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Tammany Hall and Al Smith

By WALTER LIPPMANN

SINCE it is not impossible that the Democrats will nominate a Tammany man for President of the United States, we shall hear much in the next few months about Tammany Hall. For the name of Tammany is firmly established in people's minds as the symbol of corrupt government, and any one who has to face the voters outside of New York with a Tammany label attached to him has a heavy prejudice to overcome. Of anything connected with Tammany most Americans are inclined to believe the worst. They greet the claim that there is a new Tammany with cynical suspicion.

It may be useful to inquire why this prejudice has become so firmly established. Offhand, it would be said, I suppose, that from the days of William Marcy Tweed to the days of Richard Croker the Tammany organization practiced all the political vices—the defilement of elections, the seduction of ignorant voters, the prostitution of justice; that it grew rich, fat, and defiant upon commercialized vice, the sale of public offices, the plunder of the treasury, the blackmailing of business, and the betrayal of the taxpayer. Tammany, it would be argued, has such a bad name because it has such a bad record. And yet I do not believe that this explanation really accounts for the feeling which is aroused by the word Tammany. New York City has been corruptly governed under Tammany. But its corruption is not unique. Scandal for scandal, the evil record of Tammany can be matched in the history of many, if not most, other American cities. The story of the Philadelphia Gas Ring is in every aspect as disgraceful as Tammany's. Cities like Chicago, San Francisco, Cincinnati, have experienced fully as bad government as ever came out of Tammany Hall. I

think one can go further and assert that the corruption which has made Tammany notorious, far from being unique, was really typical of American local government in the period between the close of the war between the States and the beginning of the twentieth century. Tammany at its worst was never a solitary flower of evil growing in a garden of lilies.

The whole age in which Tammany disgraced itself was an age of extraordinarily low public morality. With the exception of the few years after the European War in which the Ohio gang was operating in Washington, there has been no time in the history of the Republic when honest men were so timid and dishonest men were so bold. But of the foul traditions of that age Tammany has managed somehow to assimilate to itself the whole odium. In point of fact, it was one corrupt political ring among many. But in the minds of most Americans it is the symbol of all corruption.

THIS is due, I feel morally certain, to three main causes: The Tammany machine operated in New York City, and so it was very conspicuous. It had a picturesque name. Its operations have been exposed repeatedly and effectively, and have therefore lent themselves to discussion by students of government and writers of text-books. Obliterate the word Tammany, transfer the practices of the organization to a town less in the spotlight of the world's opinion, and cancel out the exceptionally rigorous exposures to which New Yorkers have subjected Tammany, and it would hardly be believed that the corruption practiced by Tammany differed much from that of dozens of other political machines of its time.

What was unique was not its crookedness but its prominence. "I begin with New York," wrote Bryce in 1894, when he was discussing the perversions and corruption of democratic government, "because she displays on the grandest scale phenomena common to American cities, and because the plunder and misgovernment from which she has suffered have become specially notorious over the world."

I do not think I exaggerate the consequences of the fact that Tammany's corruption took place in New York City. The concerns of New York City are advertised beyond those of any other locality in the United States. New York is the financial capital of the country. It cannot, therefore, long be out of the country's mind. New York is the publishing center of the United States. Its local press is read by editors and leaders of opinion throughout the Nation. In New York there are published, and in considerable measure written, a very large part of the periodicals read by Americans. New York is the port of entry for almost all Europeans. It is the first thing in America they see, and, unfortunately, often the only thing they see. Whatever happens in New York achieves a degree of publicity that is unique. New York murders, New York divorces, New York political scandals, receive public attention altogether out of proportion to their intrinsic interest or importance. They are exceptional news because they take place in New York. I do not say this is good. But it is a fact. Tammany's wickedness, like Lindbergh's pajamas and President Coolidge's griddle cakes, is known throughout the world because New York is known throughout the world.

But even then the wickedness of Tammany would not have been so well

lodged in the public mind if the organization were known simply for what it is, as the Democratic political machine in the borough of Manhattan. Its outlandish name has enabled people to personify it as something very distinct and strange. We have, for example, a local Republican machine in New York which has surely been as corrupt in its intentions, though it has had smaller opportunities, than Tammany. But nobody apparently outside of New York City has ever heard of this local Republican machine. It is just another Republican machine, whereas the Democratic machine is notorious as Tammany Hall.

THIS name goes back to 1805, when a patriotic order called the Columbian Society decided to indulge itself in a characteristic bit of American monkey-shines. Just as we have societies which like to play at being sultans and pashas, and others which like to play at being knights and wizards and dragons, so this Columbian Society decided to play at being red Indians. It adopted as a mock patron saint the name of an Indian chieftain called Tamanend or Tammany. It organized itself into twelve "tribes" each with a "sachem," and put a "grand sachem" over them all. It appointed a master of ceremonies called a "sagamore," and the doorkeeper took upon himself the tremendous title of "wiskinski." In 1817 it showed its sturdy moral qualities by issuing an address to the city of New York denouncing the spread of the foreign game of billiards among young men of the upper classes. And once, it is said, the society owned a natural history museum, which it sold to P. T. Barnum.

This age of innocence lasted, roughly, until about 1850, although Tammany was from the beginning a force in the affairs of New York. In 1834 the Mayoralty became directly elective. In 1842 full manhood suffrage was established. After 1846 the great period of Irish and German immigration began. The Tammany which the world knows grew up in the twenty years which followed—the period, let us recall, of the war and of the Western expansion and of the absorption of the older American leaders in great National affairs. As early as 1850 the Common Council of New York City was already known as the Forty Thieves. In 1863 William Marcy Tweed became the Boss of Tammany Hall. By 1871 Tweed had looted the treasury to a tune which raised the bonded debt of the

city nearly 300 per cent in less than three years. By July of 1871 the New York "Times" had exposed the Tweed Ring, and Tammany's name was indelibly branded throughout the world. By November, 1873, Tweed was in jail, and in 1876 he was dead.

The American tradition about Tammany was created at that time. It was created by the New Yorkers who fought it, by the brilliant and courageous journalism of the New York "Times," by Nast's cartoons in "Harper's Weekly," by the thunder of Samuel J. Tilden. The tradition has been kept alive by New Yorkers. For, although Tweed was dead, his political heirs carried on for at least a generation, and therefore civic righteousness in New York has almost been synonymous with a crusade against Tammany. I was brought up in this anti-Tammany tradition, and I remember well how uncomfortable I felt when in voting for Al Smith in 1920 I cast my first vote for a Tammany man. Since then I have learned to vote enthusiastically for Smith, but I confess that I still wince when it comes to supporting a Tammany ticket on which his name does not appear. For, although I know that the present Tammany is above the average in political machines, and in all respects more competent than the local Republican machine, I have never been able to conquer altogether the prejudice which the name Tammany arouses.

No political organization ever had a worse reputation to live down than Tammany. Yet it is the simple truth to say that in the last ten years or so New Yorkers who are well informed have gradually had their anti-Tammany complex dissolved. Today in New York a Republican politician who raises an outcry about Tammany is looked upon about as the country looks upon a Republican who tries to cadge votes by waving the bloody shirt. I do not mean to say that the Tammany of this generation is composed of disinterested lovers of mankind who have renounced worldly ambition and material desires to serve the state. I do mean to say that the new Tammany will bear comparison as to its honesty, its public spirit, and its efficiency with any other political organization which operates successfully anywhere in the country. It is a governing machine which controls its following by the usual mixture of buncombe and idealism, personal favors and special influence. Its members have a good, normal, healthy appetite for jobs, for

contracts, for real estate speculation, for law practice based on political pull. In the lower strata of the organization there is no doubt considerable petty profiteering on those who wish to have our multitudinous laws generously non-enforced. But along with this there are in Tammany Hall men of high personal integrity who are really interested in the art of government, liberal in their sympathies, and extraordinarily deft in their understanding of human nature. The organization, in brief, is not wholly predatory nor wholly philanthropic. It is simply an American political machine in a big city.

As such it is of primary interest only to New Yorkers. What interests the country about it is its relation to Al Smith. To understand that relationship properly it is necessary to realize and to keep clearly in mind that Tammany is a local political machine, and that its main concern is with the city of New York. In so far as Tammany is still predatory, it has far richer opportunities in the city than it has anywhere else outside the city.

In backing Al Smith for Governor and for President Tammany is not reaching out for plunder. The four administrations of Al Smith have proved that beyond all possibility of argument. Those administrations have given the State of New York the most enlightened government it has known in this generation. No breath of scandal has ever touched Governor Smith. His tenure at Albany has been criticised on this point or that. But no serious person has ever questioned its integrity or its public spirit. Now Governor Smith in all this time has had the fervent support of Tammany Hall. If Tammany is purely predatory, how is that to be explained? The answer is that the career of Governor Smith means to Tammany not plunder but prestige, not an opportunity for corruption but a chance to save its political soul, not petty politics but large politics. In Smith, for the first time in its history, Tammany has experienced the pleasure of a good name. The new generation of Tammany men, although they are interested in taking care of themselves, have learned what many big business men have learned, that the rewards of good government may be more satisfactory and enduring than the profits of bad government. I put the matter on no higher ground than that because if I went on to say, what I personally believe to be the fact, that there is a gen-



From a drawing by W. J. Enright

Alfred E. Smith

uine strain of civic virtue in the new Tammany few would, I fear, believe me.

What I think is indubitable is that the motives of Tammany in supporting Governor Smith lie in the region of pride and prestige, and not in the region of jobs, contracts, and plunder. The object of Tammany is to make him great, to prove to the world that a great man was reared on the sidewalks of New York, and to bask in the reflection of his glory. I have been told, and I believe it to be true, that the late Charles F. Murphy, who was Boss of Tammany Hall when the Governor was elected for the first time, looked upon Al Smith as the hope of his declining years, and that

he exerted all the great power he commanded to protect the Governor against the importunities of his own henchman. The power of Tammany, which had traditionally been used to control public officials, was in Smith's case used to free him from the necessity of pandering to the machine.

The career of Al Smith at Albany fits that notion at every point. Since the death of Mr. Murphy there has been no Boss of Tammany Hall in the old sense of the word. There has been a leader of the Democratic Party, the Governor himself, from whom the nominal Boss, Mr. Olvany, receives his instructions in all important matters. In the exercise of that leadership Governor Smith has

aligned Tammany solidly behind a program to reorganize the State Government which embodies all the principles thus far devised for destroying that kind of invisible government which Tammany is supposed to represent. It is a curious, but very significant fact, that a product of Tammany Hall should have devoted his four terms of office to creating a structure of government in New York which makes the elected head of the State Government the visible and responsible master of it. That record is the best possible answer to the fear that the advancement of Smith means the extension of the kind of politics which the name Tammany suggests. This Tammany Governor who went to Albany has reconstructed the State Government so as to realize in practice the ideals of the political reformers.

IT is significant that he wanted to do this. It is significant that he was free to do it. It is even more significant that the Tammany leaders have again and again taken off their coats and gone to work to roll up a huge majority for Al Smith and his reforms. It is not necessary to suppose that they have themselves become reformers. What counts in a realistic appraisal of this matter is that Tammany's support of Al Smith is based on a realization that his unsullied reputation is their greatest asset, and on a desire that no interest of theirs shall interrupt the fulfillment of his career.

If one were to dig down deep into the souls of Tammany men today, one would find, I think, that their hope of seeing Al Smith in the White House has almost nothing to do with any personal ambition for National office or for National influence. One would find, I believe, that what moves them is the thought that one of them, their friend and companion, might rise to such heights, and in his rise give a new dignity to them and to their own origins. I have no fear whatsoever that, if by chance Al Smith went to the White House, there would follow him to Washington the system traditionally associated with Tammany. It may be foolish to prophesy, but I am convinced that if Smith were President, Tammany would constitute itself a kind of vigilance committee to see that no wicked politician dared to embarrass the pride of Oliver Street. Any other course would, in their eyes, be the most despicable of all the vices—it would be treachery to a friend.

Hangman's Holiday

By COURTENAY TERRETT

THE murder of Albert Snyder by his wife and her lover was not a notable crime. It possessed none of the elements—mystery, riches, and social glamour—which commonly make murders “good” in a journalistic sense.

Yet the murder, and then the trial, and finally the execution, provided a hangman's holiday for press and public which exceeded, in its enthusiastic Sadiism, any similar event in a decade past.

The murdered man, a thoroughly average and undistinguished wage-earner, was not in his grave before the newspapers, which had found the current Chinese revolutions and the Ford-Sapiro libel suit dull pabulum for their readers, remembered that the Hall-Mills case, a genuinely “good” murder story, had done wonders for their circulation. Instantly the Snyder-Gray case was stretched to fill as many columns in a day as the Spanish-American War received in a week.

Before the hard-faced woman and Gray came to trial the public was acquainted with the names of their grandparents, the most intimate details of their amour, and their favorite dishes.

When they were put on trial, even the scrupulous dignity of the presiding justice could not prevent the legal process from becoming a circus.

Visiting British peers and lachrymal lady novelists, former police commissioners and naïvely excited authors of realistic dramas, were hired as “trained seals” by the newspapers in their hysterical rivalry. The most self-consciously upright journal in New York printed every word of the transcript that any reader might trouble to read, and another ran five separate and individual versions of each day's session.

It seemed an unbelievable amount of commotion for a fattish housewife and a commonplace corset salesman to have aroused by the mere bungling murder of the woman's colorless husband.

Afternoon papers sold out from five to eight editions daily on the story, and the morning papers, hours late with the account, enjoyed an equally profitable jump in circulation. Crowds fought so violently for entrance to the court-room

that police reserves had to be called out; and in the room itself, one of the largest courts in New York City, spectators were so tightly packed that not only women but men fainted in the fetid jam.

Thus it was that the public was fully acquainted with the drabest details of a case which in times of plenteous news might have earned two-thirds of a column daily in the more capacious papers; and thus when the Court of Appeals and then the Governor rejected the man's and woman's pleas for a new trial, for commutation to life imprisonment, for a reprieve, for any mercy, the public was waiting hungrily for their last words.

IN the interim of months between the time Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray vanished into Sing Sing and the time for their last revival in the public prints the newspapers had whooped up a mediocre murder trial far down in New Jersey. It had not been a notable success; so now they eagerly made ready to give their readers all the thrills they craved. A “good” electrocution sells as many papers as a Presidential election, more than a World's Series game. Men and women who ordinarily buy one morning paper get them all; and, still not certain that they have gleaned every detail, send out for the evening editions and the tabloids.

The tabloids and the full-sized tabloids sent squads of reporters and photographers, “hush men,” “fixers,” and sob sisters to Sing Sing ten days before the appointed date of execution. One of the tabloids, more zealous than its rivals, had had a man stationed there for seven weeks before the day.

There was no news which one reporter for a news association could not have gathered and turned in in two hours a day. The only legitimate news was that given out by the warden in his office and what fragments could be picked up by lounging around the yard and watching the sad-faced mothers come on their last visits.

For the more respectable papers that news was enough until within a day or two before the end, but for the papers which demanded news when there was no news the “pipe story” was the reporters' only recourse.

It came to pass, therefore, that after three days of more or less adroit invention, one correspondent jubilantly boasted of a beat over his rivals when his paper banner-lined an account of how Mrs. Snyder had petitioned her mother and the warden for black silk lingerie to wear to the chair.

This coup was eagerly rewritten by the morning papers of the same stripe, with one exception. That was the tabloid which had purchased the exclusive rights to “Ruth's Own Life Story” and which had actually obtained half a dozen sheets of pencil scrawlings from the murderess which her mother smuggled out of the death house. This paper, perhaps irritated that it had not thought of the novel idea, denounced the black-silk lingerie story as a fake.

Another of the little journals printed a daily story date-lined “Death House, Sing Sing Prison,” and presumably none of its readers ever ventured the criticism that even a Supreme Court order could not get a reporter into the death house.

It was a matter of jest, even among the tabloid “hush men”—so titled because of their mysterious, sibilant conversations—that the author of these intimate accounts of the last days of Mrs. Snyder and Gray came to Ossining only twice in the fortnight preceding the execution, and on the second occasion ventured no nearer the prison gates than a hospitable saloon half a mile away.

It was in his New York office, and not in the saloon, that this particular correspondent created the story which sold an extra 20,000 copies of his paper one afternoon—a wholly imaginative recital of Mrs. Snyder's efforts to kill herself in her cell by banging her head against the wall.

So hysterical became the contest for news, real or false, that another paper ordered a girl reporter and a camera man to sit in a car outside a convent school ten miles from Ossining all one night on the chance that Mrs. Snyder's ten-year-old daughter might be concealed there, and that a rival paper might try to spirit her away for a photograph.

The attitude of the villagers, living in the metaphorical shadow of the great