

Exit the Boss, Enter the Leader

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The old-time political chieftain, whose word was law, has become almost extinct
In his place has arisen a new type who can lead, but not command.

By CABELL PHILLIPS

WASHINGTON.

AS Senator Estes Kefauver beats the bushes in the hinterlands seeking support for the Democratic nomination, he complains that apparently everybody is for him "except the Bosses." He thus conjures up a familiar caricature in American folklore of a handful of beefy, cigar-smoking, diamond-studded, Irish Machiavellis who, as masters of large and inert blocs of voters, control the political destiny of the nation.

The picture appears true to many, just as does the popular image of the Wall Street Banker with a dollar sign on his paunch, the Labor Agitator holding a sizzling bomb behind his back, or the browbeaten and threadbare figure of John Q. Public. Edwin O'Connor has just done a magnificent portrait of the breed in his best-selling novel, "The Last Hurrah," a portrait that bears a striking resemblance to the ineffable and indestructible Jim Curley of Boston. But the political Boss today is almost as mythical as any of these, as Senator Kefauver and every other practicing politician knows. He is a mirage, a gaudy memory out of a gaudy past, a species which time has rendered almost extinct.

THE vestigial Boss of today bears little resemblance to his ruthless, hard-nosed prototype. The power he once wielded has dissipated in many directions and into many new hands. He is a far less colorful and romantic and dominating figure and he is known by the uninspiring title of Leader. There's a world of difference between The Boss of old and The Leader of today, and in that difference lie some very signifi-

cant and encouraging facts about the evolution of American political life.

What it means, in essence, is that American voters, as a whole, have matured to the point where they have pretty largely taken their political destinies into their own hands. No longer can a Frank Hague proclaim, "I am the law in Jersey City," as he did in 1937, without running the risk of being laughed out of town. And the Grand Sachem of Tammany Hall, Carmine DeSapio, found to his chagrin not so long ago that, not only could he not assure a solid slate of delegates to the Democratic convention for New York's Gov. Averell Harriman, he couldn't even deliver his own Manhattan district!

Up to twenty-five years ago, every major city, and many entire states, were political duchies under the rule of individual tyrants or cliques. New York knew in succession such powerful rulers as "Boss" Tweed, "Honest John" Kelly, Dick Croker and "Judge" George M. Olvaney, who controlled Democratic politics in the city—and thereby the city itself—from the wigwam of Tammany Hall. Philadelphia knew the Vare brothers, Edwin and William, and, alternatively, Boies Penrose, whose Republican domains extended statewide. Chicago's Kelley-Nash machine, but recently dissolved, was the last in an almost unbroken succession of Boss-ruled political organizations which held Cook County in a firm Democratic grip.

TOM PENDERGAST, master of Kansas City for three decades, gave President Truman his start up the political ladder. "Boss" Edward Crump, perennial Mayor of Memphis, controlled the political life of western Tennessee for forty years. Frank Hague, overlord of Jersey City, was, in fact, "the law" there from 1917 to 1948. He died only three months

ago. Jim Curley, whose loyal Boston constituency kept him in office while he was serving a term in Federal prison, still lives, though he is no longer active.

BOSS rule began to emerge in the era of industrial expansion following the Civil War, when cities all up and down the eastern seaboard, and as far west as Chicago, became enormous concentrations of people living in relative poverty and virtual disfranchisement. Leaders appeared in them as naturally as flowers in a dung heap. Gaining power first in their own precincts—often by being the best street fighters in the gangs—they went on to dominate wards, then to run for minor offices or to form alliances with other leaders in other wards. The competitive struggle was prolonged and often brutal, but those who survived to come out on top were, almost without exception, men of superior shrewdness, human insight and intelligence.

Successful Boss rule was the perfection of minority rule. Often a Boss needed iron-clad control over no more than a single populous ward, or to have dependable infiltrators in a few key wards, or to have the whole-hearted allegiance of a particular religious or national minority, in order to gain the balance of power in city elections.

His technique was to keep a tight grip on the primary, seeing to it by whatever wiles and devices came to hand, that the right man—his man—got the nomination, and then turning his minions out in force to swamp the polls in the general election. He might even craftily split the opposition ticket by putting up an extra candidate as a decoy.

He was often abetted in these designs by the naiveté or the apathy of the "better element" who opposed him, usually people to whom the business of politics was but an occasional and distasteful digression. To the Boss and his henchmen, politics was an absorbing full-time career.

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The same tactics were just as applicable in state-wide contests. The highest office Frank Hague ever held was Mayor of Jersey City. But by his undisputed mastery of the city, and of Hudson County in which it lay, he could pile up such huge Democratic majorities that, coupled with the sprinkling of Democratic votes from elsewhere in the state, he could elect Governors almost at will, Democratic or Republican.

PATRONAGE and other forms of largesse were the glue that held the Boss's machine together. When a Boss became Mayor, for example, or what was more frequently the case, put his man in the Mayor's chair, hundreds and even thousands of jobs on the public payroll fell to his use. So, also, did the distribution of other, more substantial favors such as the awarding of public contracts and the purchase of supplies. And to a great extent he was the personal dispenser of public charity, seeing to it (with an appropriate regard for the publicity factor) that there were baskets for the deserving poor on Christmas, free distribution of coal in the tenement districts when the winters were hard, summer picnics for the slum children, and so on.

OFTEN the Boss entered an alliance with the local underworld whereby commercialized vice was tolerated in consideration of a split in the profits. And just as frequently, he might enter an alliance with the business interests for some mutually desirable quid pro quo. Reformers or other malcontents who tried to buck the system could be quietly yoked into submission. It is said of Boston's Curley that he once threatened to have the flood gate in a downtown bank opened if the bank didn't authorize a loan to the city within twenty-four hours.

Not all Bosses were crooked (though few of them died in poverty) nor were they by any means insensitive to the needs of good government—according to their lights. Most kept their cities or states in debt by extravagance, but they usually spent lavishly for parks, boulevards, school buildings and improved welfare services. The state of Louisiana is dotted today with many handsome public hospitals, the legacy of one of the most notorious Bosses of any age, Huey Long, the "Kingfish."

In their heyday, which covered roughly the period from 1890 to 1940, the Bosses could "deliver the vote" with the dependable precision of a Seth Thomas clock. And collectively, depending upon whether they were predominantly Re-

publican or Democratic at the time, they supplied the winning balance of power in every Presidential contest from McKinley through the first election of Franklin Roosevelt.

WHAT has happened to rob the Boss of his power and prestige?

The broad answer is the growing maturity of the American electorate. This is composed of a number of different elements.

(1) The tremendous decline in patronage has robbed the Boss of most of his purchasing power. In most cities and states the last twenty years have seen a rapid expansion in civil service and merit systems for public employes. Most jobs on the public payroll now require some demonstration of fitness, and tenure is protected by law. The Philadelphia City Hall used to abound with such well-paid dignitaries as Sink



Inspector and Assistant Superintendent of Manhole Covers. But no more.

(2) Systematic public welfare services have combined with growing prosperity to deprive the Boss of much of his power over the unfortunate. No longer do supplicants for free medical care, or a food basket, or the commitment of a destitute grandparent to the County Home line up, hat in hand, at the Boss' door each morning to pray his bounty. Moreover, many other governmental activities such as schools, parks, street construction, utilities, and the like have slipped from the Boss' control to that of statutory, professional administrators.

(3) In the last two decades organized labor has achieved a political awareness it never had before. It has turned from an exclusive preoccupation with the familiar "gut issues"—wages and working conditions—to exert itself in the fields of social and economic policy. Political pres-



sure has become as important an instrument to the labor leader as collective bargaining, and aggressive political thinking has struck down to the local union level. Unified labor's Committee on Political Education (COPE) will be, next to the two major party organizations themselves, the biggest spender in the 1956 campaign.

(4) The flight from the cities to the suburbs has bitten deeply into the concentrations of voter strength on which the Bosses used to depend. Moreover, this symbolizes both an economic and cultural emancipation of the ignorant and subservient lower classes who composed the broad base of the Boss' empire. The new middle class does not take meekly to being pushed around or being told what to do.

(5) Finally, a higher general level of education, and the improvement in mass communication which has come with better newspapers and with radio and television have produced a far more sophisticated and discriminating citizenry than the Boss is prepared to cope with. Politics is now a matter of general interest at almost every cultural level. More people than ever before recognize a personal stake in the modes of government and in the outcome of elections. It is impossible to deliver this kind of voter at the polls "like so many sacks of potatoes."

Thus, Boss Rule in American politics has about faded into a nostalgic limbo, and with it has gone a good deal of the corruption and the stifling of the democratic process which the Boss needed for survival. In its place has come a sort



"Boss" Tweed, by Thomas Nast.

of beneficent anarchy in which more and more citizens vote as they please, wearing no man's collar. The so-called Independents—voters who ignore party labels in picking their candidates—have been decisive in the last four national elections. They are becoming more and more of a factor in state and municipal contests as well. Dr. George Gallup now estimates that approximately 25 per cent of the electorate outside of the South puts itself in the independent column. Independency is the antithesis of Boss rule.

AS APR -- 1956 the Boss has faded out, the amateur in politics has leaped into the limelight. The first conspicuous manifestation of this trend came in 1940 when, seemingly out of nowhere, the Willkie groundswell rolled over the Republican National Convention at Philadelphia to snatch the carefully planned proceedings out of the hands of the professionals. Wendell Willkie was himself an amateur—who once had been a registered Democrat—and his campaign for the nomination was engineered by other amateurs, Oren Root, a lawyer, and Russell Davenport, a magazine editor. Their successful foray was made possible by their discovery of a new "secret weapon"—the citizens' clubs by which the great, dormant strength of the independent vote could be galvanized.

The demise of the Bosses has not, of course, left a power vacuum in its wake. There still are leaders at every level of the political structure through whom political power is focused. But with rare and steadily diminishing exceptions, they are not autocrats. On the whole, they are a su-

perior breed of politicians who have abandoned the crude thuggery of the past and have adapted themselves to the more sophisticated mores of their constituencies.

FEW of today's Leaders operate furtively behind the scenes. Their habitat is the goldfish bowl of public office which they have had to win and hold, not by wile but by good works. David Lawrence, the four-term Mayor of Pittsburgh, remains after twenty-five years one of the biggest Democratic wheels in the country, but he holds onto his job and his power by being a first-rate Mayor. Young Richard J. Daley, Chicago's new Mayor, was brought up in the old Kelley-Nash machine, and Cook County remains a safe Democratic stronghold under his dominion. But he is a reformer at heart rather than a Boss. None can deny the existence, even today, of a formidable "Dewey machine" in New York State; but Tom Dewey was an outstandingly capable Governor. Theodore R. McKeldin, Maryland's first two-term Republican Governor, not only is a top-ranking administrator but has succeeded in supplanting a generations-old Democratic oligarchy in his state with an efficient Republican organization of his own.

Today's leaders are still able to influence large blocs of voters even if they have to make do without the brass-knuckles and carnival trappings of their predecessors. Big-city Mayors, Governors or United States Senators, for example, who have natural leadership roles within their states, often influence the course of political affairs simply by the exercise of personal prestige.

By granting or withholding endorsement, they can frequently make or break a candidate's prospects. Mayor Daley, for example, clipped

But "organization support"—a euphemism for endorsement by the Leader or Leaders of a party—lacks the connotations of brute force. And it is not invincible, as Senator Kefauver so astonishingly demonstrated just recently in Minnesota.

Frank Skeffington, the hero of "The Last Hurrah!" is anything but a fictitious character. He is a faithful composite of scores of Bosses who have stridden across the political stage. But picturesque and lovable old pirate that he was, it is just as well that he died in the last chapter. For the sake of historical accuracy, there was really nothing else he could do.

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NEW LEADERS



CARMINE DE SAPIO, of Tammany, can't always be sure of his own district.

THE NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE
 APRIL 15, 1956



THEODORE McKELDIN has built an efficient Republican organization in Maryland.

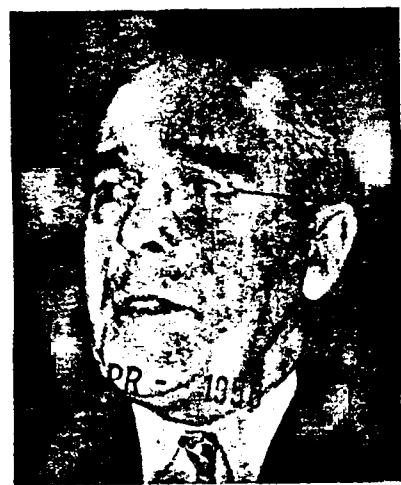


RICHARD DALEY, Chicago machine man, is more a reformer at heart than a Boss.

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the nascent ambitions of Stephen A. Mitchell, former Democratic national chairman, to run for Governor of Illinois this year simply by refusing, Nero-like, to give Mitchell the nod.



DAVID LAWRENCE, of Pittsburgh, keeps political power by being an effective Mayor.