

## The Politics of the Gilded Age

### Overview:

- The **Gilded Age** is a term used to describe the period between the 1870s to c. 1900
- **Gilded** is to overlay with a thin layer of gold, to coat with gold color; to make something appear brighter and more attractive than it actually is.
- **Mark Twain** along with another writer **Charles Dudley Warner** are credited with coining the term (From the book, *The Gilded Age* – they criticized the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century as a time of extravagance and outrageous political behavior.
- The name is fitting because at this time there is a façade of wealth & prosperity that masked the corruption and decay of American political life.

### Themes of the Gilded Age

- **Politics** – hard v. soft money; tariff issues; corruption due to greed; patronage; trusts
- **Industrialization** – railroads; steel; oil; electricity; banking; Carnegie, Rockefeller, Vanderbilt, Morgan, Gould; by the 1890s the US would have the world's most powerful economy
- **Urbanization** – millions of “new immigrants” came from Southern and Eastern Europe, mostly to work in factories; the continued transformation from agrarian nation to urban nation between 1865-1920
- **Unions/Reform Movements** – to curb/address problems/injustices of industrialization and urbanization
- **Farmers** – losing ground to new industrial economy; the Populist movement
- **The West** – the “last” west, farming, mining, cattle; the continued Indian question; the eventual closing of the frontier
- **Social** - By 1900, society had become more stratified into classes than anytime before or since.
  - The “haves” v. the “have nots”

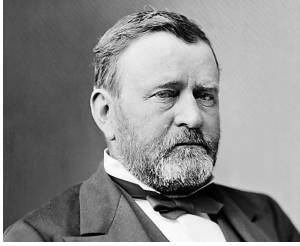


### Politics in the Gilded Age

- Era of the “forgettable presidents” – the nameless, faceless presidents who did little of value (Hayes, Garfield, Arthur, Harrison; Cleveland was the only exception) – Most of the “men of distinction” were in business
- Era known as “**Republican Ascendancy**” – all Presidents are republican except for one -- Cleveland
- Era was the most highly competitive politically in history
- All presidential elections were close and the House of Reps changed majority 6 times between 1869 and 1891 (voter turnout reached the highest levels in US history)
- Economic issues did not separate the parties much
- Social issues were more pronounced in party differences
- **Republican Party** – traced their lineage to Puritanism and stressed strict codes of morality and government involvement in regulating both economic and moral affairs of the community as a whole – middle class **WASP** (White Anglo Saxon Protestants) values; heavy support from businessmen; support from Midwest and small rural towns in NE; heavy support from African-Americans (the party of Lincoln); emphasized the identity-of-interest argument (people should accept their place in society because the wealthy know what is best for the country); the **GAR** (Grand Army of the Republic) was a politically potent fraternal organization of several hundred thousand Union Veterans of the Civil War)
- **Democratic Party** – consisted of many immigrant Lutheran and Catholics (especially the Irish); religions stressed less stern views of human weaknesses; views opposed government efforts to impose a single moral standard on the whole society; support came from the Solid South and large industrial cities where immigrants factored in significantly under political machines; emphasized economic equality; prohibition and education became intense issues at the local level
- Patronage and bribery dominate politics – giving away political offices for votes, kickbacks, party service, etc.
- The Republican party split into 3 factions
- “**Stalwarts**” – headed by **Roscoe Conkling**, a senator from New York, and favored the spoils system (“traditional” Republicans)
- “**Half-breeds**” – led by **James G. Blaine**, congressman from Maine, and favored civil service reform
- The only issue that divided those two groups was patronage/civil service reform
- The last group, the “**Mugwumps**” – represented in thought by political cartoonist, **Thomas Nast**, were composed of young liberal reformers, favored Reconstruction policies that favored African Americans, anti-corruption; the word “mugwump” was Algonquin for “big chief” and was either a reference to the self-righteousness and pompousness of the group or it could have referred to the group as being “fence-sitters” as they were half in favor of the Republicans and half in favor of the Democrats (had their “mug” (face) on one side of the fence and their “wump” (backside) on the other)
- The infighting among these groups during the 1870s and 1880s resulted in a dead-locking of the party

## The Presidents of the Gilded Age

### (Elections of 1868 & 72)



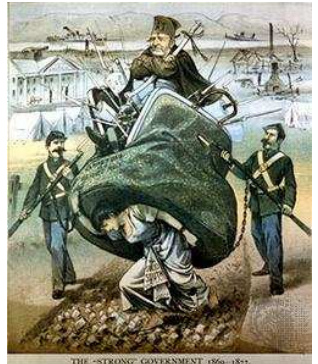
#### **Ulysses S. Grant (1869-1876) Republican**

- Republican platform was one of continued military Reconstruction
- People wanted a break from “politics as usual” and saw Grant as a non-political choice
- Supporters during campaign began “*waving the bloody shirt*” (reviving gory memories of the Civil War)
- Grant was the youngest man to be elected to presidency at the time at age 46

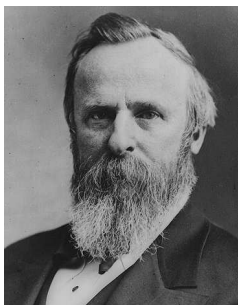
He did not care for the duties and powers of being president, only the “trappings” (Before

seriously considering the presidential nomination he said “Being President would be highly unfortunate for myself, if not for the whole country” – perhaps portends for the future)

- Grant had unofficial advisors called “**The Whiskey Cabinet**”
- Grant presided over an era of unprecedented growth and corruption
- **Black Friday** - “Jubilee” Jim Fiske and Jay Gould attempted to corner the gold market in 1869 by persuading Grant to make the Federal Treasury refrain from selling gold; Fiske and Gould then bid the price of gold upward; when the Treasury finally released gold the bubble burst (Panic of 1869); Congressional probe found that Grant did nothing illegal but acted recklessly
- **Crédit Mobilier Scandal** – Crédit Mobilier of America was a by-product of the Union Pacific Railroad. The company was designed to limit the liability of stockholders and maximize profits from construction with the hefty fees being paid by federal subsidies. The company also gave cheap shares of stock to members of Congress *who agreed to support additional funding for the company*. In 1867, sitting Congressman Oakes Ames becomes the head of the firm. In that year Ames allowed members of Congress to purchase shares at face rather than market value, *the same people who voted the government funds to cover the inflated charges of Crédit Mobilier*. Ames' actions became one of the best-known examples of graft in American history.
- When Grant ran for re-election his opponent was Horace Greeley of the Liberal Republican Party (formed in response to the corruption of Grant's administration, & ran on the slogan, “Turn the Rascals Out!”) He was endorsed by the Democrats (no Democrat wanted to run against Grant)
- Grant won re-election handily by almost 800,000 popular votes as Greeley's eccentricities worked against him – but then there were more scandals in Grant's second term...
- **The Salary Grab** – In 1873 Congress votes a **50%** salary increases for all three branches of government that would be retroactive for the last two years (Congress will repeal later after much public outcry, but that's my kind of pay raise!)
- **The Sanborn Contracts or The Sanborn Incident** 1874. William Adams Richardson, Ulysses S. Grant's Secretary of the Treasury, hired a private citizen, John D. Sanborn, to collect \$427,000 in unpaid taxes. Richardson agreed Sanborn could keep half of what he collected. Sanborn kept \$213,000, of which \$156,000 went to his “assistant”, Richardson. Some of the “commission” found its way into the Republican campaign funds.
- **Whiskey Ring** – this was a conspiracy between government agents/politicians and whiskey distillers and distributors to siphon off millions in federal taxes on liquor through an extensive network of bribes; this was discovered by the Secretary of the Treasury, Benjamin Bristow and the public found out in 1875; Publicly Grant said, “Let no man escape.”, but privately when his private secretary was indicted, he persuaded the jury not to convict him
- **The Belknap Scandal** - Carrie Tomlinson Belknap, second wife of Secretary of War William W. Belknap, secured a lucrative post military post for a friend, John S. Evans. Mrs. Belknap reportedly received \$6,000 per year for this service. After her death in 1870 it was alleged that the money was paid directly to Secretary Belknap. A subsequent congressional investigation revealed that Secretary Belknap continued to receive payments from Evans even after Mrs. Belknap's death. On 2 March 1876 the House of Representatives voted unanimously to impeach the secretary. Belknap resigned the same day, and Grant, a personal friend of the Belknap family, immediately accepted his resignation. Grant's quick acceptance of the resignation proved critical in Belknap's subsequent trial. The impeachment trial, held in April and May, resulted in acquittal; twenty-two of the twenty-five members voting for acquittal declared that the Senate had no jurisdiction over a resigned officer.



### (Election of 1876)



#### **Rutherford B. Hayes (1877-1880) Republican**

- The election was controversial and resulted in the **Compromise of 1877** that officially ended Reconstruction (see previous handout about the election and compromise)
- This becomes known as the “*stolen election*” and Hayes is referred to as “*Rutherfraud*” and “*His Fraudulency*”
- He was an honest and amiable man, a Civil War veteran who had been wounded twice; quite the religious and moral individual, he favored temperance, probably due to the influence of his wife who disapproved of alcohol and did not allow it to be served in the White House earning her the nickname, “Lemonade Lucy”
- Hayes never pleased his own party and did not earn a second term as president

### (Election of 1880)



#### **James A. Garfield (1881) Republican**

- A close election that was marked by the divisions in the Republican party
- A **dark horse** candidate
- Garfield was a Half-breed that played to both sides and his VP Arthur was a Stalwart
- Garfield was shot on July 2, 1881 while in a railroad station by **Charles Guiteau**, an office seeker who was also a Stalwart. "I am a Stalwart. Arthur is now president of the US."
- Guiteau had thought he would be pardoned and rewarded for such a "patriotic" act; instead he was arrested and sentenced to death by hanging
- Garfield did not die immediately; after

unsuccessful attempts were made to locate the bullet, Garfield died on September 19, 1881 of infection and internal hemorrhage

- Garfield had spent his four short months as president trying to sort out claims by party workers to government jobs
- Garfield is seen as a martyr in the corrupt civil service system and this spurred demand for reform



#### **Chester A. Arthur (1881-1884) Republican**



- Arthur proved to be able and uncorrupt; his enemies said that he might be president illegally because he was born in Fairfield, VT which they said was a few miles north of the Canadian border (so, he might not have actually been a natural born citizen)
- Major accomplishment during his administration had to deal with **civil service reform** (-- it seems like after any martyred president, the successors try [and usually succeed] to pass their predecessors goals)

- Major legislation was the passage of the **Pendleton Act** (1883) which established some "rules" for appointing people to government offices; office holders could not be hired based on wealth, a merit system was used for making appointments, the Civil Service Commission (a 3-man bureau) was charged with administering open competitive examinations to applicants for posts in classified offices (offices not "classified" would be open to spoils system); in 1884, 10% of offices were classified, by 1890s about 90% were classified
- The Pendleton Act is referred to as "the Magna Carta of Civil Service Reform"
- The major problem of the Pendleton Act was that while it significantly reduced patronage to individuals, it forced politicians to look increasingly to corporations for campaign financing
- Tariff of 1883 - Calls for a lower tariff – idea is backed by NEW scientific approximations Congress only cuts it by under 2%
- Arthur tried to mend fences in the Republican party and placate both sides; instead he alienated both and was replaced in 1884 as the Republican nominee for president by James G. Blaine

### (Election of 1884)

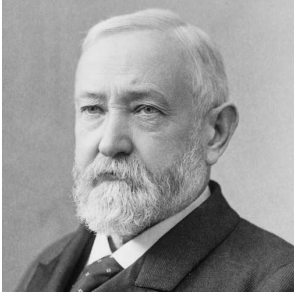
#### **Grover Cleveland (1883-1888) Democrat**

- Cleveland appealed to middle-class voters of both parties as someone who would fight corruption and big-money interests. During the campaign there was much mudslinging! Republican nominee, *James G. Blaine*, had to fight off scandal from the "**Mulligan Letters**" which linked him to scandal to a Boston businessman that indicated Blaine had used his official power as Speaker of the House of Representatives to promote the fortunes of a Railroad. *Grover Cleveland* had to face charges of having an affair and fathering a child out-of-wedlock; he admitted the affair and the possibility that the child might be his and his honesty gained him the loyalty of his supporters. This and the publication of the Mulligan Letters most likely contributed to Cleveland's narrow victory.
- Repeals the **Tenure of Office Act** (What Andrew Johnson was impeached for)
- **Presidential Succession Act** – After the 5<sup>th</sup> Vice-President dies in office we should see who's next in line ... Speaker of the House, President pro-Tempore of the Senate, and each member of the cabinet in order of their creation... Sec. of State, and ...all the way through Senators and members of the House of Representatives
- Cleveland was a staunch believer in laissez faire economics and lower tariffs (the tariff issue continued to be one of great contention during the 1880s; Republicans favored a protective tariff while Democrats hated the idea)
- Landmarks during Cleveland's term (these will be discussed in future lectures) – **Dawes Act**, **Interstate Commerce Act**



(Election of 1888)

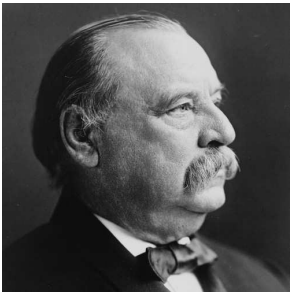
**Benjamin Harrison (1889-1892) Republican**



- The Republican Party raised and spent a lot of money during this campaign which led to Harrison's victory over the incumbent President Cleveland (Cleveland had more popular votes but lost in the Electoral College)
- Harrison, the grandson of William Henry Harrison (the 9<sup>th</sup> president who only served 32 days before dying in office) was seen as being very stiff and aloof and gained the nickname "the Human Iceberg"; he also served in the Civil War and was popular among veterans
- Harrison was a protectionist (in favor of high tariffs) and supported the **McKinley Tariff 1890**. William McKinley guides through this legislation through the House that raises import duties 50% to protect American corporations and had the effect of raising prices (cost Harrison voters, but gains McKinley national prominence)
- **51<sup>st</sup> Congress** – While Harrison is president the Congress, under the leadership of **Thomas "Czar" Reed**, appropriated more than a billion dollars of government expenditure – **The Billion Dollar Congress**
- Endorsed two bills to help protect black voting rights in the South; appointed Frederick Douglass as ambassador to Haiti
- The first president since Lincoln to be active on the international front
- Other landmarks during Harrison's term (also to be discussed in future lectures) – **Sherman Silver Purchase Act, Sherman Anti-trust Act**
- Harrison had alienated himself from many within the party and his wife died of tuberculosis during his re-election bid which left him distracted
- Fun fact – Harrison will eventually re-marry – to the niece of his deceased wife who was 30 years younger than him!

(Election of 1892)

**Grover Cleveland (1893-1896) Democrat**



- Cleveland runs again for President and will defeat the incumbent President Harrison handily with the most decisive victory in 20 years (Harrison said he felt that he had been freed from prison by losing!)
- Cleveland was left to deal with the fallout from Harrison's policies that left the country in the worst depression of the century, **Panic of 1893** (1<sup>st</sup> large-scale depression of the new urban and industrial age with 20% unemployment in the winter of 1893-94)
- Repealed the Sherman Silver Purchase Act which disrupted the Democratic Party and ensured the Republican Party's success during the 1894 mid-term elections
- In 1894, **Jacob Coxey**, an Ohio businessman, organized a group of unemployed workers, an "industrial army" that marched to Washington, DC to protest the government's inaction during the economic depression
- **Coxey's Army** did gain many supporters but also sparked quite a bit of panic in people who feared and insurrection of the unemployed
- **Pullman Strike** – another major issue with regard to striking workers (see Labor Union handout)
- Cleveland opposed temperance which gained him support among immigrant voters; but while he spoke out against injustices that faced Chinese immigrants, he sympathized with Southerners who were reluctant to give social and political equality to African Americans
- He opposed expansion into foreign territories and entangling alliances but was not very consistent in this area of foreign policy
- Legacy of Cleveland has more to do with his protection of the power and autonomy of the executive branch; not seen as an "activist" president but as the "guardian" president who helped maintain the balance of power

(Elections of 1896 & 1900)

**William McKinley (1897 - 1901) Republican**

- So significant we'll examine separately



*And one more thing!*



### The Tweed Ring

- Tammany Hall was the name for the political machine that controlled politics in NYC for quite some time and became most notorious when headed by **William Marcy Tweed** or "**Boss Tweed**"
- Tweed gathered a small group of men who controlled NYC's finances and they dispensed jobs and contracts in return for political support and bribes (kickbacks, graft, fraudulent elections); this was all meant to gain power and line their own pockets with as much as \$200 million at the expense of the city itself
- The tide began to turn against the

Tweed Ring as a result of the following; the *New York Times* and their investigative journalists that started to lay out the corrupt practices of the Tweed Ring; **Thomas Nast**, the political cartoonist, targeted Tweed using a format (pictures) that could be easily understandable to recent immigrants and those who could not read

- Tweed was quoted as saying about Thomas Nast's cartoons; "*Stop them damned pictures! I don't care so much what the papers say about me. My constituents can't read. But, damn it, they can see the pictures!*"
- Nast was offered a few bribes to start portraying Tweed favorably – he declined the money and continued his exposé of Tweed
- Tweed was finally convicted of forgery and larceny and sentenced to 12 years in jail; he was released after a year and then arrested on another corruption charge; he escaped and ended up in Spain and was extradited back to the US where he later died in a NYC prison
- **Samuel J. Tilden** made a name for himself in winning the conviction of Tweed (Tilden ran for President in 1876, the disputed election that saw the end of Reconstruction)

