

## Politics in the Gilded Age

### BIOGRAPHY READING

#### *Thomas Nast*

*Thomas Nast is regarded as the father of American political cartooning. Through his cartoons, Nast chronicled and influenced the course of U.S. history in the late 1800s. Nast's influence lingers today in political symbols he popularized, including the donkey for the Democratic Party and the elephant for the Republican Party.*

Thomas Nast was born in Landau, Bavaria, in 1840. He moved to the United States with his family in 1846 and attended a New York City public school. Nast was not a particularly adept student, but found an interest in drawing, prompting him to transfer to an art school six years later. At the age of fifteen, Nast quit school to find work in order to help support his family. He found a job as an illustrator for *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, where he drew his first cartoon attacking political corruption.

In 1862 Nast began working as a staff artist for *Harper's Weekly*, a popular magazine. He visited Civil War battlefields and created on-the-scene sketches. His drawings and cartoons stirred up northern patriotism, gained public support for the northern cause, and brought Nast national recognition.

In subsequent years, Nast became an influ-

ential political commentator. He published cartoons exposing the corruption of a group of Democratic politicians known as Tammany Hall, which Nast represented as a tiger. The head of this political machine, William "Boss" Tweed, swindled millions of dollars from New York City's government. Nast's cartoons helped depose Tweed, who was convicted and sentenced in 1873. Nast's cartoons also contributed to the defeat of Horace Greeley in the 1872 presidential campaign.

Nast's growing popularity contributed to a threefold increase in the circulation of *Harper's Weekly*. In the 1860s, during his time with *Harper's Weekly*, Nast sketched the popular image of Santa Claus in addition to drawing many political cartoons. After 1880, *Harper's* became more conservative and published Nast's work less frequently, causing Nast to leave the magazine in 1886.

Although Nast had brought in a substantial income, he began to lose money in failed business investments, including a magazine of his own. Nast turned to oil painting, but was unable to support his family and pay off his debts. He was reaching a point of desperation when President Theodore Roosevelt asked him to be the Consul General to Ecuador. Nast accepted the position. In 1902, less than six months after arriving in Ecuador, Nast contracted yellow fever and died at the age of 62.

**■ UNDERSTANDING WHAT YOU READ** After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions in the space provided.

1. What effects did Thomas Nast's Civil War drawings have at the time?

---



---

2. How did Nast influence New York City politics in the late 1800s?

---

---

3. How is Thomas Nast's influence still felt today?

---

---

4. Why are political cartoons often such an effective tool in influencing public opinion?

---

---

### ACTIVITY

Find several political cartoons in newspapers or magazines. For each cartoon, write a brief caption identifying its intended effect on public opinion.

### ACTIVITY

Students' responses will vary, but should reflect an understanding of the selection.

### BIOGRAPHY

1. He educated himself through personal studies and traveling throughout Europe studying park design and administration.
2. He designed a number of great city parks, park systems, and public grounds with a focus on beautiful landscaping.
3. He believed that public parks should be places where people could be restored by nature.
4. Possible answer: He might suggest that the inner cities could be made more attractive by creating beautiful parks and green space.

### ACTIVITY

Students' park sketches and descriptions will vary.

## CHAPTER 17

### LITERATURE

1. He wrote that corruption comes from the fact that there is no one left over in a middle-class organization of business to watch the politician.
2. Possible answer: The nickname makes him sound unimportant and insubstantial.
3. He thought members of the electorate were tough, base, and coarse. He might find it difficult to put their interests first.
4. They have no ideas, but they do have votes. They are capable of violence.
5. He is a straight man, seemingly likable and trustworthy. He follows his own ideas of right and wrong. He is kind to his people.
6. He helps them when they are in trouble. He finds jobs for them and serves as an intermediary for them in the social structure. He protects wives and children. All of these helpful actions may be seen as political corruption because he does these things in return for their votes.

### ACTIVITY

Advertisements will vary, but should stress the importance of eliminating corruption in the political arena.

### PRIMARY SOURCE

1. The nation is on the verge of moral, political, and economic ruin.
2. There is corruption in government and law, voters are bribed or intimidated, public opinion is silenced, business is affected, and the land is concentrated in the hands of the capitalists.
3. They are too involved in their battle for power to take into account the needs of the people.
4. They focus on the tariff issue to the exclusion of other important concerns.
5. The goal of the Populists was to restore government to the hands of the common people, where it originated.
6. Possible answer: The Democrats and Republicans came to realize the importance of the issues supported by the Populists, adopting them as their own in future party platforms.

### ACTIVITY

Platforms should reflect an understanding of the Populist preamble.

### BIOGRAPHY

1. They aroused northern patriotism and increased public support for the North.
2. His cartoons brought about the downfall of the corrupt political machine of William "Boss" Tweed.
3. His symbols for the Democratic and Republican parties are still used today, and his conception of Santa Claus is still popular.
4. Possible answer: They can portray the heart of an issue simply and directly.

### ACTIVITY

Students' captions should reflect a clear understanding of the intended message of each cartoon.