

George Washington Plunkitt at Work

Graziano's bootblack stand was jammed with people milling about, looking for help. Above the crowd, enthroned like an Irish king, sat George Washington Plunkitt, ward boss of Manhattan's Fifteenth Assembly District. Doing what he could to help, Plunkitt asked little in return, only votes on election day.

Plunkitt understood the close relationship between help and votes. "There's got to be in every ward," another boss explained, "somebody that any bloke can come to-no matter what he's done-and get help. Help, you understand; none of your law and justice, but help." The reverse was also true: to maintain power, bosses like Plunkitt had to be able to count on the political support of those they helped. For years Plunkitt had been a leader of Tammany Hall, the Democratic party organization that ruled New York City politics from 1850 to 1930. Like other political machines in cities across America, the Hall maintained its power by helping and, if necessary, by knocking heads.

Much of Plunkitt's daily routine was taken up with helping. One typical day began when a bartender roused him at two in the morning to get a friend out of jail. Plunkitt succeeded but didn't return to bed until after three. Howling fire sirens woke him at six. Before dawn he was assisting burned-out tenants with food, clothing, and shelter. By eleven he was home, where four out-of-work men were waiting for help. Within hours each had a job. A quick bite of lunch and it was off again, this time to a pair of funerals. Plunkitt brought flowers for the bereaved and offered condolences, all in full view of the assembled. From there he rushed to attend a "Hebrew confirmation." Early evening found him at district headquarters, helping his election captains plot ways of "turning out the vote."

From there, Plunkitt dashed off to a church fair. Then it was back to the party clubhouse. He helped some local teams by buying tickets for their next game. Before leaving, he pledged to two dozen pushcart peddlers that he would try to stop the police from harassing them. He arrived at a wedding reception at half past ten (already having helped the bride and groom with "a handsome wedding present"). Finally, at midnight, he crawled into bed, after a day of helping all he could.

Such relentless effort helped Plunkitt as well. Born poor to Irish immigrants in a Manhattan shantytown called "Nanny Goat Hill," he died a millionaire in 1924 at the age of 82. His pluck and practicality would have made him the envy of any industrialist. Like the Carnegies and Rockefellers, fierce ambition fueled his rise from butcher boy to political boss. City politics was his way out of the slums in a world that favored the rich, the educated, and the well-established.

In the late nineteenth century the needs of rapidly growing cities gave political bosses like George Washington Plunkitt their chance. "I seen my opportunities and I took 'em," Plunkitt used to say. Every city contract and bond issue, every tax assessment, every charter for a new business offered Plunkitt and his cronies an opportunity to line their pockets. Money made from inside knowledge of city projects was known as "boodle" or honest graft. ("Black" graft came from vice and extortion.) How much boodle bosses collected depended on how well their organization managed to elect sympathetic officials. That explained why Plunkitt spent so much time helping his constituents.

Plunkitt's New York was the first great city in history to be ruled by men of the people in an organized and continuing way. Bosses and their henchmen came from the streets and saloons, the slums and tenements, the firehouses and funeral homes. Many of their families had only recently arrived in America. While the Irish of Tammany Hall ran New York, Germans governed St. Louis, Scandinavians Minneapolis, and Jews San Francisco.

In an earlier age political leadership had been drawn from the ranks of the wealthy and native-born. America had been an agrarian republic where personal relationships were grounded in small communities. By the late nineteenth century, the country was in the midst of an urban explosion. Cities of unparalleled size and diversity were transforming American life. They lured people from all over the globe, created tensions between natives and newcomers, reshaped the social order. For Plunkitt, as for so many Americans, a new urban age was dawning. The golden door of opportunity opened onto the city.

HANDOUT 25: PLUNKITT OF TAMMANY HALL

George Washington Plunkitt was a professional politician associated with the powerful Tammany Hall organization of the Democratic Party in New York City. In the following excerpt from “a series of very plain talks on very practical politics,” Plunkitt describes the “distinction between honest graft and dishonest graft.” Read the selection and answer the questions that follow.

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 have myself. I've made a big fortune out of the game, 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 new 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. . . . I haven't confined myself to land; anything that pays is in my line.

For instance, the city is repavin' a street and has several hundred thousand old granite blocks to sell. I am on hand to buy, and I know just what they are worth.

How? Never mind that, I had a sort of monopoly of this business for a while, but once a newspaper tried to do me. It got some outside men to come over from Brooklyn to bid against me.

Was I done? Not much. I went to each of the men and said: “How many of these 250,000 stones do you want?” One said 20,000, and another wanted 15,000 and another wanted 10,000. I said: “All right, let me bid for the lot, and I'll give each of you all you want for nothin'.”

They agreed, of course. Then the auctioneer yelled: “How much am I bid for these 250,000 fine pavin' stones?”

“Two dollars and fifty cents,” says I.

“Two dollars and fifty cents!” screamed the auctioneer. “Oh, that's a joke! Give me a real bid.”

He found the bid was real enough. My rivals stood silent. I got the lot for \$2.50 and gave them their share. That's how the attempt to do Plunkitt ended, and that's how all such attempts end.

I've told you how I got rich by honest graft. Now, let me tell you that most politicians who are accused of robbin' the city get rich the same way.

They didn't steal a dollar from the treasury. They just seen their opportunities and took them.

... the Tammany heads of departments looked after their friends, within the law, and gave them what opportunities they could to make honest graft. Now, let me tell you that's never goin' to hurt Tammany with the people. Every good man looks after his friends, and any man who doesn't isn't likely to be popular. If I have a good thing to hand out in private life, I give it to a friend. Why shouldn't I do the same thing in public life?

... Tammany was beat in 1901 because the people were deceived into believin' that it worked dishonest graft. They didn't draw a distinction between dishonest and honest graft, but they saw that some Tammany men grew rich, and supposed they had been robbin' the city treasury or levyin' blackmail on disorderly houses, or workin' in with the gamblers and lawbreakers.

As a matter of policy, if nothing else, why should Tammany leaders go into such dirty business when there is so much honest graft lyin' around when they are in power? Did you ever consider that?

Now, in conclusion, I want to say that I don't own a dishonest dollar. If my worst enemy was given the job of writin' my epitaph when I'm gone, he couldn't do more than write:

"George W. Plunkitt. He Seen His Opportunities, and He Took 'Em."

W. L. Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*, (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1905).

1. According to Plunkitt, what is "honest" graft? _____

2. How is "honest" graft different from "dishonest" graft? _____

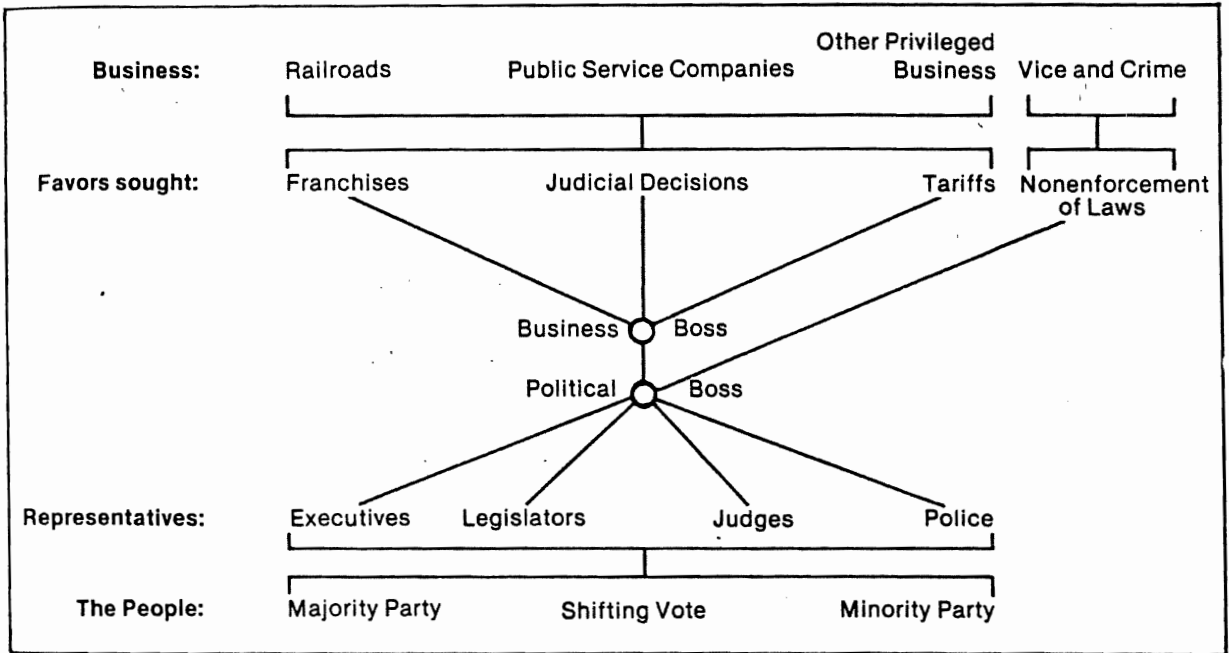
3. How did "honest" graft help Tammany men make money and get rich? _____

4. Do you agree with Plunkitt that "honest" graft is really honest? Explain. _____

Enrichment Worksheet 101

Analyzing an Organizational Chart: Corruption in Government

Lincoln Steffens was a reformer and a muckraking writer who exposed corruption in government. The following diagram from Steffens's autobiography shows how corruption of government might work. Study the diagram and answer the questions below.



1. According to the diagram, who are the representatives of the people? _____

2. According to the diagram, how could a political boss do favors for criminals? _____

3. According to the diagram, what were two "privileged businesses"? _____

 What did they seek from government? _____

4. In Steffens's diagram, what role would a corrupt judge play? _____

