

## LESSON 23      What Were American Cities Like in the Late 1800s?

### Part 1



Read the information below and use it to decide on the issue:

On balance, were urban bosses good for American cities in the late 1800s?

1. American cities grew very rapidly from 1865 to 1900. Some cities grew more than 10 times as big in 35 years. One city grew 70 times as large.
2. A political boss was the political leader of a city. Sometimes he was the mayor. Sometimes he held a minor post in city government (such as street superintendent) or was not an official at all. But he always controlled the mayor and the city government.
3. The city boss controlled a political machine, an organization to make sure people voted for the boss's candidates, an organization to make sure the boss remained in political control. (Glaab 1967, page 204 and Cornwell 1970, page 135—See the sources beginning on p. 165 for the full listing of sources.)
4. The bosses provided immigrants with services. They helped immigrants find jobs and places to live, helped them become citizens, and gave them financial aid in times of need. (Bruner 1972, p. 180)
5. The bosses were freely elected. No one was forced to vote for them. So, if they were not providing the needed services to the city's residents they would have been voted out. (Cornwell 1970, p. 137)
6. The bosses controlled city offices so they could put in their friends and cronies. Bosses gave immigrants jobs in exchange for the immigrants' votes (called patronage) and a portion of their salaries. According to an investigation in 1839, Tammany Hall (which Boss Tweed later controlled) got people jobs on the New York Customs staff. In return the people gave Tammany part of their salary. (Glaab 1967, p. 204)
7. Bosses cut through bureaucratic red tape and got things done. Boss Tweed provided New York City with an efficient machine, and people stated that under Boss Sheppard, Washington, D.C. was becoming "cleaner and more attractive." (Glaab 1967, p. 210) Without the boss around there was constant fighting between officials, and nothing got done. (Wade 1971, p. 134)
8. In New York City under Boss Tweed, new streets were laid, the park system was expanded, and the transportation system was improved. (Bruner 1972, p. 179)
9. Whatever improvements were made in New York City under Tweed were made

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- at a very stiff price. (Bruner 1972, p. 179) He stole about \$45 million from the taxpayers of New York City. He also saw to it that taxes for his friends and supporters were reduced. (Cornwell 1970, p. 136)
10. In a New York City election in 1844 with Tammany Hall in control, 55,000 votes were cast—10,000 more than the number of residents eligible to vote. Boss Tweed was in power in the 1860s. (*Dictionary of American Biography*, p. 80)
  11. The Tweed Ring stole most of its money by overcharging the taxpayers on every job, every service. (For example, the Ring passed a rule that everyone charging the city for a product or service must charge 85% more than the actual cost for the product or service.) The Tweed Ring simply paid back part of the overcharge to the person performing the service and kept the rest. (*Dictionary of American Biography*, p. 81)
  12. Patronage jobs may have looked bad, but it allowed the government to work in harmony since all the workers owed allegiance and knew the boss.
  13. The Brooklyn Bridge, which improved transportation in the area, was begun under Boss Tweed. (*Dictionary of American Biography*, p. 80)
  14. The middle class and newspapers were very critical of the bosses. For example, newspaper cartoonist Thomas Nast criticized Boss Tweed. (*Dictionary of American Biography*, p. 81)
  15. Political Boss George Washington Plunkitt said in response to the criticism that he stole city money by using inside information, “Ain’t it perfectly honest to charge a good price and make a profit on my investment and foresight? Of course it is.” (Bruner 1972, p. 180)
  16. Naturally the newspapers complained about the bosses. The newspapers were controlled by the upper middle class who were upset when taxes got higher than the graft they received. (Wade 1971, p. 134)
  17. In 1872, the Tweed Ring was driven out of power by the bankers because all the stealing and corruption drove down the city’s credit rating. (Glaab 1967)
  18. If Tweed was popular then he should have been elected himself, not have worked behind the scenes.

## Part II



Read the information below and use it to decide on the issue:

On balance, were American cities healthy places to live in the late 1800s?

19. American cities grew rapidly between 1865 and 1900.

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20. According to Jacob Riis, a photographer and journalist in New York City, 300,000 people lived in a square mile. Over 75,000 per square mile is considered unhealthy today. (Wade 1971, p. 138)
21. Cities in the late 1800s were healthy compared to the early 1800s. According to the American Heart Association, in 1872 filtered water and immunization had cut typhoid dramatically. (Bruner 1972, pp. 174-75)
22. By 1910, 70% of cities owned their own waterworks. This public water supply allowed them to pipe clean water to city residents. Sewers were in separate pipes. Indoor plumbing was much more sanitary. (Schultz 1978, p. 133)
23. In cities, 70% of trolleys were still horse drawn in 1890. Horse droppings all over the streets contaminated the water supply causing dysentery. (Bruner 1972, p. 174 and Wade 1979, p. 137)
24. A Congressional investigation in New York City in 1900 said that conditions in the tenements were worse than in 1850. The air shafts bred rats and other rodents. (Wade 1971, p. 279)
25. Incandescent lights were used in the late 1800s in cities. They were safer than kerosene or coal so they cut the risk of fire and they illuminated the street, thereby reducing crime. (Bruner 1972, p. 174)
26. Crime, fires, and disease were all serious problems in cities in the late 1800s. People still heated with coal which was a fire hazard. Pollution from industries also lowered people's life expectancies. (Wade 1979, pp. 137-38)
27. In the late 1800s fewer horses were used for pulling trollies, so the amount of horse droppings was reduced. (Green 1965, p. 119)
28. In 1872, the American Health Association said that disease was still a serious problem. (Schultz 1978, p. 131)
29. Where improvements were made they were only done in the rich areas of the cities. For example, plumbing was rare in the poor areas of the city. (statement by Jane Addams about Chicago in Bruner, p. 158)
30. Mortality from typhoid dropped 65% by 1907. (Schultz 1978, p. 134)
31. In the late 1800s streets were paved which reduced health problems from mud and wooden streets. (Glaab 1967, p. 27)
32. In the 1860s and 1870s water supplies were sometimes contaminated by the overflow from privies (toilets). (Schultz 1978, p. 134)
33. Cities instituted inspection of meat and dairy products in the late 1800s. (Glaab 1967, p. 25)

## Sources

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