

LINCOLN STEFFENS'S PHILADELPHIA

BY ARTHUR P. DUDDEN*

“MY REPORT on ‘Philadelphia: Corrupt and Contented,’” Lincoln Steffens wrote in his *Autobiography* (1931), “seemed to give the impression which lasts to this day, that that beautiful old American city was the worst in the land. *Not true, of course.* It was only older than St. Louis and Minneapolis, and I might have shown that and put Philadelphia in its relative position, if I had gone from there to Boston or some other old town in New England; Boston was the next logical step. But my editorial associates on *McClure's* opposed my choice as they did my theory. They were for Chicago next.”¹

So Steffens went off to Chicago in search of “the sensationally wicked story” his associates wanted. To his astonishment, Chicago displayed “an example of reform, a sensible, aristocratic-democratic reform experiment.”² Learning therefrom that his readers “were interested in reform quite as much as they were in graft,” reporter Steffens realized that it “would be good journalism to find and report immediately an experiment in good government to parallel the Chicago experiment in representative government.” New York City under Mayor Seth Low was the logical choice. Unfortunately the November election of 1903 returned Tammany Hall to power, and presumably to Tweed-like grafting. Steffens’s article on New York City, written on the election’s eve, was subtitled “Good Government in Danger” as the result of his fears for the outcome.³

The Shame of the Cities (1904), which brought Steffens’s sensational articles together in book form, blamed the misgovernment

*Dr. Dudden is associate professor of history at Bryn Mawr College. This paper was read at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in Philadelphia, December 28, 1963.

¹ *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1931), I, 422. Italics mine.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 422-423.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 430-434.

of America's municipalities primarily on their businessmen. Steffens charged:

The typical businessman is a bad citizen; he is busy. If he is a "big business man" and very busy, he does not neglect, he is busy with politics, oh, very busy and very businesslike. . . . He is a self-righteous fraud, this big business man. He is the chief source of corruption, and it were a boon if he would neglect politics. But he is not the business man that neglects politics; that worthy is the good citizen, the typical business man. He too is busy, he is the one that has no use and therefore no time for politics. . . . The business man has failed in politics as he has in citizenship.⁴

Here then is the message of Lincoln Steffens. He saw America's cities at the dawn of the twentieth century as shameful examples of popular misrule. Businessmen were the outstanding culprits, "big" businessmen who distorted democratic means for plutocratic ends, and "typical" businessmen who scorned politics only to fail as citizens. The entire system consisted of vicious circles of special privileges, fostered by civic neglect, and abetted by a popular hypocrisy which deplored politics and lauded business. Perhaps the most enduring portion of his indictment, when reduced to its particulars, was his all-too happy alliteration for Philadelphia as "corrupt and contented." Philadelphia was "not merely corrupt, but corrupted."⁵

Historians willing to take another look must confront the lack of any important history of Philadelphia for the period of which Steffens wrote.⁶ Also they ought to consider the working hy-

⁴ Lincoln Steffens, *The Shame of the Cities* (New York: Putnam, 1904), pp. 1-3, *et passim*; the paperback edition with an Introduction by Louis Joughin in *The American Century Series*, New York (1957) is the source for citations in this essay. See also Samuel C. McClure, *My Autobiography* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1914), pp. 240-243.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10. The original article was "Philadelphia: Corrupt and Contented," *McClure's Magazine*, XXI (July, 1903), 249-263.

⁶ For Philadelphia's history, see: J. Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, *History of Philadelphia, 1609-1884*, 3 vols., Philadelphia (1884); Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer, *Philadelphia: a History of the City and Its People—a Record of 225 Years*, 4 vols. (Philadelphia: S. J. Clarke, 1912); John F. Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania . . .* 3 vols., Philadelphia (1884-1887); John Russell Young, ed., *Memorial History of the City of Philadelphia from Its First Settlement to the Year 1895*, 2 vols., New York (1895, 1898); Joseph Jackson, *Encyclopaedia of Philadelphia*, 4 vols. (Harrisburg: The National Historical Association, 1931-1933); Herman LeRoy

pothesis which emerged in Steffens's outlook, while he moved about from city to city. He began to be convinced, he tells in his *Autobiography*, that the age of a city afforded a positive correlation with its hopelessness. Conversely his colleagues on the magazine, he believed, harbored the opposing idea that America's municipal corruption was the worst in the world simply because of this nation's youthfulness. Maturity would eventually bring improvements and social progress, they thought. Instead Steffens was convinced that, with the greater and greater passage of time, the corrupting influences of urban life became cemented into a city's everlasting foundations. "England was our fate, not our hope," he avowed, because of the older country's accumulated handicaps of advanced age. Here he reflected a point-blank disagreement with James Bryce and E. L. Godkin, both of whom anticipated America's urban future optimistically once the current era of crude adolescence reached its end.⁷ Admittedly these are the autobiographical recollections of that Steffens who after 1920 became convinced of the futility of liberal reforms, and of the historic truthfulness of the Russian experiment under Lenin and Stalin.

Yet this pessimistic anticipation of worse things due to come serves to explain Steffens's assertion that Philadelphia was not merely corrupt, but corrupted irretrievably into a contented euphoria, a condition which approximated senility for an entire city. It explains also his wish to push on from Philadelphia to

Collins and Wilfred Jordan, *Philadelphia: a Story of Progress*, 4 vols. (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1941); Edward P. Allinson and Boies Penrose, *Philadelphia, 1681-1887: a History of Municipal Development* (Baltimore, 1887); George Morgan, *The City of Firsts, Being a Complete History of the City of Philadelphia . . .* (Philadelphia: Historical Publication Society, 1926).

The pioneer general study, and still valuable, is Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Rise of the City, 1878-1898* (*A History of American Life*, Vol. X, New York: Macmillan, 1933).

For up-to-date background and bibliography, see: Blake McKelvey, *The Urbanization of America, 1860-1915* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963). See also: Blake McKelvey, "American Urban History Today," *American Historical Review*, LVII (July, 1952), 919-929; Eric Lampard, "The Study of Urbanization," *American Historical Review*, LXVII (October, 1961), 49-61; William A. Robson, *Great Cities of the World* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), pp. 25-105; Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), pp. 410-524; Constance McL. Green, *American Cities in the Growth of the Nation* (New York: J. DeGraff, 1957).

⁷ Steffens, *Autobiography*, I, 422.

Boston, where seniority alone presumably would elevate the Hub City to Steffens's primary rank of corruption. It does not explain, however, his comparatively gentle treatment of New York City, unless he ignored the fact that Father Knickerbocker's metropolis was more ancient than Billy Penn's Philadelphia, an oversight which seems unlikely.

At any rate, we need now to know what were Philadelphia's characteristics and conditions of life in 1900 or thereabouts. We must also inquire where "the Philadelphia story" fits into the historic experience of the cities of the United States. From among the myriad items of information obtainable, certain categories stand out as particularly useful for an analysis of Philadelphia's affairs at the beginning of the present century.

First, there is the subject of modern Philadelphia's political dimensions. Until the middle of the past century, the territory of the county of Philadelphia was under the control of approximately thirty municipal corporations of varying areas and populations. Turbulent inter-neighborhood rivalries and clashes between ethnic groups erupted repeatedly, with the volunteer fire companies mixed up conspicuously in these fracas. Then, in 1854 the "Consolidation Act" created "The City of Philadelphia," largely as it is today, but it continued the county of Philadelphia as one of Pennsylvania's counties, the territory involved possessing a perplexing duality thereafter as the county of Philadelphia and also as the city of Philadelphia.⁸ It seems almost needless to point out that conflicts arising between Philadelphia's overlapped jurisdictions, and politically as between the offices of the city's mayor, councilmen, and ward leaders on the one hand, and the county's sheriff, courts, and assessors on the other, have provided a continuing theme for the Quaker City's political life and its corruptions into the present day.

Second, there is the story of Philadelphia's rapid population growth during the second half of the nineteenth century, and the flight into suburban areas which was stimulated by industrial, demographic, and technological pressures or innovations. The census for Philadelphia in round figures reached upward to 675,000 persons in 1870 after expanding nearly twenty per cent during

⁸ Scharf and Westcott, *History of Philadelphia*, III, 1703; Eli K. Price, *The History of the Consolidation of the City of Philadelphia*, Philadelphia (1873), p. 82 *et passim*.

the decade preceding, then increased to 850,000 in 1880, and in 1890 to 1,050,000. By 1900 Philadelphia's population approximated 1,300,000, and then rose to 1,550,000 by 1910—a tripling of the total of fifty years before.⁹ Yet no full notion of the city's enlarging magnitude can be comprehended without an examination of growths taking place simultaneously in adjoining territory. As Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer observed at the close of the new century's first decade:

The lines of settlement have been extended far outside the limits of the county, along the arteries of cheap and rapid passenger transportation. Camden and the trains of New Jersey pour their plenty into Philadelphia each morning and receive it back again at night. On the main line of the Pennsylvania Railroad, north and south and west on all the railway lines, old towns have increased in size and new ones have appeared.¹⁰

With some qualifications suited to local circumstances, Philadelphia's experience of internal growth and its expansion beyond the legally measured municipal limits was typical of many older cities. Sam B. Warner, Jr., has aptly summarized the reasons for America's suburban trends in his recent study of Boston's growth:

The physical deterioration of old neighborhoods, the crowding of factory, shop, and tenement in the old central city, the unceasing flow of foreigners with ever new languages and habits—these negative pressures tended to drive the middle class from the city. The new technology . . . enabled these families to move out from the old city boundaries into an expanded area of vacant and lightly settled land. In this new land the rural ideal, by its emphasis on the pleasures of private family life, on the security of a small community setting, and on the enjoyment of natural surroundings, encouraged the middle class to build a wholly new residential environment: the modern suburb.¹¹

Nor was this novel suburban sprawl solely a residential phenom-

⁹ Oberholtzer, *Philadelphia*, II, 403-404, 420-421.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 420-421.

¹¹ Sam B. Warner, Jr., *Streetcar Suburbs: the Process of Growth in Boston, 1870-1900* (Publications of the Joint Center for Urban Studies of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 14.

enon, as the rising industrial importance of Camden, Norristown, and the Delaware's downriver communities including Chester and Wilmington attested. "It was the metropolitan district, combining the output of urban and suburban factories," Black McKelvey has demonstrated in his study *The Urbanization of America*, "that best reflected the cumulative advance of the American economy."¹² Philadelphia's growth by 1900, like that of numerous cities, was crowding the older quarters, consuming the open spaces, and exploding beyond the legal boundaries, with a significance that must still be further explored.

Hence the *third* category of relevant information consists of politics, Philadelphia politics, Pennsylvania politics, even national politics. Lincoln Steffens himself led the way. "My theory now," he described his turn from the shamefulness of the cities to the corruptions of state governments, "was that the state was the unit of action for good or evil."¹³ In Pittsburgh he had been induced to believe that: "The political business ring which ran the city and linked up with the Matt Quay ring which ran the state belonged to and protected the Pennsylvania Railway." The "trails of evidence" uncovered for him by local individuals "often ran off by way of Harrisburg, the capital city of Pennsylvania, to Philadelphia, the metropolis."¹⁴

The central feature of Pennsylvania's politics after the Civil War was the Republican party's domination of the commonwealth. The Republicans won their ascendancy during the war years, and were able for a long time thereafter to exploit that fact. Also Pennsylvania in general endorsed tariff protectionism, and her business community grew attached to the party which elevated this doctrine into a high principle of national wisdom. Bryan's free-silver heresy sharply focused the images of the two major parties held by businessmen and middle-class voters.¹⁵ A clear choice was afforded between the patriotic, prudent, and sane Republicans and the once treasonable and always dangerous Democrats. The Union League,

¹² McKelvey, *The Urbanization of America*, p. 236.

¹³ Steffens, *Autobiography*, II, 443.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 399, 406.

¹⁵ James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, third edition (New York: Macmillan, 1906), II, 404-405; Wayland Fuller Dunaway, *A History of Pennsylvania* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1935), pp. 524-525, 594-597, *et passim*.

the citadel of stalwart Republicanism, did nothing to dispel these illusions.

Moreover Pennsylvania's Republican party leadership exploited its opportunities to the hilt. An extraordinary dynasty of bosses held sway. Beginning with the election of Simon Cameron to the United States Senate in 1866, and continuing with his son Donald Cameron, Matthew S. Quay, and until the death of Boies Penrose in 1921, Pennsylvania was ruled by these bosses through the Republican party.

Able, adroit, masterful, and unscrupulous [Professor Dunaway once described them], they headed the majority party, which they kept subservient to their domination; controlling federal, state, and local patronage and possessing always a generous campaign fund, their power was supreme. . . . Except for the brief intervals when insurgency raised its head in partial triumph, this powerful political machine proved to be an effective steam roller which regularly flattened out all opposition with thoroughness and dispatch.¹⁶

The opposition grew enfeebled, particularly in Philadelphia where businessmen joined ranks to maintain tariff protection above all other considerations. In addition their own tendency toward removal to the suburbs outside Philadelphia's political arena, where the city's votes were cast and counted, constituted a self-imposed process of exile, which deprived the city of many of its leading citizens and of that class of men who in earlier times had been responsible for a stewardship over civic affairs. The balance of power in the city tipped into the hands of corruptible masses of impecunious immigrant, Negro, and older-stock voters, who so desperately needed whatever favors the party bosses dispensed that they delivered their sovereign votes as directed. Meanwhile the hapless Democrats became subservient to the majority party for undercover favors and crumbs of patronage.¹⁷

The *fourth*, and final, category embodies the history of Philadelphia's corruption, a record noticeably similar in many respects to that of several American cities.

In 1889, James Bryce's *The American Commonwealth* described

¹⁶ Dunaway, *History of Pennsylvania*, pp. 524-525.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 594-597; Bryce, *American Commonwealth*, II, 404-424.

in detail how it had come about that all of the municipal departments obeyed James McManes, who at that time was "the recognized Boss of Philadelphia." McManes and his confederates worked their stranglehold through the municipally-owned gas supply. Their tentacles reached out to control the other municipal offices and officeholders, the police, the city councils, and often the mayors as well. They also obtained control over the principal street tramway company. Thus McManes and his cohorts, as Bryce observed, "became not merely indispensable to the Republican party in the city, but in fact its chiefs." "Jim" McManes commanded the votes of thousands of municipal and public service employees, and he also enlisted their off-duty energies in unrelenting electioneering to round up additional thousands. Even the officials of the United States Government in the customs-house and post office were coerced into "a dependent alliance" with Philadelphia's political chieftains, whose "support was so valuable to the leaders in Federal politics that it had to be purchased by giving them their way in city affairs."¹⁸

Against this knavish state of affairs, successive reform movements raged and struggled. The state legislature afforded scant help, as is not surprising. Pennsylvania's legislature was notoriously corrupt, having mortgaged itself early to the railway, coal, petroleum, and manufacturing interests of the state. "The Standard [Oil Company] has done everything with the legislature of Pennsylvania," Henry Demarest Lloyd avowed, "except refine it." In addition the legislature was responsive to the coercive pressures which were applied by the political machines and their bosses, the state's Republican machine and also Philadelphia's.¹⁹

Nevertheless reformers scored some modest gains over the years, or at any rate improvements and achievements of a positive nature did take place. The spectacular centennial celebration of 1876 and the almost forgotten, though very large, centennial celebration of 1887, nurtured and preserved a core of civic pride and performance. So also did the development of Philadelphia's magnificent public parks and parkways, and even the slow graft-ridden

¹⁸ Bryce, *American Commonwealth*, II, 406-410; Oberholtzer, *Philadelphia*, II, 416-417.

¹⁹ Bryce, *American Commonwealth*, II, 412-413; Dunaway, *History of Pennsylvania*, pp. 524-597; Henry Demarest Lloyd, "Story of a Great Monopoly," *Atlantic Monthly*, XLVII (March, 1881), 322.

erection of City Hall which was capped at long last by Alexander Calder's gigantic statue of William Penn. Meanwhile, reformers continued to toil and spin. Beginning in 1871 with the Citizens' Municipal Reform Association and bearing fruit in 1887 from the efforts of Governor Robert E. Pattison and the Committee of One Hundred, a unique blend of an elite group in the Democratic party and the generally "wholesome power" of civic-minded persons, the so-called "Bullitt Charter" took effect for Philadelphia to provide for a strong and, hopefully, independent mayor. The sad truth, however, was that the party machinery provided the mayoralty candidates for a long time thereafter, with little relaxation of bossism's grip on the city. Not until the administration of Mayor Rudolph Blankenburg (1911-1915) did Philadelphia experience forthrightly honest leadership. Even then, the domination of Pennsylvania by its statewide machine was scarcely dented.²⁰

Therefore, in major insights, Lincoln Steffens was correct about Philadelphia. The city was a corrupted municipality in 1903. In varying degrees it had been corrupt ever since the Civil War, and perhaps even before then. Both the self-serving activities and the irresponsible negligence of businessmen had contributed to this state of affairs, as Steffens claimed.

If Philadelphia's record was outstandingly bad, the main causes appear to have originated neither with the contentment of its citizens nor with the city's greater age. Philadelphia's troubles, typical enough in themselves, were aggravated by Pennsylvania's unique combination of one-party rule and protectionist politics. Pennsylvania's hierarchy of entrenched Republican party bosses, United States Senators all of them, dominated the state for three-quarters of a century. Philadelphia's bosses and their compliant voters supported the state's machine, which nourished and sustained them in turn. Against so entrenched an establishment, reformers tilted almost in vain. Their modest achievements came only when they gained a momentary ascendancy at the state level, and eventually when the general tone of local politics improved overall. The state, not the city was the effective unit for good or evil, as Lincoln Steffens himself quickly realized.

Any evaluation of Lincoln Steffens and his story of Philadel-

²⁰ Bryce, *American Commonwealth*, II, 413-421; Oberholtzer, *Philadelphia*, II, 411-419, 426-439; Lucretia L. Blankenburg, *The Blankenburgs of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston, 1928), pp. v-viii, 1-95.

phia's municipal corruption would have to affirm that he was indeed right, though not for all, nor for enough of, the right reasons. His reputation for originality and thoroughness seems vastly overrated, when his work is contrasted with what James Bryce and local reformers had been saying all along. He overlooked too many dynamic trends and popular currents in American life. Especially did he underplay the importance of state and national politics for municipal affairs. However his flair for expressing the mood of popular indignation against the excesses of business and democracy's shortcomings was unequalled. He was unsurpassed in his ability to sum up in a few words for his countrymen what it was they had discovered to be unspeakably odious in their midst. Philadelphia was more restless and turbulent than it was content. But God knows it was corrupt, and Lincoln Steffens shouted this fact unforgettably once and for all to hear—and to be ashamed that this was so!