The Legacy of Boss Tweed on Tammany Hall
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America’s Gilded Age was a necessary period of significant economic growth and westward expansion, but it came with a great many difficulties for the American populace. From challenging immigration struggles to momentous disputes between labor and big business, the United States exhibited immense growing pains during that period. The politics of that era were also stricken by new pitfalls, as they became defined by widespread corruption and dominated by urban political bosses. No political organization typified this corruption and party bossism as greatly as the Tammany Hall Democrats of New York City in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Tammany Hall Boss William Tweed built the Hall into a political force after the culmination of the Civil War, and effectively established the model of urban bossism which was copied by other bosses throughout the country in the next several decades. Tweed, through his strong-arming tactics, fraudulent electioneering, and corrupt leadership, rightfully became the national face of the broken system of urban politics. News and media outlets played a significant role in Tweed’s ultimate ouster from the Hall, but his tenure was not soon forgotten. His legacy cast a long shadow over his successors at the head of his Tammany Hall political machine, effectively working to undermine many of the developments he brought to Gilded Age politics in New York City.

The Legacy of Boss Tweed on Tammany Hall

New York City’s Tammany Hall, the Democratic political machine active during much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, began to dominate the city’s politics at the beginning of America’s Gilded Age. The Hall’s dominance during this period was established largely through the corrupt and domineering tactics of William Marcy “Boss” Tweed, the man who led the organization in the years following the American Civil War.1 Under his leadership Tammany Hall became synonymous with tactics of bribery and corruption, and Tweed’s political model inspired the development of municipal bossism in cities throughout the United States.2 Boss Tweed helped to shape Gilded Age politics, and he became the quintessential political figure of the age. His domination came at a cost, however. His abrasive style of leadership, which emphasized manipulation and undercut trust, ultimately had an adverse effect on both the careers of Tweed and those who succeeded him and on the public perception of Tammany Hall itself. Even though the machine had effected some positive changes in New York City, the popular press berated the Hall’s leaders for their unhinged domination of the city, and that negativity came back to haunt them. Boss Tweed’s political legacy of corruption and graft, which wrought pervasive negative press coverage of Tammany Hall’s leadership, outlasted his tenure as boss and placed a stain on the machine’s leadership for years to come.

Boss Tweed was perhaps Tammany Hall’s most corrupt and most dominant boss. He served as boss from 1866 to 1871, plundering New York City and, in the process, developing the first real municipal political machine in the United States.3 Tweed bucked the concerted and patient

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3 Callow, The Tweed Ring, vii and 3.
approach which delivered previous Tammany leaders to power, wrestling leadership of the Hall away from the domineering hands of Fernando Wood by aggression and good fortune. Elected mayor of New York several times in the 1850s, Wood, a duplicitous political thief, taught Tweed and his cohorts much about corrupt municipal governance. Though Tweed found Wood severely distasteful, he certainly learned a great deal from him. Indeed, he followed Wood’s political playbook significantly. But Tweed mastered the playbook better than the man who developed it, and he used it to usurp power from Wood’s grasp. When Tweed gained an appointment to the city’s Board of Supervisors, a body which had the power to determine taxation, allocate city money, and to appoint Election Inspectors, he built the Board into “a political fortress from which he could strike Fernando Wood.” Just as Wood faltered in 1861, Tweed was named chairman of the New York County Democratic Central Committee, giving him the leadership of the city’s Democratic organization. Then, in an ultimate coup and in unprecedented fashion, Tweed gained the titles of both chairman of the General Committee of Tammany Hall and Grand Sachem of the Hall, thereby consolidating his power and unifying the organization under his control. He proceeded to establish the Tweed Ring, a collection of Tweed’s cronies whom he placed in positions of power to enforce his will on the Hall, thus focusing the organization expressly on the interests of the boss. Boss Tweed’s rise to power not only brought a new leader to New York City, but it also established in the city a new sort of corrupt and abrasive machine-style politics, which became synonymous with the politics of the American Gilded Age.

Undoubtedly Tweed’s machine was defined by the corruption and fraudulent tactics with which he led. The behavior of the Tweed Ring was so striking because it was so pervasive in the ring’s administration of New York City. The Tweed Ring engaged in political thievery, monetary fraud, and bribery. Indeed, the Tweed Ring stole between seventy-five and two-hundred million dollars during its operational period from 1867 to 1871. Tweed and his men devised a number of different techniques to skim money off the top of city projects and from the margins of city coffers. They “padded bills, raised accounts, [made] false vouchers, [gave] awards to highest bidders, and [ordered] inferior materials,” all in an effort to rob the taxpayers of New York City blind. Throughout his political career, Tweed “extorted large fees for political favors”—including a significant sum for “legal services” provided to the Erie Railroad—and he gained a near monopoly in his printing business by earning the city’s patronage on all of its printed materials and by allowing “business firms to avoid political interference” when they chose to use his printing service. He went so far as to apportion a significant amount of money to nonexistent charities, money which assuredly made its way back to the pocketbooks of Tweed and his fellow ring members. Tweed was a swindler of the greatest degree. His graft went unopposed for some time, because those who would have benefitted the most from a more fair and upright political system were the same people who were benefitting even more through Tweed’s swindles. Tweed also utilized bribery and threats on a vast scale to control his party and

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4 Callow, The Tweed Ring, 17.
5 Callow, The Tweed Ring, 18.
8 Callow, The Tweed Ring, 29.
his city. Such bribery was best exemplified by Tweed’s effort to gain control of New York City’s municipal treasury through a State Charter he was able to pass as a state senator in 1870.\textsuperscript{12} In addition to giving Tammany Hall control over the city treasury, the charter also diminished the opportunity for the state to provide significant oversight of local matters, giving Tweed and his greatest allies personal access to the treasury through a new city Board of Audit.\textsuperscript{13} He accomplished this brazen feat by first bribing two cohorts to sponsor and support the bill in the state senate, and then by offering kickbacks to other senators who voted for the charter.\textsuperscript{14} He next utilized bribery to gain support for the bill in the State Assembly. Tweed, with the aid of a Tammany lobbyist, paid more than six-hundred thousand dollars to gain sufficient votes in that legislative body to pass the charter.\textsuperscript{15} Boss Tweed, thus, utilized graft in the statehouse to avail himself to further opportunities for graft and money fraud in the city government he dominated. The boss and his fellow Hall leaders stopped at nothing—not bloated city projects, not municipal monopolies, and not even greedy bribe-ridden power grabs—to gain power and make themselves wealthy men.

Tweed and his ring also specialized in election fraud. In 1868, Tammany leaders used a number of useful, though not terribly wholesome, methods to ensure Tammany Hall’s victory on election day. One of those methods was perhaps the most obvious method of voter fraud, vote repeating, where the same person voted several times over.\textsuperscript{16} These Tammany “braves” utilized false names, names of the deceased, different outfits or appearances, and they “browbeat...Election Inspectors” in order to vote up to twenty times on election-day.\textsuperscript{17} Clearly, retention of power was far more significant than legitimacy of power for Tweed and his men, and Tweed made a living from the fraud of Tammany Hall members. Repeat voting was not the ring’s only way of increasing its vote share, however. Because immigrants were a reliable voting bloc for Tammany Hall, the ring also capitalized on the slew of new immigrants in New York City by naturalizing them and making them eligible to vote before the election of 1868. Tweed and his fellow ring members transformed some of New York’s courts into “naturalization mills” which churned out new Americans by the thousands. Indeed, these courts could, at their peak pace, turn out one thousand new Americans per day at a clip of up to three naturalizations per minute. In that one year, 1868, New York’s courts naturalized more than half the total number who had undergone the process over the twelve years prior.\textsuperscript{18} Clearly, the Tweed Ring would implement any strategy its members felt was necessary for victory, no matter the legality or the perception of corruption. Tweed did not hide his perceptions on what election-day meant either, explaining later that “the ballots made no result; the counters made the result.”\textsuperscript{19} Tweed seemed to suggest here both that—in addition to the voter fraud he utilized—he bribed the men counting the ballots and that elections were battles of power, influence, and will to win far more than they were contests to determine the man best fit for office. For Tweed and his ring, corruption and fraud was a useful

\begin{itemize}
  \item Hirsch, “More Light on Boss Tweed,” 269.
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  \item Callow, \textit{The Tweed Ring}, 209.
  \item Callow, \textit{The Tweed Ring}, 209-210.
  \item Callow, \textit{The Tweed Ring}, 211.
  \item Peter H. Argersinger, “New Perspectives on Election Fraud in the Gilded Age,” \textit{Political Science Quarterly} 100, no.4 (Winter 1985), 678.
\end{itemize}
method for achieving success and not a political ill to be avoided, though their willingness to partake in such practices ultimately cost them at the hands of the popular press.

Boss Tweed and his Tweed Ring ultimately faltered because of the strikingly negative coverage of their activities in the popular press. Tweed’s graft and corrupt governance were undoubtedly at play in his demise, but only after the public perception of the boss became increasingly negative. The popular newspapers and magazines were central in diminishing the public perception of the man who controlled the heinous political establishment that was the Tweed Ring. The “sincere, consistent and effective” opposition of Tweed by the New York Times, in combination with Thomas Nast’s sardonic cartoons regarding the boss in Harper’s Weekly, were prominent in Boss Tweed’s demise. The Times published scathing articles which undoubtedly disrupted the unity Tweed had enforced on Tammany Hall. An article titled “Thief Tweed,” which appeared in the New York Times on November 2, 1871, proclaimed “Mr. Tweed is identified with the greatest robberies recorded in the history of mankind,” and that he had fraudulently thieved between six million and twenty million dollars from the treasury of New York City.20 This type of inflammatory journalism certainly took its toll on Boss Tweed’s reputation. Another article from October of that same year, 1871, proclaimed Boss Tweed’s dealings with the Department of Public Works showed “some evidences of his avarice and his effrontery which are positively pagan in their unconsciousness of the quality of shame.”21 It also established that the city’s partnering with a private company which supplied materials for the Department of Public Works was “a piece of the most audacious swindling,” before pointing out that “Tweed prints his infamy on official paper.”22 The article thus determined that Tweed not only displayed a disdain for righteousness in his administration of the city, but also freely demonstrated his utter lack of shame by making his graft official. This sort of public news ultimately turned popular opinion away from Tweed. William Tweed’s greatest enemy in the press, though, did not hail from the vociferously anti-Tweed New York Times.

Thomas Nast, the famed political cartoonist from Harper’s Weekly, was perhaps the single-most important voice contributing to the fall of William Marcy Tweed from his perch atop Tammany Hall. Nast was “the best and most biting political cartoonist of his day,” and he was certainly “not one to restrain his pencil, at least where Democrats were concerned.”23 His cartoons slowly ate away at Tweed’s credibility and, in concert with the Times, dashed his public image. One of his cartoons featured Tweed as a Roman emperor watching the Tammany Tiger, the symbol of the Hall, slaughter the forms of Liberty, Justice, and Commerce.24 Another cartoon, called “The ‘Brains,’” pictured an exceedingly corpulent Boss Tweed with a bag of money instead of a head, “his diamond pin gleaming where his heart ought to be,” and came complete with a subtitle which finished a sentence begun by the title, “(The Brains) that achieved the Tammany Victory at the Rochester Democratic Convention.”25 Nast portrayed both a man grossly and overtly controlled by his riches, and a man who had utilized that ill-begotten wealth to influence the

24 Mark Wahlgren Summers, The Era of Good Stealings, 11.
political system. He was both morally bankrupt and politically corrupt. Another cartoon, “Under the Thumb,” included a fantastically large image of Tweed’s right thumb placing pressure on New York City, attacking the absolute control he had on the city’s politics. Tweed certainly recognized the dangers of this negative press, having subdued much of the press opposed to his aims, but “he could neither buy nor break the New York Times” or Thomas Nast. Tweed understood even more specifically the greatest threat to his administration, once proclaiming he cared little about newspaper articles opposing him because his “constituents [did not] know how to read,” but that he was deeply concerned by the cartoons because those constituents could not “help seeing them…pictures.” So, both the New York Times and Thomas Nast in Harper’s Weekly contributed to the Tweed’s demise. Indeed, the city finally had enough of Tweed’s disreputable efforts as Tammany Hall boss, and Boss Tweed fell from power upon his arrest in the fall of 1871, later to be convicted, and never to return to power.

After the tumultuous tenure of William M. Tweed as boss at Tammany Hall, the political organization saw the somewhat reform-minded John Kelly rise to power as the new leading man. John Kelly took over the headship of Tammany Hall from the disgraced William Tweed in 1871, whereupon he attempted a reclamation project of the Democratic Party in New York City. Kelly recognized the Hall “suffered from bad repute and…declining membership” as a result of his predecessor’s ignominious exit, so he aimed to rebuild the once mighty Hall to its previous glory. Kelly ran the organization as an aggressive disciplinarian, seeking to restore the Hall through a more forthright and less duplicitous leadership style. He held another advantage over his predecessor, for Kelly was perceived, even amongst anti-Tammany forces such as the New York Tribune, as a trustworthy and honest man. John Kelly was clearly a different sort of man than Tweed, and he undoubtedly ran Tammany Hall differently as well. He revamped, and to some extent even reformed the Hall, bringing in a new Grand Sachem, and expanding the general committee. He decreased the city debt by millions of dollars, in stark contrast with the financial efforts of Tweed. Within two years of his ascension to boss, John Kelly “brought success back to the Hall” as Tammany won a number of significant local offices on election-night of 1873. Despite all of the hardships he faced in the aftermath of the Tweed scandals, the new boss succeeded through political acumen and pragmatic city management.

Kelly did have his faults, however. Perhaps the greatest of these was his unwillingness to compromise. He exerted his dominance in the race for New York governor when he unequivocally opposed the nomination of Irving Hall Democrat Lucius Robinson at the 1879

26 Halloran, Thomas Nast, 138.
27 Halloran, Thomas Nast, 136.
28 Mark Wahlgren Summers, The Era of Good Stealings, 11.
31 Zink, City Bosses, 113.
32 Zink, City Bosses, 118-119.
33 Zink, City Bosses, 119.
34 Allen, The Tiger, 151.
35 Zink, City Bosses, 120-121.
36 Zink, City Bosses, 122.
37 Allen, The Tiger, 151.
state convention. To assert his position and make clear his immense sway over New York Democracy, Kelly nominated himself for governor, and proceeded to split the Democratic vote with Robinson sufficiently enough for their Republican counterpart to win. That episode, though it cost the state Democratic Party, reinforced Kelly’s immense sway over voters. Despite Kelly’s significant strength in the state party, though, he struggled to control many of the officials he picked to lead the city. As a result, Kelly never re-established Tammany Hall to the “position of prominence he had in mind.” From 1884 until his death in 1886, Kelly’s power “passed gradually to Richard Croker, his principal henchman” in the Tammany machine. Though John Kelly had “raised the standard of membership” and improved the methods of the Hall by eliminating some of its former corruption and graft, he and his successor Croker remained under the long shadow of William Marcy Tweed. Significantly, despite John Kelly’s moderate success as New York’s city boss, he could never shake the immense influence of, or change the perception of, the popular press.

Richard Croker took the reins of the Tammany Hall political machine, minus some of its earlier more insidious elements, in the middle of the 1880s. Having “safely weathered the dark days” of Boss Tweed’s reign over the Hall—unlike Kelly, he served the Hall throughout Tweed’s tenure—Croker served in much the same manner as had his immediate predecessor. Croker had to overcome several stains on his record before attaining that position, though. Indeed, this man began his political career “as a bully to intimidate possible Republican voters.” He also served as a vote repeater, once voting seventeen separate times in the same election. He was even arrested in 1874 for allegedly “murdering one opponent at the polls.” Croker was indicted in the case, but he escaped that charge with a hung jury because of an apparent lack of evidence. Despite issues he faced early in his political life, Croker served as boss of Tammany Hall from about 1885 until 1902, a seventeen year run as perhaps the most powerful man in New York City. During his extensive stint in office, Croker “maintained a good personal morality,” and he made sure to stay connected with the constituents of his city. He took great care in reading and responding to hundreds of letters per week, while taking great pride that, in his words, “every man, rich or poor, small or great, who wanted to see [him], did see [him] and was listened to.” Croker clearly valued a personal connection with his constituents, and his efforts at outreach undoubtedly established for him great political credibility. The Hall even achieved significant electoral success in the early years of Croker’s time as boss, but it ran into some difficulty by the mid-1890s when churchman Charles Parkhurst began to sound the alarm regarding the terrible conditions in parts of the city. Of course, a great deal “of the onus for the disgraceful situation ultimately came to rest on the broad back of [Richard] Croker,” and that, combined with the

38 Zink, *City Bosses*, 122-123.  
40 Zink, *City Bosses*, 125.  
41 Zink, *City Bosses*, 126.  
42 Zink, *City Bosses*, 126.  
43 Zink, *City Bosses*, 127.  
44 Zink, *City Bosses*, 118, 128, and 135  
45 Argersinger, “Election Fraud in the Gilded Age,” 684-685.  
46 Argersinger, “Election Fraud in the Gilded Age,” 685.  
47 Zink, *City Bosses*, 132.  
48 Zink, *City Bosses*, 145.  
49 Zink, *City Bosses*, 135.  
50 Zink, *City Bosses*, 140.
Hall’s connection with widespread corruption which enveloped the city soon after meant trouble for the Croker regime. Croker followed those issues with his oversight of two electoral disasters for the Hall, which ultimately yielded his demise as boss and the rise of one Charles Murphy to the position. Despite the troubles that brought Richard Croker’s administration down, including the corruption in which he was implicated, his time as boss was typically benign. Though he proved to be more fallible than his predecessor Kelly, each man was still significantly less troublesome than Boss Tweed. Despite their work, Kelly and Croker saw the Tweed effect linger against Tammany Hall in the popular press.

Boss Tweed left a long political shadow in New York City, and his corrupt rule colored the press coverage of the men who succeeded him, John Kelly and Richard Croker. The lingering effects of Boss Tweed’s legacy on the perceptions of the Hall certainly had a great deal to do with the residual attacks. Though some in the press conceded that Kelly was a more reputable leader of the Hall than his predecessor, the New York Times “saw Kelly’s succession not as a turning point but as more of the same.” In one article from 1881, the Times attacked John Kelly for the way he led the city, proclaiming that “all honest citizens” were supportive of efforts by the Hall to dethrone Kelly. The author of the article then compared Kelly to the Caesars and Kaisers of Europe, before returning to mock his “honest leader” handle. The article also supported those who slammed Kelly for being “addicted in practice” to any number of different crimes and then moved forward to proclaim that recent Democratic electoral failures were “wholly due to the mismanagement of Kelly.” Such articles were reasonable and expected for the actions of Tweed, but the Times treated Kelly exactly as they had treated his predecessor a decade earlier. Tweed’s tenure caused a disdain for Hall leadership of any kind to emanate from powerful press outlets like the Times. Another piece published during the Kelly era in 1875 lambasted the Hall’s practices in their entirety. It exclaimed that the “Tammany demagogues” gained victory “by trading on the socialistic prejudices of ignorant men.” The Times held nothing back in a virulent attack on Tammany Hall. The New York Tribune also attacked Kelly calling him in 1874 an uncharitable “friend, follower, and instrument of Tweed.” Richard Croker was not immune to the brutal attacks by the popular press, either. In an 1890 article Croker was similarly berated for his ignorance of the happenings in his own administration. The Hall’s leaders, in the aftermath of Tweed, took many heavy blows from the press as a result of the political organization’s perception which developed during the era of Boss William Tweed.

William Tweed dominated Tammany Hall and New York City politics briefly but thoroughly. In the process, he developed a new machine model for city politics, which became pervasive in Gilded Age municipal governance. He and the ring he established strong-armed their way to electoral victories, lined their own pockets with immense wealth siphoned from the city coffers, and ruled with corruption and vice throughout their dominant reign. Tweed’s less-than-subtle and utterly unconscionable tactics, coupled with resulting negativity from the popular press,

51 Zink, City Bosses, 140-141.
52 Zink, City Bosses, 128.
57 “Mr. Taintor’s Reply to Mr. Kelly,” New York Tribune, October 14, 1874.
ultimately brought the Tweed Ring itself to a quick demise. The press, unwilling to forget Tweed’s treachery and his intimate connection with the Hall, excoriated and berated the very men, John Kelly and Richard Croker, who reformed the organization from its prior evils and who maintained those developments through the decades of their rule. Tweed’s leadership and personality were too memorable, too disgusting for the press to ignore, even when his successors largely discarded Tweed’s methods from their own political playbooks. Boss Tweed’s legacy outlasted the boss himself, to the great chagrin of the men who remained at Tammany Hall.
Bibliography


