The streets of New York were a teeming place after the Civil War. The unpaved dirt streets were strewn with trash thrown from windows and horse manure from animals pulling carriages. Diseases like cholera and tuberculosis thrived in the unhealthy environment. Black smoke clogged the air from the burning coal and wood that heated homes and powered factories. Over one million people crowded into the city, and many lived in dilapidated tenements. Poverty, illiteracy, crime, and vice were rampant problems for the poor and for the Irish and German immigrants that comprised almost half the population. The city government offered very few basic services to alleviate the suffering, and churches and private charities were overwhelmed by the need.

By the mid-1850s, “Boss” William Magear Tweed (1823 – 1878) was one of the leading politicians in New York City. He headed the Tammany Hall political machine, which controlled Democratic Party and most of the votes. He had spent a lifetime in public service and held a wide variety of local positions including volunteer firefighter, Board of Education, Board of Supervisors, and state senator. Most importantly, in 1860 he was named the “grand sachem” of Tammany Hall and was in control of the political machine. In 1870, the state legislature granted New York City a new charter that gave local officials, rather than those in the state capital in Albany, power over local political offices and appointments. It was called the “Tweed Charter” because he so desperately wanted that control that he paid hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes for it.

After installing his own men as mayor and in other key positions, Boss Tweed helped the immigrants and poor out in many ways. Thousands of recent immigrants were naturalized as American citizens and thus had the right to vote. Tweed also made sure that the immigrants had jobs, found a place to live, had enough food, and even had enough coal money to warm their apartments during the cold of winter. In addition, Boss Tweed contributed millions of dollars to the institutions that benefited and cared for the immigrants such as their neighborhood churches and synagogues, hospitals, orphanages, and charities. Immigrants in New York were grateful for the much-needed services from the city and private charities. The Tweed Ring seemed to be creating a healthy society. In overwhelming numbers immigrants happily voted for the Democrats who ran the city.

However, all was not well in New York. The “Tweed Ring” was corruptly raking in millions of dollars in graft and skimming off the top. Tweed doled out thousands of jobs as patronage and he expected favors, bribes, and kickbacks in return. Massive building projects such as new hospitals, elaborate museums, marble courthouses, paved roads, and the Brooklyn Bridge had millions of dollars of padded costs added that went straight to Boss Tweed and his cronies. They also gobbled up massive amounts...
of real estate, owned the printing company that did official city business such as ballots, and received large payoffs from railroads. Soon, Tweed owned an extravagant Fifth Avenue mansion and an estate in Connecticut, gave lavish parties and weddings, and owned diamond jewelry worth tens of thousands of dollars. In total, the Tweed Ring brought in an estimated $50 to $200 million in corrupt money. Boss Tweed's avarice knew few boundaries.

The corruption in New York City government, however, went far beyond greed to cheapen the rule of law and degrade a healthy civil society. Most people in local government received their jobs due to patronage rather than merit and talent. The Tweed Ring also manipulated elections in a variety of ways. They hired people to vote multiple times, and even had sheriffs and temporary deputies protect them while doing so. They stuffed ballot boxes with fake votes and bribed or arrested election inspectors who questioned their methods. Sometimes, they simply ignored the ballots completely and falsified election results. Tammany candidates often received more votes than eligible voters in a district. In addition, the ring used intimidation and street violence by hiring thugs or crooked cops, and received payoffs from criminal activities they allowed to flourish.

In the end, Boss Tweed's greed was too great, and his exploitation was too brazen. The New York Times exposed the rampant corruption, and the cartoons of Thomas Nast in Harper's Weekly lampooned the Tweed Ring for its illegal activities. In October 1871, Tweed was arrested and indicted shortly thereafter. He was tried in 1873, found guilty of forgery and larceny, and sentenced to twelve years in prison. He escaped in disguise to Cuba and thence to Spain in 1875 by paying $60,000 in bribes, but he was recaptured, returned to New York, and died in jail in 1878.

“‘I don't care who does the electing as long as I get to do the nominating.’”

WILLIAM MAGEAR TWEED

Defining Civic Virtues: Avarice
To allow the love of wealth to lead you to do wrong acquiring it.
Discussion Guide

Directions: Discuss the following questions with your partner(s).

1. What problems did Boss Tweed and his political machine attempt to address in New York? Why did he have the opportunity to provide corrupt services to the immigrants of New York?

2. Boss Tweed held a large number of political offices in the local and state governments. Do you think he was interested in public service to serve the public good and health of civil society, or did he have a different motive in mind?

3. What services did he provide for the immigrants of New York? Did it matter to the immigrants if these services were provided legitimately or whether they were part of the corruption of the Tweed Ring?

4. What are some examples of the avarice of the Tweed Ring? How did the greed of the Tweed Ring contribute to the corruption of the political system? How were projects that benefitted the city and its inhabitants associated with the corruption of the Tweed Ring?

5. In what ways did the people of New York continue to benefit from Tweed’s projects even after the Tweed Ring was exposed and removed from power?

6. Did Boss Tweed accept justice for his greed and illegal activities? Did he take responsibility for his actions? Or, did he seek to evade justice and responsibility to the end of his life? Explain your answers.

7. How did the press help put an end to the corruption of the Tweed Ring? What is the role of a free press in a free society and constitutional republic? To what extent do you think that journalists in newspapers, television, and on-line have maintained high standards of professional journalism and the commitment to a healthy, free society? In what ways have they succeeded or failed? Give examples to support your answer.

8. Political cartoonists like Thomas Nast still question the integrity of the public actions and personal actions of politicians today. Look at some examples of recent political cartoons and think about the following items:
   a. What symbols do they use that are recognizable by most Americans?
   b. What topics are they targeting in their satires?
   c. What are some common themes from the commentary about today’s politics and society?

9. Why is avarice, or greed, so destructive to a healthy political system and civil society?
THE TWEED RING IN THE POLITICAL CARTOONS OF THOMAS NAST IN HARPER’S WEEKLY

Directions  For several years, cartoonist Thomas Nast had pilloried the graft, corruption, and outright theft carried out by the Tweed Ring and Tammany Hall in his memorable images published in Harper’s Weekly and The New York Times. In 1871 the Times published a series of news articles detailing the political machine’s abuses, and naming the most powerful of its leaders. Nast redoubled his efforts to spotlight the perpetrators through his powerful cartoons. In fact, Tweed reportedly exclaimed, “I don’t care a straw for your newspaper articles; my constituents don’t know how to read, but they can’t help seeing them damned pictures!” The voters swept the Tweed Ring from power in the November election of 1871, and trials and prison followed shortly thereafter for Tweed and his henchmen. When Tweed escaped from prison in 1875 and fled to Spain, he was captured in Spain because the police there recognized him from Nast’s cartoons.

Analyze the cartoons on the following pages and answer the questions for each image. Then prepare for a class discussion of the importance of a free press in republican government.

1. THOMAS NAST, HARPER’S WEEKLY, JANUARY 14, 1871

Note: For a clear and detailed digitized image, search Princeton University Digital Library (www.pudl.princeton.edu) for “Tweedledee and Sweedledum”

In Thomas Nast’s cartoons, he often represented William M. Tweed as “Tweedledee” and fellow Tammany Hall Democrat Peter B. Sweeny as “Sweedledum.”

1. Who are the people represented in the drawing? Who is the “clown” with the $15,500 diamond stick-pin?
2. What is the clown doing with the public treasury? How does this break his trust as a public servant?
3. How does Thomas Nast’s political cartoon demonstrate the vice of avarice? How does it demonstrate corruption?
2. THOMAS NAST, HARPER’S WEEKLY, OCTOBER 21, 1871

Note: For a clear and detailed digitized image, search Princeton University Digital Library (www.pudl.princeton.edu) for “The Brains”

1. Who is the figure represented in the above political cartoon by Thomas Nast? What clues help reveal the identity of the person?

2. How do you know that the cartoon is a commentary about the vice of avarice?
3. THOMAS NAST, HARPER’S WEEKLY, NOVEMBER 11, 1871

Note: For a clear and detailed digitized image, search Princeton University Digital Library (www.pudl.princeton.edu) for “The Tammany Tiger Loose”

As is the case in most of his work, Nast uses rich symbolism in this image. Tweed himself had selected the snarling tiger as the symbol for the firemen’s company that he established, but Nast used Tweed’s own symbol against him. The tiger is shown mauling the female figure, Republic, whose helmet (the ballot) and sword representing power, lie broken nearby. The banner of Law and the American flag are tattered beneath her. The other female figure represents Justice, with her broken scales and sword at her side. The male figure represents Mercury, Roman god of commerce, with his winged helmet smashed at his left side. The arena is filled with a large audience taking in the spectacle, and the Tweed Ring’s members look on with determined attention.

1. What does the tiger represent about Tammany Hall and the Tweed Ring?
2. Who is the corrupt emperor seated above in the stands? What clues does the cartoonist, Thomas Nast, reveal about the identity of the emperor?
3. Judging by the figures that have been mauled and killed by the tiger and what they represent, what is Nast’s commentary about the health of government and civil society?
4. THOMAS NAST, HARPER’S WEEKLY, AUGUST 19, 1871

Note: For a clear and detailed digitized image, search Princeton University Digital Library (www.pudl.princeton.edu) for “Two Great Questions”

1. Cartoonist Thomas Nast drew all of the major figures in the Tweed Ring in the above cartoon. Why are they all pointing at each other?

2. How does the writing and the cartoon show a commentary about the vice of avarice in the Tweed Ring? To what extent do any of the figures take responsibilities for the wrongs they are committing?
Virtue In Action

Strive to be a model of selflessness and charity for others in your daily life.

- Think about ways in which Boss Tweed deceived himself into thinking that he was serving others when he was really serving his own interests. Identify ways that you can avoid that vice in your own life.
- When working on a group project in class, make sure that you contribute to the effort and give credit to others for their contributions.
- If you play a team sport, play the game selflessly that contributes toward a team victory rather than trying to win all the glory as an individual.
- Think of ways that you can volunteer your time to a local charitable cause with a family member or friend.
- Work with the student council or a teacher to organize a project to help a local charity.
- In your classes, be respectful and civil when having a debate or discussion. Listen carefully to others and value their contribution, rather than dominating a conversation.
- At home, think of ways that you can selflessly contribute by doing extra chores or serving your family in some small way.

Sources & Further Reading


Avarice

Directions  Are there ways that American culture promotes avarice, or greed? How do advertising, media, social media, movies, or television shows promote rampant consumerism, debt, and greed? What effect does that have on our civil society? What people and institutions can you think of that contradict that selfishness and greed?

“There's an honest graft, and I'm an example of how it works. I might sum up the whole thing by sayin': 'I seen my opportunities and I took 'em.'”

—GEORGE W. PLUNKITT, 1905