

"How I Got Rich by Honest Graft"

Life in Tammany Hall

George W. Plunkitt

Mark Twain referred to the late nineteenth century as the "Gilded Age" because he believed wealth was gilding the corruption of American society. At the local level, political machines—led by "bosses"—bought votes by promising immigrants food, shelter, and other needed services. Bosses also received kickbacks from people who wanted city jobs and companies that wanted city contracts. The most notorious political machine was Tammany Hall in New York City. George W. Plunkitt, a Tammany Hall boss, argued in favor of "honest graft."

Everybody is talking these days about Tammany men growing rich on graft, but nobody thinks of drawing 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 getting richer every day, but I've not gone in for dishonest graft—black-mailing gamblers, saloon-keepers, disorderly people, etc.—and neither has any of the men who have made big fortunes in politics.

There's honest graft, and I'm an example of how it works. I might sum up the whole thing by saying: "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 going 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 invest-

ment and foresight? Of course it is. Well, that's honest graft.

Or supposing it's a new bridge they're going to build. I get tipped off and I buy as much property as I can that has to be taken for approaches. I sell at my own price later on and drop some more money in the bank.

Wouldn't you? It's just like looking ahead in Wall Street or in the coffee or cotton market. It's honest graft, and I'm looking for it every day [of] the year. I will tell you frankly that I've got a good lot of it, too. . . .

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

They didn't steal a dollar from the city treasury. They just seen their opportunities and took them. That is why, when a reform administration comes in and spends a half million dollars in trying to find the public robberies they talked about in the campaign, they don't find them.

The books are always all right. The money in the city treasury is all right. Everything is all right. All they can show is that 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 going 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. . . .

Tammany was beat in 1901 because the people were deceived into believing 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 robbing the city treasury or levying

blackmail on disorderly houses, or working in with the gamblers and lawbreakers.

As a matter of policy, if nothing else, why should the Tammany leaders go into such dirty business when there is so much honest graft lying 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 writing my epitaph when I'm gone, he couldn't do more than write: "George W. Plunkitt. He Seen His Opportunities, and He Took 'Em."

"Wall Street Owns the Country"

The Birth of Populism

Mary Lease

Farmers in the South and the West faced many hardships in the 1870s, which led them to political action. Railroads charged high prices to transport farm products, deflation increased the value of farmers' debts, and expanded farm production sharply reduced prices. Many farmers blamed these economic conditions on the eastern financial establishment.

In 1891, various farmers' organizations formed the People's party, known as the Populists. In their 1892 platform, Populists advocated a shorter workday, women's suffrage, democratic reforms such as direct election of senators, and government ownership of transportation and communication lines. Mary Lease, a Kansas Populist known for admonishing farmers to "raise less corn and more hell," stated the Populist cause in this excerpt from one of her many speeches.



Mary Lease was one of the most popular speakers for the People's party, in which women played a significant role.

This is a nation of inconsistencies. The Puritans fleeing from oppression became in turn oppressors. We fought England for our liberty and put chains on 4 million blacks. We wiped out

slavery and by our tariff laws and national banks began a system of white wage slavery worse than the first. Wall Street owns the country. It is no longer a government of the people, by the people, and for the