Do you ever worry about air pollution or about dishonest politicians? Well, so did people in the 19th century.

Just to reassure you—most politicians are honest and most air is clean. But that is no reason to relax. There are people around who will mess up the world if we let them.

One of the worst, in the years after the Civil War, was a man named William Marcy Tweed. He was called “Boss” Tweed and he ran New York City. New York had problems—big problems—especially problems of air pollution and traffic congestion. Some 700,000 people lived in New York, most of them squeezed into a small area near the tip of Manhattan island. Much of the city’s business took place around a famous street called Broadway. Trying to walk or take a horse-drawn bus down Broadway was a nightmare. There were so many people it sometimes took an hour just to move a few yards. And talk about pollution—whew—hold your nose while I tell you about it.

New York was home to more than 100,000 horses. Now, a healthy horse dumps a whole lot of manure each day. Imagine all that smelly manure spread around by wheels and feet. When the manure dries, it turns into powder that blows in your face and goes up your nostrils. But that isn’t the worst of it. In the 19th century, people and businesses could burn anything they wanted. Mostly that was coal, which puts black fumes in the air. Even worse, Standard Oil had a New York refinery. Oil refineries, without controls, give off terrible, noxious fumes. That oil refinery was a big polluter. Hold on, that’s not all. When Boss Tweed controlled New York there wasn’t much in the way of sanitary services. So people often dumped their garbage in the streets. Garbage smells—especially in August. Are you choking? Well, I still haven’t mentioned the pigs. Pigs ran about eating garbage and leaving their own smells and dumpings. And then there were flies, and disease. But you may have heard enough.

There you are in the middle of Broadway, and you want to get away. You climb on a horse-drawn bus. It sways back and forth so violently that some passengers get seasick. You try walking. But there are no street lights (they haven’t been invented yet). Horses, people, buses, and carriages are all pushing and shoving on Broadway. Pedestrians often get killed in traffic accidents. Have you had enough of the good old days? So had a lot of people in the 19th century. The politicians said that soot in the air was a sign of modern progress, but most people were beginning to gasp for fresh air.

Fresh air was the last thing that Boss Tweed cared about. He was a scoundrel—a real bad guy who controlled most of the city’s jobs and services. He used his power to get money for himself. He bribed others and forced them to do as he wished. Here is an example of the way he worked. A new city courthouse was to be built; Boss Tweed became the contractor and charged the city three or four times what the building actually cost. He put the difference in his pocket. Then he filled the building with $50 sofas and charged the city $5,000 for each. How did he get away with that? Well, he was charming—in a scoundrelly way—so he fooled people. Many citizens didn’t realize he was stealing from them. And because he was so powerful, those who did know were afraid to do anything about it.

**Political Machines**

**And**

**The Boss**
Machinery of Government

Who's the Boss?

William Marcy Tweed was called "Boss" because that was exactly what he was: the boss. He wasn't elected to run New York, but he did it anyway. He was actually a city alderman. (An alderman is a member of a city legislative body.) He was never mayor. It didn't matter. He controlled the New York State Democratic Party and the Tammany Hall political machine.

Tweed put graft (getting dishonest money) on a businesslike basis. All city contracts were padded by a fixed amount, which went to Tweed and his cronies. At the Tammany clubhouse, he slept in a bed with blue silk sheets. He sometimes entertained on his yacht, the [William M. Tweed], which had a crew of 12, fancy furniture, and Oriental rugs. When Tweed went to jail, he was asked his occupation. He said, "Statesman."

"Who took the money?" is the question. "HE DIDI!" says everybody. Boss Tweed (the fat man with the huge nose) made the city pay $1.8 million for plastering one building—guess who the surplus came back to?

There were some things the Founding Fathers hadn't expected. Political parties were one. Political machines were another. The machines were unofficial governments that existed alongside the real city governments; each had its own functions. In New York, Tammany was the stronger one. Tammany Hall was the most powerful of all the urban political machines (machines thrived in many 19th-century cities). Insiders had their own name for Tammany; it was "the Tiger." That beast did some good—actually quite a bit of good—especially for immigrants who needed help getting started in America—but it was all at a price.

Tammany began as a kind of benevolent club in 1789, designed to help the poor. Mostly it was a dress-up society where men donned Indian garb, called themselves "sachem" or "braves," held parades, and drank whiskey. But when one of its early leaders, William Mooney, stole $4,000, he set the Tiger to thieving. Tammany paid people to vote—sometimes a dozen times each. And bribery? Well, the Tiger bribed the police, the elected officials, anyone who would take money. But eventually, when the immigrant flow slowed down and reformers closed in, the Tiger lost its roar. Do you hear people complain about politics today? Tell them to study some history.
Political Machines and The Boss
Questions

Read the paper and use the information and cartoons to answer the questions.

1. Who was the “Boss” of New York City after the Civil War?

2. On page two under “Machinery of Government” a definition of political machines is given. What is it?

3. Look at Thomas Nast’s cartoon of Boss Tweed in the top left corner. What does he try to show was central to Tweed’s whole life, personality, and power? How does he depict this?

4. Tammany Hall was the name of the political machine over which Tweed was “Boss”. Look at the cartoon showing “Tammany Street ‘Cleaners’”. Does the cartoonist think The machine was effective in providing city services?

5. How did Tweed accumulate money for himself? Use the City Courthouse as evidence.

6. What is graft?

7. Who were helped by Tammany Hall and other machines?

8. Name some ways that Tammany Hall corrupted the political process (elections, etc) and justice system.

9. What caused “the Tiger” (Tammany Hall) to weaken and lose control?