, *The Gilded Age*, 200, 207; Michael F. Holt, "The Primacy of Party Reasserted," *Journal of American History* 86 (June 1999): 154.

Because ethnics settled overwhelmingly in cities, the urban areas of the Northeast and Midwest had heterogeneous populations. Urban political machines emerged by mid-century as vehicles for conciliating group diversity. Bosses dispensed a whole range of services to the needy, including food, intercession with the authorities, and jobs on city construction projects. They expected little more than partisan loyalty and a blind eye to corruption in return. Despite the constant attacks of moralistic reformers, urban machines survived well into the twentieth century. This was partly because immigration dissipated only with World War I and partly because bosses and machines provided social services to those most in need.

Strong partisan loyalties and massive voter turnout suggest that the political system of the Gilded Age served the American people quite well. But, in fact, those who were dissatisfied with contemporary politics grew in numbers as time passed. Women, for instance, could not vote in most states during the Gilded Age. Men employed metaphors of sewers and cesspools to insist that politics was too unseemly for ladies. Politically-aware women countered with analogies to public housecleaning and increasingly involved themselves in issues that affected family life. Their political activities usually took the form of education or lobbying.<sup>20</sup>

Woman suffrage always loomed large among women's issues. The right to vote meant that women and their concerns would have to be taken seriously. Susan B. Anthony lobbied for women to be included in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, but without success. The suffrage movement splintered in the aftermath of this defeat. But, by the 1880s, there was a broad network of women's groups involved in politics, including suffrage associations, philanthropic organizations, civil reformers, voluntary organizations, and temperance groups. Frances Willard's Woman's Christian Temperance Union was the most important female political association of the era. Willard argued that women must venture beyond their traditional domestic realm in order to protect the home. Male irresponsibility in the form of alcoholism impoverished families. The WCTU also endorsed woman's suffrage,

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<sup>20</sup>Suzanne Lebsock, "Women and American Politics: 1880-1920," in *Women, Politics, and Change*, eds., Louise A. Tilly and Patricia Gurin (New York, 1990): 35. Also see Rebecca Edwards, *Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era* (New York, 1997).

guardianship rights for mothers, better wages and working conditions for women, and a single standard of sexual morality for both sexes. The notion that correctable environmental factors caused poverty accompanied the rise of the Settlement House Movement in the 1880s and 1890s. This led to extensive lobbying for political solutions to urban problems. A network of women's clubs emerged by the 1890s that agitated for regulation of women's and children's employment. The Depression of the 1890s, likewise, gave those who promoted social issues a greater sense of immediacy. Frequently, however, women found that men had quite different conceptions about government's responsibility for public welfare. Women's political activities seemed radical primarily because they promoted an interventionist state on social issues.<sup>21</sup>

Many laborers likewise found mainstream parties and politicians inadequate to their concerns. As laborers moved from the artisan's shop to the factory floor, they struggled with whether they should resist the time discipline of the factory system or accommodate industry. Troops were called out to quell civil disorder between labor and capital several hundred times during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The largest disturbance was the railroad strike of 1877, which involved most of the nation outside New England and the South. At its worst, strikers engaged in pitched battles with militiamen in Pittsburgh.<sup>22</sup>

The Knights of Labor became a national force in the late 1870s. It offered workers of all races, skills, and sexes an alternative to the reigning exploitative culture. The Knights formally opposed the wage system and called for land reform, the eight-hour work day, monetary reform, an end to child and convict labor, and equal rights for women. Unable to move the mainstream parties on their issues, the Knights organized third party efforts in 189 towns and 34 states in the mid-1880s, with significant success. But poor leadership and the violence associated with the Southwestern railroad strike and Haymarket bombing of 1886 quickly undermined the movement. Labor's national third party effort of 1888, the Union Labor Party, was a dismal failure.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Lebsock, "Women and American Politics," 37-41; Maureen A. Flanagan, "Gender and Urban Reform: The City Club and the Woman's City Club of Chicago in the Progressive Era," *American Historical Review* 95 (October 1990): 1032-50.

<sup>22</sup>Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1919* (New York, 1987), 15-18, 21-22.

<sup>23</sup>McCormick, "Public Life in Industrial America," 98. Also see Leon Fink,

The American Federation of Labor, founded in 1886, promoted the tactic of working within the contemporary political structure through strikes, lobbying, and selected political endorsements of individuals. Laborers were fractured by ethnicity, skills, and sex. The AFL rejected unskilled workers and only cigarmakers and typographers accepted female members. Its decentralized organizational structure accommodated ethnic diversity better than other unions. Decentralization also helped when a member trade, the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steelworkers, was broken during the Homestead strike of 1892. As in the past, violence turned public opinion against the union involved.<sup>24</sup>

Farmers, particularly those in the South and West, also came to rebel against the reigning political culture. Commercial agriculture spread rapidly across the Great Plains and upland South after the Civil War. Connection to the world market, however, caused dependency upon distant markets and declining prices. Many lost their status as independent farmers. When searching for the roots of their problems, farmers noted that commission agents, futures speculators, and wholesalers appeared to make a profit without laboring. Railroad freight charges, likewise, seemed to be the product of monopoly rather than the value that railroads' services added. For instance, railroads usually had reasonable rates in markets served by more than one line. But monopoly situations caused rates to increase enormously. Thus, carrying crops on longer routes between major terminals frequently cost less than shorter routes to or from a minor depot.

Founded in 1867, the Patrons of Husbandry, or Grange, took an economic approach to solving farmers' problems at first by establishing cooperatives. Although, officially non-partisan, the Grange eventually promoted state-level railroad and grain elevator regulation with significant effect in the Midwest. The Supreme Court, however, ruled the state "Granger Laws" unconstitutional in *Wabash v. Illinois* in 1886. This became the catalyst for establishing the federal Interstate Commerce Commission in 1887. The ICC legislation outlawed the long haul-short haul differential and rebates, but did not revive the rate

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*Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana, 1983) and Gerald N. Grob, *Workers and Utopia: A Study of Ideological Conflict in the American Labor Movement, 1865-1900* (Evanston, IL, 1961).

<sup>24</sup>McCormick, "Public Life in Industrial America," 100.

setting powers of the Granger Laws.<sup>25</sup>

Eventually, the federal government's deflationary monetary policies, which made credit expensive and difficult to obtain, became farmers' greatest complaint. Between the Civil War and the 1890s, the nation's volume of business tripled while money in circulation increased by less than fifty percent. Those who owned money (creditors) saw its purchasing power almost double during this period. Deflation required debtors, however, to pay off loans with increasingly more valuable dollars. Thus, an increasingly large portion of the fruits of their labor went to bankers and mortgage companies. Farmers supported reflationary measures such as issuing greenbacks (fiat money) and the free (untaxed) and unlimited coinage of silver and gold at a ratio of 16 to 1, otherwise known as "free silver." By the end of the 1880s, farmers in the South and West were ready for political insurgency.<sup>26</sup>

Grover Cleveland ruled over a divided Democratic Party during his first term as president. His use of patronage had been erratic at best. As an idealistic believer in economical, limited government, Cleveland had vetoed hundreds of private pension bills, which angered Congressmen playing ombudsman for their constituents. He even vetoed a proposal to provide free seed to drought-stricken Texans and provided only tepid support for ICC legislation.<sup>27</sup>

In his 1887 State of the Union address, Cleveland focused entirely upon his opposition to the protective tariff. It was the major source of an embarrassing treasury surplus as well as an unfair privilege to favored classes. Because many northeastern Democrats favored protectionism, he further divided his party for the upcoming presidential election. Republicans vigorously defended the protective tariff in 1888 and charged Cleveland with serving British free-trade interests. American businessmen contributed more than \$3 million to publish pro-tariff campaign literature. The result was a complete GOP victory. Republicans won the presidency and control of both houses of Congress for the first time since 1872.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Worth Robert Miller, "Farmers and Third-Party Politics in Late Nineteenth-Century America," in Calhoun, *The Gilded Age*, 235-60; Robert C. McMath, Jr., *American Populism: A Social History, 1877-1898* (New York, 1993).

<sup>26</sup>Miller, "Farmers and Third-Party Politics," 241-43.

<sup>27</sup>Gould, "Party Conflict: Republicans versus Democrats," 223; Kelley, "The Democracy of Tilden and Cleveland," 159-60; Salisbury, "The Republican Party and Positive Government," 28.

<sup>28</sup>Gould, "Party Conflict: Republicans versus Democrats," 216; Kelley, "The

When the new Congress met in 1890, Republicans set about exercising their mandate with a wide-ranging program of reform. The McKinley Tariff increased protectionism once again. The Dependent Pension Act made almost all veterans and their dependents eligible for support. This doubled the number of federal pensions. Republicans argued that they were dispensing the treasury surplus to the needy. Congress also doubled spending on the Navy. To appease western silver interests, the GOP passed the Sherman Silver Purchase Act, which charged the treasury with purchasing and coining \$2-\$4 of silver each month. The act did little, however, to please debtors because it left gold in a preferential position. To address the growing clamor against monopolies, Congress also passed the Sherman Antitrust Act. Democrats immediately labeled Republican efforts the "Billion Dollar Congress." It was the first time federal expenditures had reached that level. They would reverse the GOP mandate in the 1890 Congressional elections.<sup>29</sup>

Southern and western farmers considered Republican actions on the money and monopoly issues quite inadequate. The Southern Farmers Alliance, which had spread rapidly throughout the South and West in the late 1880s, took the lead in pushing for third party action. After a series of organizational meetings, representatives of a number of farm and labor organizations met in July, 1892 to found the People's, or Populist, Party. The new third party shared both leadership and programmatic ties to the Greenback-Labor and Union Labor parties of previous decades.

The People's Party brought together Jacksonian anti-privilege sentiments and the active government orientation of the GOP. Steeped in the egalitarian ideas of American republicanism, Populists denounced the widening gap between rich and poor and the exploitative ideas of Social Darwinism used to justify it. America, they claimed, was degenerating into European conditions of privileged aristocracy and impoverished peasantry. Their Omaha Platform of 1892 called for reform of land, transportation, and monetary policies. Populists secured a million popular votes and 22 electoral votes in 1892. Calls for a shift from governmental distributionist activities to a redistributionist and

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Democracy of Tilden and Cleveland," 161-63.

<sup>29</sup>Morgan, *From Hayes to McKinley*, 320-64.

regulatory approach had found their voice.<sup>30</sup>

In 1892, Grover Cleveland and the Democrats captured the presidency and both houses of Congress for the first time since before the Civil War. The rapidly alternating mandates of the previous four years suggest that the major parties were not effectively meeting the challenge of public affairs. The most important reversal was yet to come. Almost immediately upon Cleveland's taking office, nineteenth century America's worst depression struck. By the end of 1893, five hundred banks and fifteen thousand business firms had closed. At its nadir, economic activity declined about twenty-five percent. By the mid-1890s, almost twenty percent of the work force was unemployed and the prices for most farm products had dropped below the cost of production.<sup>31</sup>

Northeastern fiscal conservatives attributed the panic to uncertainty about the currency resulting from the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890. Cleveland called a special session of Congress, and after an acrimonious debate, secured repeal of the Sherman Act in 1893. The vote severely divided both mainstream parties, but especially the Democrats. Repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act made "free silver" the premier political issue of the 1890s. Because easterners dominated both mainstream parties, only the People's Party had endorsed it in its 1892 national platform. To undermine the Populist monopoly, Democrats and Republicans from the South and West quickly resolved to take control of their parties and endorse the white metal.

The year after Congress repealed the Sherman Silver Purchase Act, Ohio businessman Jacob Coxey led a poor people's march on Washington demanding appropriations to employ the poor on federal projects. Railroad workers, likewise, went on strike against the Pullman Palace Car Company, stopping virtually all traffic west of Chicago. Police arrested Coxey before he could deliver his petition and Cleveland called out the Army to break the Pullman strike. Such turmoil conjured up visions of the Paris Commune in many eyes. Coxey was already a Populist. Eugene V. Debs, the leader of the Pullman strike, soon joined

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<sup>30</sup>For Populism and republicanism see Worth Robert Miller, *Oklahoma Populism: A History of the People's Party in the Oklahoma Territory* (Norman, OK, 1987).

<sup>31</sup>John Spalding, *Great Depressions: 1837-1844, 1893-1897, 1929-1939* (Glenview, IL, 1966), 58-59.

the third party movement.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the lower voter turnout of an off-year election, the People's Party increased its vote by more than 40% in 1894. Still, Populists actually lost a number of offices in the West. Republicans swept the national House of Representatives. The election of 1894 ended the politics of stalemate, and a fluid three-way struggle for party survival ensued. The Democratic Party collapsed in the West and Republicans met the same fate in the South. This made the People's Party one of the two largest parties in half of the states of the Union. But, in the crucial Northeast and Midwest, voters shunned the seemingly radical Populist movement and went over to the GOP in large numbers. Populists, however, insisted that a union of interests existed between farmers and laborers. A month after the congressional elections the AFL chose John McBride, the openly Populist leader of the United Mineworkers Union, as its new president. This raised the prospect of spreading Populist influence to the industrial regions of the nation. The nearly defunct Knights of Labor and American Railway Union were already in the Populist camp.<sup>33</sup>

Populists agonized over the fate of their party in the wake of the 1894 elections. Their extreme rhetoric had scared respectable society. In January, 1895, party leaders decided to downplay the more radical planks in the Omaha platform and concentrate on the money issue. Free silver, they claimed, would be an entering wedge to gain control of government. Populists, likewise, decided to hold their 1896 national convention after those of the Democrats and Republicans. Third party leaders expected to pick up silverites bolting from the old parties. Republicans obliged by nominating William McKinley for president on a pro-gold, high tariff platform. Reform Democrats, however, gained control of their convention and nominated Nebraskan William Jennings Bryan for president on a free silver platform. Bryan was a dynamic speaker and close to the Populists in his native Nebraska.

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<sup>32</sup>For Coxey's Army see Carlos Schwantes, *Coxey's Army: An American Odyssey* (Lincoln, NE, 1985). For the Pullman strike see Stanley Buder, *Pullman: An Experiment in Industrial Order and Community Planning, 1880-1930* (New York, 1967) and Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana, 1982).

<sup>33</sup>George B. Tindall, "The People's Party," in *History of United States Political Parties*, ed., Arthur Meier Schlesinger, Jr. (New York, 1973): 1719-20; Michael Pierce, "The Populist President of the American Federation of Labor: The Career of John McBride, 1880-1895," *Labor History* 41 (February 2000): 5-24.

Populists split badly over nominating Bryan and his Democratic running mate, Maine banker and capitalist Arthur M. Sewall, in 1896. In the West, Democrats were valued fusion partners and naming the same ticket would unify silver forces. Southern Populists, however, wanted a straight third party ticket. Democrats were the hated party of the establishment in their region. Manipulations surrounding the final outcome, which nominated Bryan, but dumped Sewall in favor of southern Populist Thomas E. Watson, pleased no one. Both sides hurled charges of treason to the third party cause with such venom that a national party hardly existed by the end of the convention.<sup>34</sup>

McKinley greeted visitors at his Ohio home in the traditional fashion in 1896. Bryan, on the other hand, stumped the nation in the cause of free silver. Reformers of many schools rallied to his cause. But, business interests poured millions into the McKinley campaign. On election day, McKinley, the Republican Party, and the gold standard triumphed. Bryan carried the South and West, but was unable to crack the Northeast or Midwest. Free silver had little appeal to industrial workers. They feared inflation would increase the price of necessities. In a very close vote, Samuel Gompers had defeated John McBride for reelection as president of the AFL in December, 1895, and turned the union away from Populism at a crucial moment.<sup>35</sup>

The election of 1896 brought the world of Gilded Age politics to an end. Afterward, the GOP easily dominated the Northeast and Midwest, and thus, the federal government. Democrats eclipsed the Populists in the South where the GOP already was a minor party. Although Bryan and the Democrats carried the West in 1896, the region quickly slipped back into the GOP column afterward. Returning prosperity and the nationalism emerging with the Spanish-American War of 1898 rapidly turned the public's attention from the hard times of the previous decade. Bryan's 1896 candidacy undermined Populism and saved the Democratic Party from destruction. Had easterners continued to control the Democratic Party and committed it to gold in 1896, silverite defections would have given Populists a serious chance of eclipsing it as the major rival to the GOP nationally. The Populist Party virtually disappeared with the 1896 campaign. With it went the hope of restructuring the American economic system along more egalitarian

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<sup>34</sup>McMath, *American Populism*, 199-200; Tindall, "The People's Party," 1723-24.

<sup>35</sup>Pierce, "The Populist President," 23.

lines.

During the Gilded Age, politics had been a national obsession. Men of all races, social backgrounds, ethnicities, and economic status overwhelmingly participated, and in relatively equal proportions. Despite the assertions of early twentieth century Progressive historians, Gilded Age political parties took strong, sometimes ideological, stances on the major issues of the day. This was particularly true on the fundamental issue of the proper role of government in the nation's economic and social life. Rallies, parades, barbecues, and popular speakers both entertained and educated the masses. As H. Wayne Morgan has noted, if high voter participation and a thorough airing of the issues can be used as a gauge, the Gilded Age was a very democratic period in American history. Corruption, the shabby treatment of racial minorities, and the exclusion of women from the electoral process, of course, were the major blots on this record. Some level of corruption, however, has always been with us and racial minorities would fare even worse in the early twentieth century.<sup>36</sup>

Progressive historians argued that Gilded Age politicians were the tools of business interests and ignored mounting inequalities and social divisions. Certainly many politicians were pro-business; and most Americans had not come to the conclusion that government had a major responsibility to solve social problems. Economic depression, labor turmoil, and the angry intensity of the Populist Revolt would significantly affect both perceptions and would play major roles in destroying the Gilded Age political system.

Considering the turbulence of the previous decade, there was a growing consensus among America's social elite around the turn of the twentieth century that volatile elements should be excluded from politics. Progressive Era election reform radically changed the American political landscape. Disfranchisement hit African-Americans and immigrant non-citizens heaviest, but also caught a significant number of poor native-born whites. Personal registration laws with long residency requirements eliminated major portions of America's highly mobile work force. Antifusion laws and direct primaries made future third party insurgencies unlikely. Just as important, political parties, which had mobilized voters and party loyalties, were weakened

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<sup>36</sup>H. Wayne Morgan, "The Gilded Age," *American Heritage* 35 (August/September 1984): 45.

severely. Non-competitive politics in certain regions undermined both party discipline and voter participation. The direct primary took control of nominations out of the hands of party leaders. Subsequently, extra-party single issue tactics pioneered by women spread to men as interest group identities began to compete with party associations for the loyalty of voters.<sup>37</sup>

In many ways, the Progressive Era can be seen as a reaction against Gilded Age politics. Strong parties had provided common Americans – laborers and farmers; Anglos, ethnics, and racial minorities – with a sense of involvement in the democratic process that gave them confidence that their participation mattered. The 30% drop in voter turnout between 1896 and 1924 reflected the reduced participation of America's poorest and least educated elements, and particularly that of identifiable minorities. The hottest political issues of the Gilded Age, likewise, were purposefully insulated from the democratic process during the Progressive Era. The money and monopoly issues, for instance, were entrusted to independent regulatory agencies, namely the Federal Reserve Board and Federal Trade Commission.

The turbulent world of Gilded Age politics engaged the American populace on public issues to a degree not seen since the turn of the twentieth century. Would America have a more responsive government today had the Populist Party survived as a major alternative or had Gilded Age parties adequately adjusted to meet the crises of the 1890s? We will never know. The People's Party failed, and the Gilded Age world of mass politics, with its barbecues, parades, rallies that made politics a community event, and its speakers who educated, entertained, and established a personal bond with their electorate, passed from the scene of American politics at the turn of the twentieth century.

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<sup>37</sup>Peter H. Argersinger, *Structure, Process, and Party: Essays in American Political History* (Armonk, NY, 1992), 53-54, 59-61; McCormick, "The Party Period and Public Policy," 222-23; McCormick, "Public Life in Industrial America," 102-03; Burnham, "The Appearance and Disappearance of the American Voter," 53.