The late 19th century witnessed the birth of modern America. It saw the closing of the Western frontier. Between 1865 and the 1890s, Americans settled 430 million acres in the Far West – more land than during the preceding 250 years of American history. But to open lands west of the Mississippi River to white settlers, the Plains Indians were pushed in a series of Indian wars onto restricted reservations.

This period also witnessed the creation of a modern industrial economy. A national transportation and communication network was created, the corporation became the dominant form of business organization, and a managerial revolution transformed business operations. By the beginning of the twentieth century, per capita income and industrial production in the United States exceeded that of any other country except Britain. Long hours and hazardous working conditions, led many workers to attempt to form labor unions despite strong opposition from industrialists and the courts.

An era of intense political partisanship, the Gilded Age was also an era of reform. The Civil Service Act sought to curb government corruption by requiring applicants for certain governmental jobs to take a competitive examination. The Interstate Commerce Act sought to end discrimination by railroads against small shippers and the Sherman Antitrust Act outlawed business monopolies.

These years also saw the rise of the Populist crusade. Burdened by heavy debts and falling farm prices, many farmers joined the Populist party, which called for an increase in the amount of money in circulation, government assistance to help farmers repay loans, tariff reductions, and a graduated income tax.

Mark Twain called the late nineteenth century the "Gilded Age." By this, he meant that the period was glittering on the surface but corrupt underneath. In the popular view, the late nineteenth century was a period of greed and guile: of rapacious Robber Barons, unscrupulous speculators, and corporate buccaneers, of shady business practices, scandal-plagued politics, and vulgar display.

It is easy to caricature the Gilded Age as an era of corruption, conspicuous consumption, and unfettered capitalism. But it is more useful to think of this as modern America’s formative period, when an agrarian society of small producers was transformed into an urban society dominated by industrial corporations.

The Gilded Age (c.1870 to 1900) was sandwiched between the Civil War and the Progressive Era, two periods in which politics “really mattered.” In contrast, the intervening decades seem to offer only lessons in disillusionment and cynicism. The end of Reconstruction left a sorry mess in the South; the Homestead Act and railroad grants culminated in a Western bust, followed by a massive depression in the 1890s that failed to evoke a New Deal. The Populist movement collapsed, and Republicans’ crowning achievements were a high tariff and maintenance of the gold standard.

There are, however, other ways to teach Gilded-Age politics, perhaps even to recapture its excitement, while at the same time teaching social history. Political cartoons flourished in these years, partly because of new technologies of mass circulation but also because of the intensity—even viciousness—of partisan debate. Such cartoons reflected the society that produced them, with references ranging from the Bible to the nationwide bicycle craze. They vividly represent the prejudices of the white, Protestant, middle-class majority, and of regional and partisan factions within that majority. The following analyses of cartoons from an article entitled “The Corrupting of New York City” by Peter Baida and those found in The American Pageant, Chapters 23 & 24 reveal key issues at stake during this era.

FYI ➔ Significant Political Cartoonists of the Gilded Age

- Thomas Nast of *Harpers Weekly***
- Joseph Keppler of *Puck*
- Frank Beard of *The Ram’s Horn*
- Eugene Zimmerman of *Judge*
- Grant Hamilton, Bernhard Gilliam, James Wales, W.A. Rogers, & Frederick Opper

**Assignment:** As you analyze the political cartoons on the following pages, read the commentary on each. Answer the following prompt in a mini-DBQ (a paragraph). “To what extent did the political cartoons of the Gilded Age expose the corruption of the era?” Cite at least 4 of the cartoons in your response.
Cartoons for analysis

“Boss Tweed as Moneybag” (Doc A): one of Thomas Nast’s searing renderings of the most famous of all corrupt politicians.

“The Tammany Tiger” (Doc B): mauls the principles of the Republic, while Tweed as Caesar watches the arena unmoved. In fact, by the time Thomas Nast’s cartoon appeared in 1871, Tweed’s imperium was dissolving, and the cartoonists had done a great deal to propel the Boss toward destruction. Even today, when most political cartoons from a century ago seem bland and quaint, Nast’s still have plenty of sting to them. And if effectiveness is a gauge of political cartooning, they have never been surpassed. They came volleying out from the pages of Harper’s Weekly al through the summer and fall of 1871, and in the end they brought their target down.

“The President of the United States and his Cabinet” (Doc C): Beneath Tweed’s ample shadow, an imaginary President of the United States flourishes, while all around the Boss’s henchmen enjoy their roles in the cabinet.

“Under the Thumb” (Doc E): Tweed holds New York under his thumb while happy New Jersey – never, in fact, the most innocent of states – enjoys the blessing of Tammany-free government. The caption reads, “What are you going to do about it?” – a phrase of Tweed’s that Nast never let go of.

Famous Words of William “Boss” Tweed

“My constituents don’t know how to read, but they can’t help seeing them damned pictures.”
“Tweed stands guard at the ballot box” (Doc F): and in the caption Nast once again hammered home his favorite line: “As long as I count the votes, what are you going to do about it? Say?”

“New York City’s Courthouse” (Doc G): Tweed’s fabulous courthouse, the supreme monument to civic jobbery. It is here that Tweed truly stole from the public funds and out the money into his own coffers.

“Tammany Ring” (Doc H): One of Nast’s most effective cartoons shows each member of the Ring answering the question “Who stole the people’s money?”

“Let us Prey” (Doc I): The ultimate Nast judgment, and perhaps the best-known American political cartoon, has Tweed and his fellow vultures clinging anxiously to their storm-lashed perch.

“Bribery & Corruption” (Doc J): Nast’s summation shows Tweed with time to ponder what was done about it.
"Honest Graft and Dishonest Graft" (Doc K):

I've told you how I got rich by honest graft. Now, let me tell you that most politicians who are accused of robbin' the city get rich the same way.

They didn't steal a dollar from the city treasury. They just seen their opportunities and took them. That is why, when a reform administration comes in and spends a half million dollars in tryin' to find the public robberies they talked about in the campaign, they don't find them.

The books are always all right. The money in the city treasury is all right. Everything is all right. All they can show is that the Tammany heads of departments looked after their friends, within the law, and gave them what opportunities they could to make honest graft. Now, let me tell you that's never goin' to hurt Tammany with the people. Every good man looks after his friends, and any man who doesn't isn't likely to be popular. If I have a good thing to hand out in private life, I give it to a friend. Why shouldn't X do the same in public life?

Another kind of honest graft. Tammany has raised a good many salaries. There was an awful howl by the reformers, but don't you know that Tammany gains ten votes for everyone it lost by salary raisin'? The Wall Street banker thinks it shameful to raise a department clerk's salary from $1500 to $1800 a year, but every man who draws a salary himself says: "That's all right. I wish it was me." And he feels very much like votin' the Tammany ticket on election day, just out of sympathy.

Tammany was beat in 1901 because the people were deceived into believin' that it worked dishonest graft. They didn't draw a distinction between dishonest and honest graft, but they saw that some Tammany men grew rich, and supposed they had been robbin' the city treasury or levyin' blackmail on disorderly houses, or workin' in with the gamblers and lawbreakers.

As a matter of policy, if nothing else, why should the Tammany leaders go into such dirty business, when there is so much honest graft lyin' around when they are in power? Did you ever consider that? Now, in conclusion, I want to say that I don't own a dishonest dollar.

If my worst enemy was given the job of writin' my epitaph when I'm gone, he couldn't do more than write:” George W. Plunkitt. He Seen His Opportunities, and He Took 'Em."

Senator George Washington Plunkitt of Tammany Hall as recorded by William L. Riordon, 1905

(Doc L): This is a political cartoon from Paul Conrad in the Los Angeles Times from September 30th, 1982. To what Thomas Nast political cartoon does this allude?