

## Chapter 1

# RECONSTRUCTION AND THE GILDED AGE

or

*Is Anyone Here An Honest Man?*

The four-year Civil War hopefully will remain this country's costliest war. Think about it...both sides were Americans...360,000 Union soldiers and 258,000 Confederates dead plus countless wounded...an unspeakable tragedy. Defeated "Johnny Rebs" returned to devastated towns and ruined farms. Former slaves walked free but homeless and destitute. Folks on both sides were bitter and angry and unsure what to do next. President (by assassin's bullet) Andrew Johnson suddenly found himself thrust into Abraham Lincoln's large shoes. The new President tried to follow in "Honest Abe's" footsteps but, unfortunately for America, "Andy the drunken tailor" proved to be a man with really tiny feet.

“WHO CARES, THEY ARE ALL DEAD ANYWAY...”

## COMPETING RECONSTRUCTION PLANS

### or *My Way or the Highway*

Lincoln had probably never heard the Yiddish term *mensh*, but when it came to how he wanted to treat the conquered South, he certainly was one. He believed that since the South did not have the right to secede, it had never actually done so. He wanted to pardon any southerner who would swear a loyalty oath; in any Southern state, when ten percent of those who had voted in 1860 had sworn, they could set up a state government and be welcomed back into the Union with open arms and maybe a hug.

Many northern Republicans in Congress hated Lincoln’s Ten Percent Plan and wanted to make the South pay dearly for their treason. In 1864, while the war was still raging, Congress had passed the **Wade-Davis Bill** calling for a majority to declare loyalty to the Union before a state could be readmitted. Lincoln refused to sign the bill and Congress adjourned, so it did not go into effect. When the president puts a bill that has been passed “in his pocket” and allows it to expire when Congress leaves town on vacation, it is known as a pocket veto. Lincoln almost certainly stuck the Wade-Davis Bill in his stovepipe hat, not his pocket — where it doubtless got smeared with fried chicken — but you get the point.

**Andrew Johnson** had been chosen as Lincoln’s running mate in 1864 because he was a pro-Union Democrat from Tennessee who would underscore that the Republican Lincoln desired unity. (Andy was rip roaring drunk at his vice-presidential swearing in, claiming later that he had innocently been trying to cure a bad cold. Yeah, right.) But after Lincoln was killed, President Johnson generally refused to cooperate with Republican leaders. He agreed with Lincoln’s Ten Percent Plan mainly because a quick reinstatement of Southern state governments seemed certain to bring large numbers of his fellow Democrats back into the Congress. Republican legislators, used to ruling the roost during the Civil War, were appalled when in December, 1865, smirking former Confederates (virtually all Democrats) showed up to reclaim their seats as if the war had never transpired. Congress, dominated by Northern Republicans, told them to take a hike. Presumably the wine and cheese “welcome back” reception was also canceled.

State governments down in Dixie did other obnoxious things that irritated northern Republicans. A few southern state legislatures refused to officially renounce secession. South Carolina and Mississippi would not repudiate their Confederate war debts. Mississippi failed to ratify the **Thirteenth Amendment** (1865) to the Constitution that outlawed slavery everywhere in the United States. Reportedly, there was lots of graffiti with phrases like “GRANT IS A DRUNK” and “GENERAL SHERMAN SUCKS” plas-

tered all over the South. Worst of all, the new southern state legislatures passed laws that became known as **Black Codes**. These Black Codes aimed to keep newly-freed blacks subservient to whites. Blacks could not vote, bear arms, serve on juries, hold office and could even be arrested for “loitering” and assigned to “work crews.” Slavery was gone in name but white southerners intended to keep it in practice.

Northerners fumed. Radical Republicans in Congress decided to take control of Reconstruction away from the President and run it their own (very intense) way. In early 1866 they provided for the **Freedmen’s Bureau** — a federal agency set up to operate down South providing food, clothing, education, and job training for former slaves. Johnson, a southern bigot at heart, vetoed the bill, but Congress overrode his veto (remember how it’s done?) with a two-thirds vote in both the House and the Senate. The Republican Congress then passed a civil rights bill outlawing discrimination based on race. The President vetoed this as well but was overridden again.

To make sure black citizens’ rights would truly be permanent, Congress proposed the **Fourteenth Amendment** to the Constitution (ratified in 1868 when three-fourths of the states approved it) stating that the federal and state governments may not deprive any person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws. Any former Confederate official, unless pardoned, was forbidden to hold federal or state office. And without doubt in the North, wearing the color gray at a social function was considered extremely bad taste.

Southern whites reacted to all this with such fury that horrible race riots broke out in several southern cities, notably Memphis and New Orleans, during which over eighty blacks were estimated to have been killed. President Johnson was undeterred, and as the November 1866 midterm elections approached, he embarked on a speaking tour to encourage the election of Democrats who supported his views (Midterm elections occur halfway through a President’s term; the entire House of Representatives and one-third of the Senate stand for reelection, and the results are widely viewed as a referendum on how the President is doing).

Johnson’s appearances hurt more than they helped. He was frequently heckled and decided to yell right back, turning red-faced and reportedly spitting all over the folks standing in front. A report that he turned around, dropped his pants and said, “Kiss this!” was probably exaggerated. Whether or not Johnson was actually intoxicated at any of these appearances has been wondered about ever since, but these emotional outbursts certainly reflected poorly on the dignity of the office of President. Turned-off voters sent huge Republican majorities (over two-thirds and thus veto proof) to both Houses of Congress. President Johnson could only console himself with a good stiff drink.

“WHO CARES, THEY ARE ALL DEAD ANYWAY...”

In March 1867, Congress passed the **Reconstruction Act** and the President couldn't do anything about it. Cursing and kicking the wall did not prevent his usual veto from being easily overridden, and presumably prodigious amounts of spackle had to be allocated to the White House maintenance crew. The South was split into five military districts, and Union troops dispatched to oversee the formation of new state governments composed of blacks and loyal whites. When Congress approved new state constitutions that ratified the fourteenth amendment and guaranteed suffrage for blacks, then and only then would a southern state be readmitted to the Union.

Former Confederates could bitch all they wanted, but there were “blue bellies” with bayonets and bad attitudes right outside their doors. This was probably the point when lots of white southerners — a couple of years after the fighting had ended — finally admitted to themselves, Wow, we really did lose the war. One by one the wayward southern states reentered the Union, defeated but still proud and defiant, and definitely unwilling to stop eating grits or be nice to visiting northerners.

## THE IMPEACHMENT OF THE PRESIDENT

*or Just Do It...We'll Find a Reason!*

Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania in the House, and Charles Sumner in the Senate (recovered physically from his beating but retaining a pathological fear of gold-tipped canes) led the Radical Republicans. Both of these guys were a passionate mixture of both political opportunism and a sincere desire to protect the rights of freed slaves. Both scowled a lot and looked scary, and neither was much fun to hang out with.

In 1867, obsessed with hatred for President Johnson and fearful that he would undermine the military Reconstruction going on, the Radicals went way too far. Basically, they tried to destroy not only Andrew Johnson but also the office of President. First, they restricted his power over the armed forces; then they passed (over a presidential veto) the infamous **Tenure of Office Act**. This law stated that the President could not fire any appointed officials approved by the Senate without getting the permission of the Senate first. Absurd — the idea that the President should not be allowed to determine the makeup of his own cabinet — but these congressional bullies thought they could get away with it. They probably also hoped the President would shine their shoes and dance a little jig for them.

President Johnson deliberately fired Secretary of War Stanton (a stooge for the Radicals who well deserved the boot) so the Tenure of Office Act (clearly unconstitutional) could be tested in the courts. Rumors that Johnson broke the news to Stanton

with the words “So long dorkboy!” further exacerbated an already tense situation. Since the President had technically broken the law, the Radical Republicans smelled blood. The House of Representatives impeached Johnson: as stipulated in the Constitution, a majority of the Representatives (126 to 47) voted that the President had committed “high crimes and misdemeanors” and should be removed from office. With the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court presiding, a trial was held in the Senate, with a two-thirds vote necessary to remove the President.

President Johnson kept his job by one vote cast by courageous Republican Senator Edmund G. Ross, who bucked his party and (are you sitting down?) actually acted for the good of the country. Ross was not reelected to another term, but that sometimes happens when politicians rise above the public passions of the moment and decide to do the right thing. Unfortunately, American History’s lengthening road is littered with far too many noble dreams abandoned by self-seeking politicians, so it’s no wonder most folks today bestow the same amount of prestige on our elected officials as they do used car salesmen.

Andrew Johnson had delivered lots of intemperate speeches, and he really was a loudmouth without an ounce of tact, but what the Republicans truly couldn’t stand was his opposition to their agenda — and that is not “high crimes and misdemeanors” or a good reason to kick the President out of office. The whole Tenure of Office Act imbroglio was simply an excuse to try get rid of a chief executive the Republicans hated and disagreed with, and had they succeeded, the presidency would have been greatly weakened — perhaps permanently — and our founding fathers’ notion of three equal branches of government checking and balancing each other destroyed. Whew, close call! Another bunch of rabid GOP bloodsuckers tried to pull a similar stunt when they impeached President Clinton in 1998, but we’ll get to that later on.

In the presidential election of 1868, neither party wanted anything to do with Johnson. The Republicans knew their haughty conduct had garnered them a lot of enemies, so they nominated the most popular and heroic figure they could think of — General Ulysses S. Grant — despite the fact that he had no political experience whatsoever. The Democrats’ prospects were in even worse shape, since they were still looked upon (with considerable justification) as the party of secession. They talked a lot about improving the economy by allowing for inflation — rising crop prices would help strapped farmers struggling with fixed debt repayments — but their candidate, Governor **Horatio Seymour** of New York, remained uncommitted to his party’s own cause and basically bored everyone to death.

The Republicans roused Americans by waving the **bloody shirt** — a phrase that initially served to remind the voters of the Republicans’ loyalty and the Democrats’

“WHO CARES, THEY ARE ALL DEAD ANYWAY...”

treachery during the Civil War (a Congressman on the floor of the House actually waved a real bloody shirt, at which point some observers were grossed out and exclaimed, “Jeez, wash that thing.”). For the next half-century both parties would continually wave the bloody shirt, which eventually came to symbolize the promise of fat pension payments to the Civil War veterans who comprised a large part of the electorate. This kind of pandering or buying of votes when a party’s agenda is not popular enough on its own merits has continually been a part of American politics. Currently, the Republicans trumpet huge tax cuts our country cannot afford, causing the budget deficit and debt to explode...but I digress.

Grant won an unimpressive victory, and immediately demonstrated he had no idea how to serve as a civilian Chief Executive. Personally trustworthy, he took lots of bad advice and allowed his friends and political appointees to run wild and loot the government. Two multi-millionaire speculators (pure scoundrels), **James Fisk, Jr.** and **Jay Gould**, bought the assistance of the President’s brother-in-law and attempted to manipulate the gold market; failing to comprehend the situation, the President acted painfully slowly to stop it — too late to help many honest folks who were ruined (I can attest that idiot brother-in-laws are not uncommon, but when you are President you’ve got to keep a lid on them). In another sordid affair, the Union Pacific Railroad, which had been fleecing taxpayers for years, created a company called **Crédit Mobilier** to bribe potentially nose members of Congress with millions of dollars worth of stock. Even Grant’s vice-president, **Schuyler Colfax**, couldn’t resist a piece of that action.

Remarkably, the Republicans renominated Grant to run for a second term in 1872. Fed up “Liberal Republicans” broke away, and even more remarkably nominated New York Tribune editor **Horace Greeley**, even though he was essentially a hothead with no political experience. More remarkable still, the Democrats — desperate for a win any way they could get it — also nominated Greeley, even though he had long blasted that party as a bunch of unpatriotic scoundrels. Most remarkable of all, gullible Americans solidly reelected Grant. Poor Greeley had a particularly rough campaign during which he was attacked as a communist (which he wasn’t) and a vegetarian (which he was, but what’s wrong with veggies?). Then, in one month, he lost the election, his wife, his business, his sanity, and his life. Bummer...but he still might have been better than Ulysses S. Clueless.

Scandal followed scandal in Grant’s second term. Officials in the war department granted contracts to the shipbuilding company offering the highest “under the table” payoff. Secretary of War William W. Belknap sold rights to set up trading posts on Indian lands and personally pocketed the cash. Whiskey distillers in Missouri — the Whiskey Ring — avoided paying excise taxes by bribing officials in the Treasury Department.

Grant cannot escape blame for allowing and ignoring all the malfeasance swirling in and around his Administration. A nonstop cigar smoker and serious boozier, there has been a longtime rumor that he had a hole cut in the wall of his office in the White House so he could conveniently discard his empty whiskey bottles, which would shatter and then fall directly into the trash in the cellar. Lesson here: a good general does not automatically make a good president. Grant may have been the worst of all.

## RADICAL RECONSTRUCTION IN THE SOUTH

*or You Lost, So Shut Up and Do What We Tell You*

Black codes were removed in the South starting in 1867, but virtually all blacks remained desperately poor. Many African-Americans (and poor whites) became **sharecroppers** — a lousy arrangement in which a white landlord provided farmland, tools and seed, whereupon rent had to be paid in profits from the resulting crop. Usually what was left over was barely enough to eke out a living, and ironically, in terms of material comforts, many former slaves found themselves worse off than before. When sharecroppers inevitably needed to borrow money from landowners or banks, the interest rates charged were usurious, inhumane and just plain evil — kind of like what credit card companies charge today. Blacks were free, but it was a freedom embittered by unremitting poverty and debt.

Lots of northerners headed south, becoming known as carpetbaggers because they carried their belongings in small suitcases made out of samsonite...just kidding, carpet. Since airplanes had not been invented yet and none of these folks traveled on USAIR, most of these intrepid travelers arrived at their southern destinations without losing their luggage. Some of the carpetbaggers intended to make a fast buck by hook or crook, some came with honest motives such as business investment or to help blacks. Regardless, southern whites hated them all.

They hated **scalawags** even more — white southerners who had remained loyal to the Union and now supported Radical Reconstruction. Former confederates saw scalawags as traitors to the Rebel cause, so their loathing is somewhat understandable...go to the racetrack and bet a week's paycheck on the wrong horse and you'll see it's natural to want to throttle the winners. Don't literally do this, I'm just making a point.

Some of the Reconstruction governments in the South did positive things like building schools and hospitals and repairing damaged infrastructure. But a lot of carpetbaggers and scalawags were criminals who stole everything that wasn't nailed down. State legislators got rich by charging taxpayers for projects that never even existed; many an

“WHO CARES, THEY ARE ALL DEAD ANYWAY...”

outhouse was paid for but never built. Historians sometimes point out that these Reconstruction governments were no more or less corrupt than local governments of the same period up North. Fair enough, but history shouldn't let these dirtbags off the hook.

Blacks in the South cast ballots in large numbers during Reconstruction. Almost unanimously voting Republican — the party that had sponsored emancipation and Radical Reconstruction — they were pivotal in the election of President Grant. Two African-Americans served in the Senate, fourteen in the House of Representatives, and many more in state and local positions, though there was never a black governor nor a black majority in a state legislature. Ironically, it's said that African-Americans newly allowed to dress as Santa Claus chafed the former Confederates the most...go figure. The Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution passed in 1870, stating: “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” Dream on. Anyone who thought black suffrage would last in the South was wearing rose-colored glasses and oblivious of the bigots who were starting to dress in bed sheets.

In the late 1860s, secret societies such as the **Ku Klux Klan** and the **Knights of the White Kamelia** sprang up in the South dedicated to denying blacks their basic rights, particularly their right to vote. These morons disguised themselves in white sheets and hoods, and any Klansman who showed up wearing a floral pattern was heavily teased as a wussy boy who might, say, read a book or think independently. The Klan operated mostly at night and employed intimidation and violence; burning a cross in front of your house was a first warning, a lynching might come next.

In 1870 and 1871, the Grant Administration proposed and the Congress passed a series of **Force Acts** authorizing martial law, the suspension of habeas corpus and even military action to discourage anyone down South intent upon interfering with blacks' right to vote. But it was all talk with little action. Northerners were getting bored with Reconstruction and sick of bickering with obstinate white southern bigots. This description of the former Confederates might sound harsh, but it is true and, Who Cares, They Are All Dead Anyway. What are they going to do to me? Come back from the dead and haunt me? (Just in case, I use a nightlight.)

## THE END OF RECONSTRUCTION

*or President Tilden...Not!*

In 1872 Congress passed the **Amnesty Act**, allowing all former Confederates, except for their top leaders, to hold office, and in short order southern whites regained control of

state and local governments in the South. By 1875 only three states — South Carolina, Louisiana, and Florida — remained under Radical Reconstruction rule. The Freedman's Bureau had been disbanded in 1870 so dark clouds danced on the horizon, blowing fast toward the former slaves in the South. The last thing America needed was a fraudulent and divisive presidential election in 1876. But that's exactly what happened.

The Democrats knew they had a real shot at winning the presidency for the first time in about twenty years. They nominated Governor **Samuel J. Tilden** of New York who, although extremely bland, had a reputation as a reformer (it was rumored that one of Tilden's speeches actually put a corpse to sleep). Incredibly, Grant would have accepted a nomination to run for a third term had not Congress (urged on by a large majority of Americans including many in his own Republican party) passed a resolution informing him that, since he had completely messed up for eight years, it would be best if he honored the two term tradition and return home to die. Grant did soon die of cancer, personally of modest means and racing till the end to finish his memoirs so his family would have money to live on. Remember, it was the people he appointed who were corrupt. Grant himself was just clueless. The Republicans argued amongst themselves and finally settled on a compromise candidate — Governor **Rutherford B. Hayes** of Ohio. Hayes was a good choice because he had never been caught stealing anything and he hailed from a “swing state” — a state that normally split evenly between the Democrats and the Republicans and one in which the voters would be predisposed to vote for one of their own.

Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina sent in two sets of electors, one for Democrat Tilden and one for Republican Hayes. Tilden had won the popular vote but the Republicans charged fraud. Congress appointed an “electoral commission” consisting of eight Republicans and seven Democrats to get to the bottom of all the confusion and — surprise, surprise — by a party line vote of 8-7 awarded all the disputed electors to the Republican Hayes. Democrats went ballistic, and in the South, lots of them went searching for their rifles. To calm the Democrats down, the Republicans offered to pull the Union troops out of the South and end Reconstruction if the Democrats would accept Hayes as President. The Democrats finally acquiesced two days before the inauguration, after the Republicans said “pretty please” and threw in promises to build some railroads in the South, and appoint a southerner to a cabinet post to be named later.

Hey, let's put it this way. Samuel Tilden won the election. But you say you've never heard of a President Tilden? That's because the man got the shaft. He was screwed royally, ripped off, robbed, purloined, pilfered...you get the picture. And you thought this kind of chicanery could only happen in a banana republic...no, not the store — a politically unstable country in Latin America.

“WHO CARES, THEY ARE ALL DEAD ANYWAY...”

## BLACKS IN THE “NEW SOUTH”

*or Screwed For a Hundred Years*

The corrupt election of 1876 ended Reconstruction, and the removal of federal troops left southern blacks completely vulnerable. President Hayes (appropriately nicknamed “His Fraudulency”) promised blacks that if they trusted southern whites, their civil rights would be respected, but he lied. Southern local and state governments immediately set about formalizing segregation, and they passed **Jim Crow** laws to enforce this separation of the races. These laws legislated totally separate facilities for whites and blacks: schools, prisons, hospitals, railroad cars and waiting areas in the stations, hotels, restaurants, theaters, bathrooms, drinking fountains, and even cemeteries.

In one of the worst Supreme Court decisions ever — **Plessy v. Ferguson** (1896) — the men in black sheets cited the Fourteenth Amendment (in a manner those who created it never intended) and ruled “**separate but equal**” could be constitutional as long as the facilities provided were truly equal. Of course, facilities were never equal, and America’s so-called highest court effectively legalized segregation and second-class status for African-Americans. Ironically, some black-owned restaurants served collard greens and black-eyed peas (a terrific name for a musical group) — superior food that white southerners never got to experience. Their loss.

In the 1880s, southern blacks generally were allowed to vote, as various political factions offered false promises to gain their support, but in the nineties the ballot box slammed shut. Economic conditions worsened, and with blacks as competitors for jobs and power, whites commenced a campaign of **disfranchisement** (denial of voting rights) across the South. Blacks found that they had to pay a fee for voting, and since virtually all blacks were poor, this **poll tax** kept them home on Election Day (the poll tax was conveniently waived for poor whites). Then there was the **literacy test** — a reading exam voters had to pass in order to vote — and many former slaves had not yet learned to read or write. Illiterate whites received easier tests requiring them to read such difficult words as “A” and “I;” a black person who could read English would be handed a page of ancient Greek! Particularly insidious was the **grandfather clause** — a law stating basically that a person was ineligible to vote unless their grandfather had voted. This law made it impossible for most blacks to vote because their grandfathers had been slaves and certainly not able to vote.

White-dominated state legislatures also engaged in “**racial gerrymandering**.” “Regular” **gerrymandering** has always been a part of American politics — the party in power creates legislative districts in which their supporters outnumber the opposition, in an

attempt to guarantee that the candidate from your party wins every election. Gerrymandering got its name in 1812, when Massachusetts Governor **Elbridge Gerry** and Republican state legislators drew a district boundary in their favor that was so squiggly, some observers thought it looked like a salamander — thus “Gerrymander.” Both parties often do this today; it stinks, but it is not illegal. Racial gerrymandering makes use of the same principle, except that southern legislatures drew district lines to ensure that whites always outnumbered blacks. The insidious result: a black man could never hope to run and have any chance to win an election. And to top it all off, very few African-Americans were able to vote in the South after 1890 because, if all else failed, Election Day brought out the genetically inbred Klansmen pathetically driven to make themselves feel superior to somebody.

An African-American named **Booker T. Washington** stood tall and spoke out. He was a former slave who obtained an education and founded **Tuskegee Institute** in Alabama. In 1895, he made a speech in which he declared that blacks should ignore white prejudices and concentrate on learning useful skills and improving themselves economically. This “**Atlanta Compromise**” delighted whites because it seemed to be so accommodating, but many blacks had mixed feelings. Washington was disparaged then (and still is today) for catering to whites and being too willing to accept discrimination. That criticism was (and is) unfair. Learning job skills, making money, gaining economic (and then political) power are certain avenues to equality, much more so than foot stomping and righteous indignation. Bigots are too ignorant to comprehend righteous indignation and they usually jump quickly out of the way when you try to kick them. But bigots are forced to treat African-Americans with respect when they find themselves in need of a black-owned service or product, or a job in a black-owned company. Go Booker T., Go!

**William E. B. Du Bois** — born in 1868, intellectually gifted, and the first African-American to earn a Ph.D. in history from Harvard — became a foot stomper. Understandably angry at the continued intransigence of white racism, in the early 1900s Du Bois ripped Booker T. Washington for his apparent willingness to accept inferior racial status. Du Bois and his **Niagara Movement** in 1905 loudly demanded the unrestricted right to vote, an end to segregation, and equal justice in the courts. Whites in America collectively yawned, as Washington had always known they would. But a few liberal whites got fired up and founded the **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People** (NAACP) of which Du Bois became an officer and the editor of its newspaper, *The Crisis*. (Little known fact: the NAASCP — The National Association for the Advancement of Swedish Colored People — folded almost immediately due to a lack of membership.) Washington died in 1915, and thanks to Du Bois and others, a

“WHO CARES, THEY ARE ALL DEAD ANYWAY...”

new era of black pride and militancy was born. Sadly, most civil rights leaders of the time focused on their differences and never accepted how perfectly the two men complemented each other.

## GILDED AGE POLITICS

### *or Fill Your Pockets and Screw the Public*

America’s greatest writer in the late nineteenth century was the one and only **Mark Twain** — we’ve all heard of him, particularly due to his authorship of books such as *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer*. If you are a young person and you haven’t yet encountered these books, check them out and shame on your English teachers. Even though there is no sex in these stories, and the action moves slower than you are used to in *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter* and the *Lord of the Rings*, etc., Twain is good, really good. He’s funny, and offers insightful portraits of what our country used to be. It was Mark Twain who described politics after the Civil War as a **Gilded Age**: glitter on the outside, trash underneath.

Corruption pervaded every level of American government: local, state and federal. Most big cities were controlled by “bosses” who could turn out immigrant voters on Election Day and who, though never elected to public office, could handpick officeholders...naturally, men who would do what they were told. Mayors and governors across the country bowed to the Boss.

**William Marcy “Boss” Tweed** and his infamous Tweed Ring ran New York City from 1868-71. They bribed judges, bought votes, and tried to convince a whole generation of New Yorkers that the democratic process was a joke and the only sensible government was one in which you paid off the Boss. The rule of the day: “Addition, division, and silence.” The “books” recorded a payment of \$138,000 to a plasterer for two days of labor and a city hall estimated at \$250,000 ultimately cost \$8 million.

But Boss Tweed’s luck finally ran out. The *New York Times* published damning evidence and gutsy young caricaturist **Thomas Nast** attacked him mercilessly in *Harper’s Weekly* magazine. Tweed was arrested, escaped, rearrested after being recognized through a Nast cartoon, and put in prison, where he died alone, unforgiven, and probably the most despicable of the 19th century big city bosses. By the way, Thomas Nast’s drawings popularized the tradition cartoonists still use today of representing the Democrats with a donkey and the Republicans with an elephant. Nast showed great restraint in this since he could just as easily have chosen rats, cockroaches, or any of the innumerable other species of vermin.

On the federal level, one undistinguished president followed another, all of them subservient to Congress and eminently forgettable (but don't totally overlook them in case someone brings them up or they turn up on an exam.) The Senate and the House of Representatives were no better, as both the Republicans and the Democrats focused on personal attacks against each other and enriching themselves. The issues of the day — the protective tariff (too high considering a treasury surplus?), currency reform (should there be inflation to help poorer folks who owed money?), and civil service reform (is the spoils system totally out of control?) — were all tough issues that were, well, tough, and most in this generation of indolent American politicians tried their best to ignore them. Unfortunately for lots of these guys, Alcoholics Anonymous had not been founded yet.

President Hayes came to office through a stolen election, so it is often forgotten that he had an otherwise well-deserved reputation for bravery as a Union officer in the Civil War, and integrity as a congressman and then governor of Ohio. He did actually try to curb the outlandish extremes of the spoils system, most notably the New York Customs House, which collected about two-thirds of the nation's duties on imported goods and was essentially a den of thieves. One of the biggest crooks of them all, New York's Senator Roscoe Conkling, was particularly furious when his buddy and fellow criminal **Chester A. Arthur** was canned as head of the custom's house.

Hayes' brief flirtation with political reform caused the Republicans to argue amongst themselves and divide into two factions: the **Half-Breeds** and the **Stalwarts**. Conkling led the Stalwarts; they were unabashedly in favor of milking the spoils system for their own personal enrichment. Maine Congressman **James G. Blaine** led the Half-Breeds; this group also loved corruption but at least wanted to be at a little bit discreet about it. This pathetic state of affairs provides the perfect snapshot of the utterly unprincipled Gilded Age. First Lady Lucy Hayes — perhaps on some unconscious level trying to atone for sins swirling about the political landscape — earned the nickname “Lemonade Lucy” when she banned alcohol from the White House. But visitors devised ingenious ways to sneak intoxicating beverages onto the premises. One cabinet officer reportedly sneezed, cracking so many bottles tucked into his pants that he required hospitalization.

President Hayes had often proclaimed his intention to serve only one term, which was lucky for him since his streak of honesty had made his fellow Republicans utterly uninterested in renominating him. A Stalwart from the critical swing state of Ohio named **James Abrams Garfield** got the nod, but Conkling was able to get his Half-Breed partner in crime, Chester A. Arthur, nominated to run for Vice-President. Garfield had been a Union general in the Civil War, but the Democrats countered by nominating their own general, Winfield S. Hancock, who had been wounded at Gettysburg (reports

“WHO CARES, THEY ARE ALL DEAD ANYWAY...”

that he had taken a musket ball in his butt scampering away from a Confederate infantry charge were Republican mudslinging and utterly false). Both sides barely addressed serious issues as they frantically waved the bloody shirt, tossed about insults and — on Election Day — cash and free drinks. Garfield barely won the popular vote but managed a solid majority in the Electoral College: 214-155.

Just about everyone who personally knew Garfield found him capable and a nice guy. And the new President did sincerely desire to follow up on his predecessor’s efforts to at least begin to get the spoils system under control. But Garfield did not have the thick skin to turn people down when they asked him for favors — no wonder he had the reputation for being such a nice guy — so the usual mad scramble for jobs engulfed him as soon as he moved into the White House. For four months, President Garfield gasped for air in this swirling whirlpool of spoils when on July 2nd, 1881, disappointed (and deranged) office-seeker **Charles J. Guiteau** shot him in the back in a Washington railway station. Tragically, President Garfield lingered on in agony for about eleven weeks until he was almost certainly killed by his doctors, searching for the bullet in his body with all the subtlety of golfers trying to find an errant ball in the rough. Remember, back in those days (and for many decades still to come) a patient was more likely to be hurt by their physician than helped.

Thus the ultimate spoilsman Chester A. Arthur suddenly found himself elevated to the presidency. Job seekers licked their chops. But to most everyone’s surprise, the shocking circumstances of President Garfield’s death seemed to bring out a decent and dignified side of Arthur most people never knew existed. As President, he actually worked conscientiously and threw his support behind civil service reform.

The American public, outraged over the Garfield assassination, at last demanded decisive action. In 1883, Senators and Representatives, worried more about getting re-elected than anything else, did the right thing and passed the **Pendleton Act** — America’s first real attempt to clean up the spoils system. The Pendleton Act set up a **Civil Service Commission** which was supposed to impartially guarantee that federal employees would be hired based on a merit system, rather than their political or familial connections. At first, the Act only covered about ten percent of federal employees, but today it has been expanded to cover just about all of them. And as long as we are on the subject of civil service reform, in 1939, Congress passed the **Hatch Act**, making it illegal to ask civil service (government) employees to make political contributions or actively engage in politics unless they choose to do so of their own free will. All this civil service reform was long overdue, and while it is good that we have these laws, let’s not kid ourselves...if you are looking to get a government job, it still helps to know somebody!

In 1884, the Republicans once again had no interest in renominating a sitting

President who had turned out to be fundamentally honest. Chester A. Arthur was told to pack his integrity and hit the road, and being a hefty six foot two inches tall, he may well have replied, “Okay, which way to the nearest restaurant.” Instead, Senator James G. Blaine of Maine, who had long craved the Republican nomination, finally got his wish. He was one slick operator, and a consummate Gilded Age politician. Now if you have been catching my drift these last several pages, that means he was also deeply corrupt — most blatantly in the favors he had thrown to railroad companies. Unfortunately for Blaine, solid proof of his malfeasance existed in the form of the **Mulligan letters**, one of which Blaine had closed with the admonition: “Burn this letter.” It was pretty obvious to the American public that a politician was really up to no good when he asked a businessman he was corresponding with to torch their correspondence.

Even some Republicans couldn’t stomach an obvious bribe-taker like Blaine, so they dramatically declared they were switching to the Democrats. Their former Republican friends insultingly called them **Mugwumps**, an Indian name essentially describing a person who is totally full of themselves. Once again, here is an example of how history is not black or white, but gray; some of the mugwumps were honest reformers, but others probably were full of themselves and just looking for a better deal.

The Democrats nominated a former mayor of Buffalo and governor of New York named **Grover Cleveland**. Today, new parents rarely name a child Grover because of that annoying character on Sesame Street, but back then Grover was a perfectly good name. Cleveland had a terrific reputation as an honest reformer, but during the campaign it was revealed that he, like Blaine, had skeletons in his closet. One of them was a doozy; while living in Buffalo, the bachelor Cleveland had fathered an illegitimate child. Back then, this was unbelievably scandalous and the candidate was urged by his advisors to flat-out lie about it and deny everything. But Cleveland demanded that the truth be told; he had accepted responsibility for the child and provided financial support. Imagine the mudslinging in this campaign: the Mulligan letters versus the stigma of an illegitimate child. But the difference was Cleveland told the truth, while Blaine clung to his lies. Cleveland won in a squeaker, and we get an obvious lesson in American morality. You can screw up, but if you sincerely admit it and apologize, folks will generally forgive and give you another chance. Later on in our history, there will be plenty of examples of how the cover-up always damages a person’s reputation much more than the initial mistake.

President Cleveland — the first Democratic President in twenty-eight years — proved to be just another post Civil War presidential stinker, though perhaps the best of a bad lot. He announced that he wanted to enforce the Pendleton Act, but ravenous office-seeking vultures still found themselves plenty of snacks. Republicans, with some

“WHO CARES, THEY ARE ALL DEAD ANYWAY...”

justification, accused the President of virtuous words unmatched by deeds, and like the other presidents of his time, Cleveland willingly let Congress take the initiative on legislation.

Remarkably, in light of the federal deficits the United States regularly racks up in our modern era, the Cleveland Administration was embarrassed by a budget surplus that was due almost entirely to high protective tariffs that poured revenue into the national treasury. Remember, there were no income taxes in those days. To his credit, Cleveland essentially said, “Hey. This is crazy, let’s lower these protective tariffs and give American consumers a break.” His most famous quote was the more esoteric: “What’s the use of being elected unless you stand for something.” Protectionist Republicans (and even some of his fellow Democrats) accused Cleveland of being hostile to American businesses. Politicians in both parties would have loved to see the surplus squandered on more perks for Civil War veterans, who by this time had waved their bloody shirts to shreds and received from the government as much as, or in many cases more than, they deserved. A couple of hardcore alcoholics in the House of Representatives reportedly suggested that a nationwide party with an “open bar” would be the best way to dispose of the troublesome surplus. But Cleveland held firm, demanded the tariffs be lowered, and in so doing angered lots of voters in both parties. This showed guts and fortitude — virtually unheard of among politicians of the Gilded Age — and President Cleveland’s honorable stance cost him his chance to be reelected.

Super-psyched to knock off the unpopular Cleveland in the presidential election of 1888, the Republicans nominated just the man for the job: **Benjamin Harrison**. This senator from Indiana came from a famous family; his grandfather had been (briefly before he dropped dead in a month) the ninth president of the United States, and his great-grandfather had been a signer of the Declaration of Independence (there was an unsubstantiated rumor that his father — rarely mentioned by Benjamin — had been a female impersonator based out of New Orleans). Naturally, Harrison defeated the incumbent Cleveland by promising the sugary sweets most self-interested Americans craved: high tariffs and still more benefits for Civil War veterans. In an oddity, Cleveland received more popular votes than Harrison but lost out in the Electoral College. Since November 2000, Al Gore receives regular visits from Grover Cleveland in his nightly dreams, or rather nightmares.

President Harrison was one of America’s worst presidents. He accomplished virtually nothing, and I hate to waste a paragraph on this guy. He turned his back on civil service reform, and squandered the surplus on the civil war veterans and **pork barrel** projects for influential Republican congressmen (pork barrel projects benefit an individual state or congressional district but are paid for out of federal revenue that is sup-

posed to serve the entire nation). Senators and Representatives support each other's pork barrel projects (a form of vote trading political scientists refer to as **logrolling**) because it helps politicians who "bring home the bacon" get reelected. All this stuff still goes on today — some call it the lifeblood of American politics — but you'd be right if you said lots of this bacon really smells rancid and some parts of the country unfairly get more of it than others. I guess in some ways American democracy is like the state of New Jersey — most of it is something to be really proud of, but there are times on the turnpike when you absolutely have to hold your nose.

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The Gilded Age was not America's finest hour...or minute or second for that matter. Reconstruction brought recalcitrant Confederate states back into the Union, and the federal government abandoned freed African-Americans to the purgatory of a segregated South. Corruption permeated politics and talk of reform was basically all hot air. As far as most of the Republicans and the Democrats of the time should be remembered, Shakespeare said it best: "A pox on both their houses." As the years passed, many Americans, disgusted with the stench of the dirty dealers, turned their noses to the sweet-smelling western frontier. Others stared wide-eyed at an expanding America that every day seemed to present new and greater opportunities to make a fortune. Who will get rich? Who will stay poor? And what the heck are those newfangled contraptions scaring the horses? Uh oh...stay tuned...don't touch that dial!!!

### **This Really Happened!**

For centuries washing your clothes is so much trouble many people don't even bother. At sea, clothes are actually towed behind the ship for cleaning. Perfumes from the Far East become popular in Europe — not to entice or enchant, but to cover up body odor! Then around 1860 the idea of putting clothes, water and soap into a wooden box and tumbling them is beginning to catch on. In 1914 electric motors are introduced, but water often drips into them, giving paralyzing shocks to the operators. But soon the bugs are worked out, mass production makes the luxuries of the well-to-do the necessities of the middle class, and new standards of cleanliness sweep across America!!!

***And the rest is History...***

“WHO CARES, THEY ARE ALL DEAD ANYWAY...”

## Quiz yourself on Chapter 1

Multiple Choice (circle the correct answer).

1. In the Compromise of 1877
  - a. African-Americans ended up getting screwed
  - b. Rutherford B. Hayes became President
  - c. Democrats completely wussied out
  - d. Samuel Tilden got screwed
  - e. All of the above
  
2. During the Gilded Age politicians waved the bloody shirt
  - a. because they hoped someone would volunteer to wash it
  - b. they were too lazy to take it the congressional Lost & Found
  - c. they wanted to appeal to veterans for their votes
  - d. because they couldn't find the bloody pants
  - e. none of the above
  
3. Ulysses S. Grant was
  - a. a poor general but an excellent president
  - b. an excellent general but a poor president
  - c. a poor general and a poor president
  - d. an excellent dancer and a fabulous lover
  - e. a and d
  
4. Big city bosses such as “Boss” Tweed were
  - a. basically “Robin Hoods” out to help the poor
  - b. basically “Clara Bartons” out to help the injured
  - c. basically Charlie Sheens completely out of their minds
  - d. basically trying to enrich themselves
  - e. none of the above
  
5. The assassination of President James Abrams Garfield
  - a. made Mrs. Garfield's lover very happy
  - b. dramatically demonstrated the need for reform of the military
  - c. dramatically demonstrated the need for reform of the spoils system
  - d. put an end to target practice in the White House hallways
  - e. b and d

6. Radical Republicans
  - a. insisted on a harsh Reconstruction
  - b. took Control of Reconstruction away from President Johnson
  - c. instituted a strict dress code for all congressional functions
  - d. tried to impeach the President because they disagreed with him
  - e. a, b, and d
  
7. Booker T. Washington's "Atlanta Compromise"
  - a. delighted whites because it seemed so accommodating
  - b. urged economic empowerment for blacks
  - c. was contrary to W.E.B. Du Bois' calls for immediate equality
  - d. allowed blacks and whites to attend Braves games together
  - e. a, b, and c
  
8. During the Cleveland Administration
  - a. stupid people thought the city of Cleveland was our nation's capital
  - b. the federal budget had a surplus
  - c. the federal budget had a deficit
  - d. Cincinnati and Akron were jealous
  - e. b and c
  
9. President Harrison
  - a. survived in office a lot longer than his grandfather
  - b. squandered federal money on more money for veterans
  - c. squandered federal money of pork barrel projects for Congressmen
  - d. should have been in a different line of work
  - e. all of the above
  
10. During the Gilded Age
  - a. government corruption was much worse than it is today
  - b. the rich got richer and the poor got screwed
  - c. millionaires had a blast
  - d. Most politicians deserved to be put in jail
  - e. all of the above