

Lincoln Steffens'  
The Shame of the Cities,  
and the Philosophy of Corruption and Reform



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AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF CORRUPTION AND REFORM

EDITED, ANNOTATED AND INTRODUCED  
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## PREFACE

American journalist and writer Lincoln Steffens (1866-1936) hoped he could *shame* Americans, both politicians and the public, into honest municipal government and democratic reform. This hope is expressed in the title of his 1904 collection of magazine articles, *The Shame of the Cities*; and the theme of shame is repeated in several of the chapter titles: “The Shame of Minneapolis,” “The Shamelessness of St. Louis,” “Pittsburgh: A City Ashamed.” He was convinced that the citizens’ political indifferences and neglect stood at the root of municipal corruption.

The revelations of rampant corruption in this volume were not news to the local journalists and reformers in St. Louis, Minneapolis, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Chicago or New York. The stories had already been reported in the local press and often confirmed in criminal investigations, trials and convictions. Steffens, famed “muckraker” though he was, was not so much *exposing* corruption as he was communicating the news of local corruption and the prospects of reform to the country at large. He had much local help from journalists, reformers and even from the corrupt politicians themselves. But others had already exposed the corruption.

Like several of the local reform groups, Steffens enjoyed significant national and political support. Beginning with Theodore Roosevelt’s work as Police Commissioner in New York City, Steffens’ journalism had been unofficially incorporated into Roosevelt’s “bully pulpit.” After more than a century, Steffens’ book retains considerable interest; and one will strain to find inaccuracies in his reports. The work is therefore a document of the history of American political corruption and reform; and it is worth study for the light it casts on the vicissitudes of Gilded Age corruption in America.

The essays collected here to which Steffens' "Introduction; and Some Conclusions" was added by the author, otherwise first appeared as a series of magazine articles published in *McClure's Magazine*. The present text follows that of the 1904 book. The orthography and spelling have been up-dated and Americanized throughout, and Steffens longer quotations indented and related sources cited wherever possible. Steffens' references to persons and events have been identified, including most of the chief political actors. There is a cast of hundreds in Steffens' articles—and a snapshot of Gilded Age corruption at its crest. Original notes to the work are identified as such, and all other annotations to the text are the work of the editor. The present edition includes a brief chronology of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era, a newly assembled bibliography of historical and related contemporary sources plus an analytical index. This is the first index for the Steffens volume.

The aim of the present study edition is to make use of Steffens' work in the attempt to better understand the social and political phenomenon of corruption generally. In particular, I want at least to pose the question of the relationship between the large-scale economic expansion or "modernization" of the post-Civil War Gilded Age and the prevalence of corruption in those times. A clearer understanding of the relationship between prolonged economic expansion and corruption is of interest to political philosophers, political scientists and also of interest to the practice of reform. We have to wonder, about the "cohesive power of public plunder," given the large and jolting changes the country was subject to in the Civil War and in the large-scale industrialization of the following Gilded Age. What cannot reasonably be doubted is, in Steffens' words, that *the tendency* of corruption "is literally to change the form of our government from one that is representative of the people to an oligarchy, representative of special interests." Political corruption distorts democratic representation.

Suspicion of corruption and backroom, insider self-dealing is easy—the stuff of popular conspiracy theories. *Evidence* of corrup-



tion, on the other hand, including details on the perpetrators and beneficiaries, is much harder to come by. But Lincoln Steffens, traveling from city to city across the country, did come by it, with much help from local journalists and the support of national advocates of reform—including the President of the United States. Given his wealth of detail, and the remoteness of his times from our own, Steffens' work opens up, in a comparatively disinterested fashion, a world of social, economic and political factors which contribute to our understand of the more pervasive patterns of corruption and political decay.

From the perspective of political philosophy, it is difficult to avoid the impression of a conceptual and theoretical conflict between “republican virtue” (which presupposes the citizens' and statesman's self-restraint), and the expansive, driving force of self-interest and national political ambition in late nineteenth century liberal and republican thought. In consequence there will be considerable attention in what follows to the general concept of corruption and its relationship to accepted political practices. From an historical and empirical point of view, the relationship between local corruption and national politics and policy is also of special interest.

The impetus for reform arose in part from national disgust with the patronage or “spoils” system of political appointments following the 1881 assassination of newly elected President James A. Garfield by a disgruntled office-seeker. The reaction against this tragedy marked the origin of the gradual introduction of the Federal Civil Service system; but, on the other hand, it is abundantly clear from the present book that many politicians, national, state and local were quite content to base their politics and political organizations on patron-client relationships, both before and after the passage of the Pendleton act of 1883. The heart and soul of Gilded Age political corruption, which gradually extended into business, was lack of moral self-restraint combined with a pervasive political clientelism; and slow improvements were intimately connected with the gradual introduction of civil service reform. The political

“spoils” system was slowly contracting in the final decades of the nineteenth century; yet the contraction of political spoils only intensified the extension of clientelism from politics into business. This, in turn evoked popular and political efforts to control the power and political influence of big business, eventuating in regulatory agencies of the state and federal governments and the advent of antitrust legislation. Better understanding the historical origins and sources of the municipal corruption Steffens detailed, we may also better understand the roles of moral self-restraint in the needed balance of larger and smaller structures of constitutional democracy.