

By 1900 most cities had full-time professional fire departments. But the lack of water made fires very dangerous—and reliance on wood as a building material gave fires fuel to burn. Both Chicago, in 1871, and San Francisco, in 1906, suffered very devastating fires. Another problem of the growing cities was crime.

Some social reformers pushed to improve life in the cities. The Social Gospel movement held that Christians had a duty to try to reform conditions. Some reformers created settlement houses. These community centers aimed at helping the poor, especially immigrants. Run mostly by women, they offered schooling, nursing, and other assistance.

● Politics in the Gilded Age

MAIN IDEA Local and national political corruption in the 19th century led to calls for reform.

The large populations of cities provided an opportunity for a new political force—the political machine controlled by a boss. A machine was a group that controlled a political party. By giving voters services they needed, the machine won their votes and controlled city government.

The city boss controlled the whole machine—and the city government. Bosses controlled jobs in the police, fire, and sanitation departments. They controlled the city agencies that granted licenses to businesses. They controlled the money used to fund large construction projects. Many bosses were first- or second-generation immigrants, and they understood immigrants' concerns. By helping to solve immigrants' problems, they won loyalty.

Political machines could point to many accomplishments. As they gained power, though, some individuals became corrupt. Some used illegal methods to win elections. Others abused power to become wealthy. Since the bosses controlled the police, they were seldom pursued. The Tweed Ring of New York was one of the most famous examples of corruption among city officials. Boss Tweed and

many associates were finally convicted of various crimes.

Corruption reached national politics. For many decades, presidents had given jobs to loyal party workers in what was called the spoils system. As a result, some workers were not qualified for their jobs. Others used their positions to get money.

Reformers wanted to end these abuses. They proposed a civil service system in which government jobs would go only to those who proved they were qualified.

President Rutherford B. Hayes took some steps to reform the federal government. This aroused the anger of some members of his own party. These Stalwarts, as they were called, opposed any changes. The next president, James Garfield, favored the reform movement, and he was shot and killed by an unbalanced Stalwart. His successor, Chester Arthur, pushed through the Pendleton Act of 1883. It created the Civil Service Commission to give government jobs based on merit, not politics. The act helped reform the civil service. However, some politicians now turned to wealthy business leaders for campaign money. As a result, some corruption continued.

Another issue was how high to make the tariff, or tax on imported goods. Business leaders and Republicans wanted high tariffs so they could cut foreign competition. Democrats favored low tariffs. Under Republican presidents Benjamin Harrison and William McKinley, the tariff was high. Under Democrat Grover Cleveland, the tariff was lower for a short period.

Review

1. Where did immigrants come from in the period from 1870 to 1920?
2. What problems arose in the growing cities?
3. What role did political machines play in cities?
4. What led to the call for civil service reform?