CIVIL service reform in the post-Civil War decades was a tale of three cities—New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. It was in these cities that the earliest, most earnest, most numerous, and most consistent supporters of the merit system were found. While New York and Boston were more important centers of reform, the Philadelphia story forms an integral part of the civil service reform movement.

That movement did not get under way until Representative Thomas A. Jenckes of Rhode Island introduced his bill in December, 1865. The bill would have created a commission to institute open competitive examinations for selecting civil service appointees. The earliest support Jenckes received was from a Pennsylvanian—Hugh Burgess, a scientist of Royersford. Both Jenckes and Burgess had personal reasons for dissatisfaction with the American civil service. A constant annoyance was their failure to receive material sent to them through the mail. Burgess, who forwarded his foreign periodicals to Jenckes, complained of their frequent pilferage. "I duly receive my scientific periodicals," he wrote Jenckes in September, 1864, "but never the papers of general interest tho mailed in London by the same agent.... When do you bring in your Civil Service Bill. It is much needed in the Post Office." It was late 1865, however, before the bill was introduced.¹

The reasons why Jenckes delayed introducing his bill until after the Civil War and why civil service reform got underway at that time are complex. The impact of the Civil War upon the civil service was similar to its effect on the larger social order. The war accelerated developments already under way. The grow-

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¹ Congressional Globe, 39 Cong., 1 sess., 98; Burgess to Jenckes, Royers Ford, September 30, 1864, Jenckes Papers, Library of Congress.
CIVIL SERVICE REFORM MOVEMENT

ing bureaucracy swelled abnormally and the rotation of office-holders increased. Although the spoils system controlled more offices more completely than before, the stress of war exposed its deficiencies and stimulated interest in reform. In this way, the Civil War contributed both to the rise and to the fall of the spoils system. It was the war's legacy of Reconstruction, however, that played a greater though more subtle role in the movement for civil service reform.

Jenckes was a Radical and, although he clearly wished to improve the civil service, he seemed to time the introduction of his bill to confound President Johnson. Yet Jenckes's measure failed to be noticed throughout most of 1866. Even the future proponents of reform were more concerned with other aspects of the struggle between Johnson and the Radicals. Future reformers, however, came to realize that one of the most important pawns in that struggle was the civil service.

By December, 1866, Republicans were more receptive to civil service legislation. The report of the Jenckes bill at that time occasioned the beginning of a long association between Jenckes and Joseph George Rosengarten, a Philadelphia lawyer whose family was prominently engaged in manufacturing chemicals. Rosengarten was a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and had also studied in Europe, where he became interested in governmental administration. Prodded by Burgess, Rosengarten sent Jenckes an adaptation of an article on the Prussian civil service, which Jenckes incorporated into his forthcoming report. About this time, the Nation published an article by Rosengarten which stressed the "political evils" and the waste of taxpayers' money resulting from the spoils system and called for "prompt action and agitation . . . by all . . . who feel where the shoe pinches."2

After Jenckes spoke for his bill in January, 1867, Rosengarten, who had urged Philadelphia newspapermen to support the measure,

proudly reported, "The newspapers have given such a thorough report of your Bill and speech that the public have the 'Civil Service' well before them." Burgess was also enthusiastic. He told Jenckes that if he ever got his bill through he "would be the greatest patriot in the country."

Expectations for early passage of the Jenckes measure, however, soon ended. Thaddeus Stevens, the Radical leader of Congress, successfully moved to lay the Jenckes bill on the table. The bipartisan vote outlines an urban versus rural pattern. There is indication of correlation between distance from centers of commerce and decrease of interest in civil service reform. All voting representatives from Philadelphia and Pittsburgh supported the Jenckes bill. Of the remaining Pennsylvania representatives, only two favored the measure while ten registered opposition.

The Radicals split over Jenckes's measure because they found the Tenure of Office Act a more congenial method of curtailing Johnson's power over the civil service. The Jenckes bill went beyond their immediate requirements by curtailing congressional as well as executive control over patronage. Reformers themselves greeted the Tenure of Office Act as a reform measure but wished to couple it with the Jenckes bill to insure the "purification" of politics.

It is impossible to dissociate civil service reform from the Johnson-Radical struggle over Reconstruction. By 1867 that struggle had aroused interest in the civil service. A by-product of Reconstruction, civil service reform merely received the attention normally given a by-product. It could not steal headlines and enthral millions. Reconstruction thus simultaneously stimulated and stifled reform. In time, however, some of those whose interest was kindled would become convinced of the intrinsic worth of civil service reform and less certain of the value of Radical Reconstruction. These were the "best people" many of whom had joined the Republican party during the antislavery crusade and were recognized by the Lincoln administration. Their elimination from politics and the corresponding growth of corruption led to wide-

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2 Congressional Globe, 39 Cong., 2 sess., 837-841; Rosengarten to Jenckes, Philadelphia, January 31, 1867, and Burgess to Jenckes, Royers Ford, February 2, 1867, Jenckes Papers.

3 Congressional Globe, 39 Cong., 2 sess., 1036.

4 The Nation, IV, No. 84 (February 7, 1867), 101.
spread interest in civil service reform. Jenckes's supporters increased in numbers and power in 1867.

The concern of the "best people" over who would control the Republican party is illustrated by Henry C. Lea, eminent Philadelphia publisher, historian of the Inquisition, and an early reformer. Lea viewed the impeachment as a political not a judicial process and wanted to convict Johnson in order to gain his patronage. "After all," Lea explained, "the greatest danger to which our institutions are exposed is the scramble for office & . . . the passage of such a measure as Mr. Jenckes's Civil Service Bill would be the panacea for the greater portion of the evils under which we suffer, & which threaten to increase immeasurably in the future. . . ." After Johnson was acquitted, Lea lamented that control of the party would rest "more than ever in the hands of the 'war-horses.'" Lea associated impeachment and civil service reform, and his primary concern was not Reconstruction, but reformers' chances of controlling the Republican party.6

A shift in goals is perceptible. Instead of being a means of tying Johnson's hands and effecting Radical Reconstruction, civil service reform had become for some of its supporters a means of tying the politico's hands and effecting control of the Republican party. Not only would the Jenckes bill change the character of the civil service, it would also deprive the party war horses of patronage and power. The resulting vacuum could be filled by reformers and their peers. Reformers in 1868 counted on Grant to help carry out these plans. He, too, was a nonprofessional politician. Certainly he would back the Jenckes bill, and most certainly he would appoint respectable and cultured men to office.

Grant, however, disappointed reformers. By shutting the door to public service on the "respectable and cultured" members of society, he unwittingly converted many of them to civil service reform. If he had admitted them to office, their ardor for the Jenckes bill might have cooled.

In Philadelphia, Grant's actions led to organization. Even before Grant took office certain Philadelphians were promoting reform. Lea and Rosengarten in particular worked in close harmony with Jenckes. Even William D. ("Pig Iron") Kelley, the protectionist,

inflationist representative from Philadelphia, affirmed his support of the Jenckes bill and emphatically declared that competitive examinations “must be popularized!” By July, 1869, Philadelphia’s “leading citizens” were “thoroughly disgusted” with recent federal appointments. “Hundreds of the best citizens” were signing a petition, written by Lea, urging their congressmen to support the Jenckes bill or some similar measure. At this auspicious time, Henry Villard arrived in Philadelphia. Villard had covered the Lincoln-Douglas debates as a journalist and would in time make his mark in finance by completing the Northern Pacific Railroad. His current task, however, was building up the membership of the American Social Science Association, which worked for hard money, a revenue tariff, and civil service reform. Villard’s efforts were initially successful. The nucleus of the Philadelphia Association was Rosengarten, Lea, and James Miller McKim, an abolitionist founder of the Nation. With organization, Philadelphia reformers technically became a pressure group. Actually, the Philadelphia branch of the Social Science Association was not very effective. The Jenckes bill was not passed; nor were state and municipal politics cleaned up. Pennsylvania was beginning its half century of domination by the machine of the Camerons, of Quay, and of Penrose.  

On the national level, reformers did win a limited victory in 1871 with a Pennsylvanian playing a key role. Following a setback in the election of 1870, Grant changed his tactics and called for civil service reform. Congress, however, remained adamantly and enacted none of the four reform bills before it. Unity was needed before results could be achieved. After consultation, reform advocates agreed on a simple joint resolution empowering the President to appoint a commission which would prescribe civil service rules. The draft, written by Representative William H. Armstrong of Williamsport, Pennsylvania, was approved by Grant. In the clos-
ing moments of the lame duck session, the resolution was moved as a "rider" amendment to the civil appropriation bill. It was approved while spoilsmen gnashed their teeth and labeled its passage trickery.\(^9\)

The fruits of their limited victory proved more harmful to the cause of civil service reformers than had their earlier defeats. As the campaign of 1872 approached, many ardent reformers called for Grant's nomination in behalf of reform, but others equally ardent opposed it on the same grounds. After Greeley was nominated by the Liberal Republicans, reformers split into three bickering factions: Liberal Republicans who accepted Greeley, Liberal Republicans who refused to accept him and crawled back to Grant, and those who consistently supported Grant. It took reformers three years to compose their differences. By that time the civil service reform movement had reached its nadir. Grant had abandoned the species of reform attempted under the rider and in the eyes of many, reformers had been tried and found wanting.

The triumph of spoilsmen led reformers to organize anew. In February, 1875, Henry Adams called for a "consultation." Carl Schurz took an active part in its organization. Through his lyceum engagements he made many new acquaintances whom he wished to invite. In Philadelphia, he discovered "a nest of young men of excellent character and standing, who are willing and indeed eager to cooperate with us, in fact just the kind of men we want." From Pittsburgh, Schurz hopefully reported that a "great many people" wanted something done to "relieve them of the old choice of evils. We may," he wrote, "be able to accomplish more than we now anticipate."\(^10\)

Although the reformers' man Benjamin H. Bristow did not receive the 1876 Republican nomination, they were reasonably satisfied with the nomination of Rutherford B. Hayes. As soon as Hayes took office, Philadelphia reformers demanded the removal of both the Philadelphia collector and postmaster as a part of civil service reform. One correspondent concluded that "[a]s long as Don Cameron's nominees continue in office, political reform will be impossible in this City and State." Although Hayes attacked

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\(^10\) Schurz to Edwin Lawrence Godkin, New Brunswick, New Jersey, March 25, 1875, and Schurz to Godkin, Pittsburgh, March 27, 1875, Schurz Papers, Library of Congress.
Conkling's machine in New York City, he left the equally obnoxious Cameron machine in running order. Another Philadelphian, after reading that Hayes proposed an eight-year term of office as civil service reform, wrote the new Secretary of the Interior, Carl Schurz, in bitter disappointment, "... the country has asked for bread & you have given them a stone."11

In the spring of 1878, everyone was dissatisfied with the Hayes administration, which seemed to take two steps backward for every three-step advance. Wayne MacVeagh, a Philadelphia reformer, wrote that Hayes "is genuinely noble and true-hearted,—only slow and patient and half-blind. . . . It is enough to make one's heart break when he reflects what possibility of great glory was before us and to what distant future it seems to have receded." Yet, despite their early disappointment with Hayes, reformers were on the whole pleased with him by the end of his administration and would have supported him again. But Hayes had promised to serve only one term.12

Independents once more took steps to organize. By early February, 1880, a "strong body" of influential citizens among whom the Philadelphia Union League was well represented had warned the Pennsylvania state convention that the nomination of Grant, Conkling, or Blaine would alienate a great many Republicans. Lea, living "completely under the domination of a perfectly organized & vigorously managed machine," did not expect to stop Grant or Blaine, but he was wrong. Garfield was nominated. "No third term, a party without a master, a candidate without a stain. We have met our enemies and they are ours," telegraphed an enthusiastic Philadelphian.13

While reformers helped prevent the nomination of a distinct enemy of reform, it was evident that even a relatively friendly President could not institute full-scale civil service reform. Organization was necessary to apply pressure on Congress.

At the height of the 1880 presidential campaign, New York City

11 William Welsh to Schurz, Philadelphia, March 24, 1877, and M. Ralph Thayer to Schurz, Philadelphia, April 11, 1877, ibid.
12 MacVeagh to Norton, Philadelphia, April 13, 1878, Norton Papers; Lea to Schurz, Philadelphia, December, no day, 1879, Schurz Papers.
established the first effective Civil Service Reform Association. Almost immediately reformers organized in other cities. On March 28, 1881, the Civil Service Reform Association of Philadelphia held its first meeting. Composed of many of Philadelphia's leading citizens, the association immediately went to work. Through its president, Wayne MacVeagh, who was also a Cabinet member, the association requested Garfield to extend the merit system to the federal offices of Philadelphia. Delegates from the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh associations met in Newport, Rhode Island, with representatives of eleven other associations to form the National Civil Service Reform League. Among the delegates was Jenckes's early supporter; Joseph George Rosengarten of Philadelphia who had not given up agitating for reform.

The Philadelphia association worked in a variety of ways to achieve its objective. In its first year, its members prepared and distributed four pamphlets, published the views of United States senators and representatives from Pennsylvania on civil service reform, and exposed the levying of political assessments. Garfield's first few months as President proved disappointing to reformers. But by June 30, Wayne MacVeagh hopefully reported to Schurz, Garfield "dreads 'patronage' more and more" and added "... he is so good and true at heart, he is sure to learn. But it is awful to think he should need to learn so much. Keep hammering away very strongly on spoils, spoils, spoils... a dozen Senators and Congressmen,—candidates for governor,—State Committeemen,—all forms of evil beset him every hour of every day." On the whole, MacVeagh thought, the "tide" was turning "toward decent permanency of tenure." Garfield never demonstrated his capacity for learning. A few days later, a half-crazed office-seeker, Charles Guiteau, shot the President in a Washington railroad station.

Next to Jenckes, Guiteau made the greatest contribution to the civil service reform movement. His timely shots gave reformers a simple, emotion-packed illustration of the evils of the spoils system. The Philadelphia Civil Service Reform Association joined


with sister associations in exploiting Garfield’s assassination. Reformers quickly transformed their concept of Garfield from a weak, spineless tool of Blaine to a fearless crusader for civil service reform. “The cynical impudence,” wrote Henry Adams, “with which the reformers have tried to manufacture an ideal statesman out of the late shady politician beats anything in novel-writing. They are making popular capital. They lie and manoeuvre just like candidates for office. The independents and reformers are as bad as the late lamented, and for the same reason. It pays.”

And pay it did. Although politicians refused to alter their behavior during most of 1881 and 1882 despite monster petitions from Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and other cities, the election of 1882 changed many congressional minds. Republicans including the Cameron machine in Pennsylvania suffered defeat. “Congress is like a pack of whipped boys this winter . . . ,” wrote Mrs. Henry Adams of the lame duck session in 1883. The same Congress that had rejected, then reluctantly approved, an inadequate appropriation for the Civil Service Commission now moved with haste to consider the Pendleton bill. Stung by the whip of public opinion, congressmen passed the reform measure. Even Don Cameron voted for the Pendleton bill. As Henry Adams observed, congressmen were chiefly occupied in swearing at reformers and passing their bills.

Reformers realized, however, that the Pendleton Act was not a complete remedy. It would cripple the bosses of states with urban centers, but rural bosses would remain untouched by its provisions. Aside from offices in Washington, the act applied only to customhouses and post offices in the largest cities. The vast majority of federal civil servants and all municipal and state employees in the country were still unprotected by civil service regulations.

The New York and Massachusetts associations were successful in securing state civil service reform acts, but a similar act failed


to pass the Pennsylvania legislature. Although Philadelphia applied the merit system to some municipal officers in 1885, it “was never honestly enforced and was detrimental for that reason.” State-wide reform did not come to Pennsylvania until 1923 under the administration of the progressive governor, Gifford Pinchot.

Why was the civil service reform movement less successful in Pennsylvania than it was in New York and Massachusetts? Perhaps the Cameron machine was entrenched more firmly than other political machines. This answer raises a second question: why was the Cameron machine so well entrenched? The answer may lie in Pennsylvania’s industrialism. The backbone of the civil service reform movement was professional and business men whose interests were mercantile and financial rather than industrial. The machine functioned satisfactorily for the industrialist. Favors and privileged treatment could be obtained. While Pennsylvania, like New York and Massachusetts, did have a sizable number of professional and business men hostile to the machine, their strength was not so great proportionately as that of their fellow reformers in New York and Massachusetts. Industrialists in Pennsylvania were more powerful. A Philadelphia reformer indicated the reason his city lagged behind. “We do not seem to possess in this manufacturing town,” he lamented to a New Yorker, “the proportion of thinkers, writers or speakers of ability, which your great commercial & financial metropolis constantly draws to itself.”

Although Pennsylvania reformers were not as powerful as those in New York and in Massachusetts, they certainly were as devoted. Henry C. Lea personified the ever vigilant reform spirit. Even as late as the administration of Theodore Roosevelt—which generally meant more civil service reform than ever before—Lea protested civil service abuses.

As perhaps the oldest survivor of those who, from the beginning, labored for the reform of the Civil Service I must be permitted to say that your recent order, forbidding political influence in the advancement of members of the classified service sounds like mockery to a

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Pennsylvanian who has watched with sorrow & indignation your prostitution of the appointing power for the benefit of the infamous machine that has made our City & State a by-word in the nation for . . . political profligacy. In our efforts to redeem our community from this disgrace . . . we might at least, from your past career, have expected you to hold your hands off, & it has been in the highest degree disheartening to find you strengthening its position by surrendering to it control over the federal patronage for which you are responsible. . . . [Y]ou are regarded as the practical ally of the most disreputable political highwaymen that our country has yet produced.20

The reform spirit in the early leaders did not die until they did.

20 Lea to Roosevelt, Philadelphia, July 7, 1902, Lea Papers, University of Pennsylvania.