Bridgewater Review

Volume 2 | Issue 1 Article 6

10-1983

Political Bosses In Urban America: Corruption or Contribution?

Dennis L. Lythgoe
Bridgewater State College

Follow this and additional works at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev

 Part of the American Politics Commons, and the Political History Commons

Recommended Citation

Lythgoe, Dennis L. (1983). Political Bosses In Urban America: Corruption or Contribution?. *Bridgewater Review*, 2(1), 12-16.
Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol2/iss1/6

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

Political Bosses In Urban America

Corruption or Contribution?

by Dennis L. Lythgoe

In the years following the Civil War, America's cities grew dramatically, not only because of the Industrial Revolution, but because of the influx of immigrants. The result was political chaos, and the part-time politician couldn't handle the change. From this disorganization, the political boss, a distinctive breed, emerged. Even though many bosses were involved in graft and corruption, they also replaced chaos with order.

Most of the early bosses in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century came from either the corner saloon or the volunteer fire department. In either setting they were able to sell themselves as "people's men," who were down to earth and interested in service to humanity. "Big Tim" Sullivan and Charles Murphy of New York both emerged from saloons. Sullivan was nicknamed "Dry Dollar" because he never laid a customer's change down until he had carefully dried the bar top with his towel. Murphy increased his clientele by serving a free bowl of soup with a five-cent beer. George Cox of Cincinnati was the owner of a saloon called "Dead Man's Corner," where numerous killings had taken place. Heavyset Jim Pendergast opened a saloon in Kansas City's working-class section called the West Bottoms. He provided pungent garlic bologna, cheese, and bread to anyone who bought a nickel beer. Like the saloon, the fire department provided an opportunity to make friends playing cards and making small talk. From that environment emerged Boss Tweed of New York.



City Hall
Boston, MA
Photo by Robert Ward

A trademark of every one of these bosses was his concern for the poor and underprivileged. In a period of growing urban poverty, when the federal government declined to assume responsibility, politicians from working-class neighborhoods built their own welfare programs. The down-and-out knew they could get help from the boss, who would give them baskets of food or buckets of coal. The boss would slip a widow money to cover the cost of a respectable funeral and burial, or help an immigrant find a job and a place to live. After the immigrant was settled, the boss would help him to become naturalized, which increased the immigrant's pride and gave the boss another vote.

The bosses also created a system of political clubs for middle-class neighborhoods. The purpose was to provide social services for people who did not need a basket of food but who could not afford to belong to the elite country clubs. The political machine rented large halls for banquets and parties and dances. They sponsored picnics and barbeques, baseball leagues, and weekly bridge parties for women. In turn, people were expected to poll voters and pass out sample ballots at election time. In later years, people on the receiving end of social services were expected to drive people to the polls.

Wise bosses were heavy contributors to Catholic parochial schools or Jewish charities. Sometimes pastors even urged their parishioners to vote for machine politicians. Bosses did favors for small businessmen, especially storekeepers. Restaurants, saloons, and delicatessens found the friendship of the boss invaluable in securing health department approval. Many cities made the licensing of numerous small businesses appear to be a special favor. In return the businessman would display campaign posters in his window and talk politics with his customers.

New York's Boss Tweed had notorious alliances with businessmen who would provide kickbacks to the machine in return for contracts, whether for stationery, toilet paper, or construction work. In the early years of the Tweed regime, the fee was ten percent, while several years later it had grown to sixty-five percent. Tweed even paid exorbitant fees for advertising in newspapers which in return maintained a friendly editorial policy. The last year Tweed was in power the city paid advertising bills to newspapers in excess of one million dollars.

From San Francisco to the big cities of the East Coast, all forms of organized crime operated under the friendly eye of the machine. Hazen Pingree in Detroit tolerated prostitution in his city, not because he got a cut, but because he realized its popularity among the voters. Prostitution was illegal in Cincinnati, but it thrived under Boss Cox. Under the aegis of the machine, prostitutes were examined once a week and those free of disease were given work permits for seven days. In New York, the Tammany Machine instructed police to wink at violators as long as they paid the police and the organization a percentage of the take. Chicago was a notoriously wide-open city. Brothels prospered with boss-controlled police getting a percentage.

In the twentieth century, Chicago remained much the same under Richard J. Daley, whose moral code was "Thou shalt not steal, but thou shalt not blow the whistle on anybody who does." The Cook County Democratic Committee included a man named John D'Arco who was known as the crime syndicate's man on the committee. It was public knowledge that Chicago's Mafia chieftian Sam Giancana actually owned the First Ward through his representative D'Arco. As long as the Mafia didn't

challenge him and remained satisfied with its limited share of city government. Daley could live with it -- the same way he lived with the "rascals in Springfield," meaning leaders of state government.

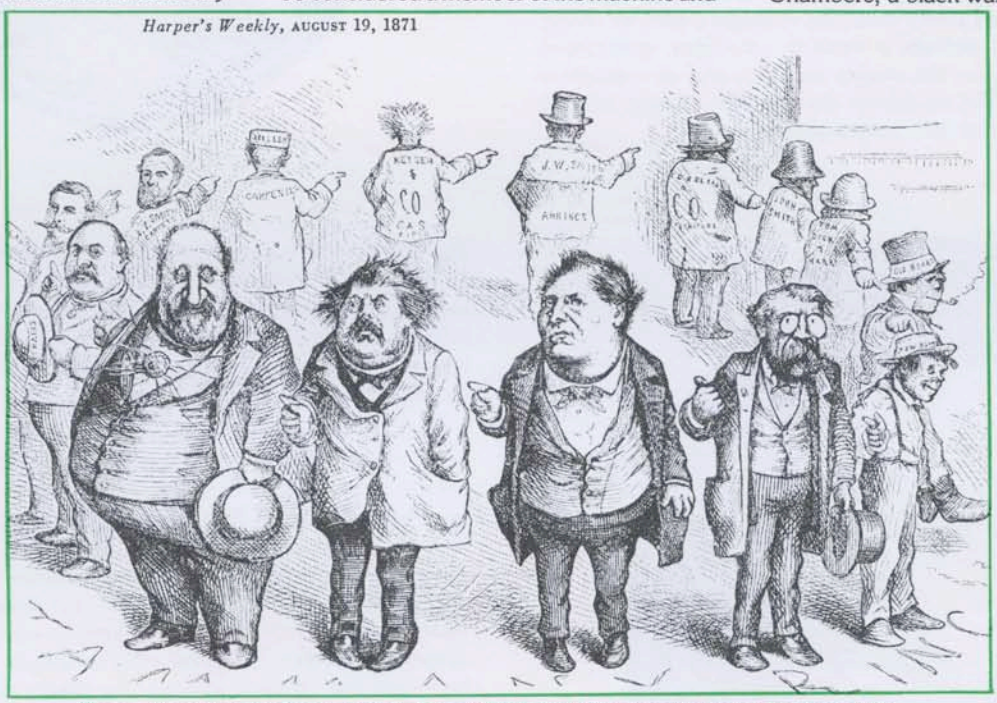
Bosses came from every imaginable ethnic background. James Pendergast in Kansas City, Frank Hague in Jersey City, James Michael Curley in Boston, and Charles Murphy in New York were Irish-Americans. San Francisco's Abraham Reuf was a German Jew, Chicago's Anton Cermak was born in Bohemia, and Boss Tweed was from a long line of native Americans. Their education was diverse as well. Ed Butler of St. Louis, Richard Crocker of New York, "Big Tim" Sullivan, and George Cox of Cincinnati never finished grammar school. On the other hand, Doc Ames of Minneapolis received an M.D. before he was twenty-one, and Abe Reuf held a law degree.

Some bosses let their success go to their heads. Frank Hague had a home in New Jersey and one in Florida. Tom Pendergast owned an elegant mansion in Kansas City and traveled first class to Europe. Duke Vare of Philadelphia owned a home that cost a half-million dollars. Richard Crocker maintained a castle in Ireland, a house in Palm Beach, and an apartment in one of New York's most exclusive residential districts. Tweed lived in a Fifth Avenue showplace, kept his horses in a silver-trimmed mahogany stable and sported an expensive yacht.

But the bosses who were really astute avoided a show of wealth. Richard J. Daley continued to live in the same lower-class ethnic community of Bridgeport, four miles from the Chicago loop, for his entire twenty-one-year reign as mayor. He rarely traveled outside the state and wore the same old baggy suits, which is probably why Daley was the most impressive power broker of them all.

The primary reason for the longevity in office of many of the bosses was their ability to deliver the vote from people who were indebted to them at election time. It was an intricate system of mutual favors. Richard Crocker of Tammany Hall could get hundreds of precinct captains to do leg work for the machine because of this system. The ward heeler or precinct captain got out the vote because people felt they should pay him back for a past favor. Likewise, he worked for the boss and the local organization because he was in their debt. In many instances, thousands of people who delivered the vote were also on the city payroll. In Kansas City, during Jim Pendergast's prime in 1900, he had almost five hundred jobs on the city payroll to give to loyal supporters.

Richard Daley always bristled when reporters used the term "machine" because he preferred "organization." But it was no secret that Daley's dual role as mayor and chairman of the Cook County Democratic Committee gave him final say over the award of some 35,000 patronage positions. At least weekly he would meet with his patronage director to peruse job applications right down to ditch digger. It was assumed that when the mayor gave his approval, the person who got the job would be considered a member of the machine and could be counted on to work one of Chicago's 3,412 voting precincts at election time. Until the final two years of Daley's regime, that arrangement produced incredible success for the machine at the ballot box.



Thomas Nast's devastating assault on the Tweed Ring helped bring about his demise. Members of the ring reply "Twas Him" to the question, "Who stole the people's money?"

While it is tempting to condemn city bosses for corruption, it should be remembered that they supported many projects of public improvement. Tenement house reform, park and boulevard systems, and building programs were common projects readily embraced by the bosses. Under the Tweed ring, the Parks department made a major contribution in building parks and squares throughout New York City. These improvements were evenly distributed among neighborhoods of all social classes. Jim Pendergast put his machine behind bond issues for parks and boulevards for Kansas City, and Boss Crump helped Memphis achieve one of the most attractive park and boulevard systems in the country.

Perhaps surprisingly, the bosses also did more than other white groups to achieve racial equality. Curley, who was Mayor of Boston on and off for thirty-six years, ran as well in the Lithuanian neighborhood of South Boston and the Italian section of East Boston as he did in the working-class Irish wards. In his last term in City Hall, he conferred minor patronage on the growing black community and joined the NAACP.

Pendergast distributed patronage to blacks in his organization, and Boss Cox paved the way for black enfranchisement by suppressing violence against blacks at the polls. Edward Crump actually gave blacks the vote in Memphis. In St. Louis, Jordan Chambers, a black ward boss, got his start in politics by working in Boss Butler's machine.

Richard Daley was terrible with human relationships and purposely fenced out blacks in his Chicago machine, but essential services under his tenure were superb. Daley was acclaimed for providing an ingenious transportation system comprised of expressways fanning out from the central core with rapid-transit trains running down their median strips (or in Daley's words, "medium strips"). Chicago streets were considered to be the cleanest and best illuminated in the country. Once he said to the garbage truck drivers of the city: "You men, with the help of God, are going to make this the finest city. You are going to go out and make every street and every alley the finest street and the finest alley."

Under Daley, Chicago's police and fire departments were ranked by professionals as among the most effective in the world. In fact, when the police department was accused of corrupt practices, Daley conducted a nationwide search and hired one of the top law enforcement officials in the country to be Chicago's chief. In doing

so he salvaged his political reputation by picturing himself as a man of the highest integrity.

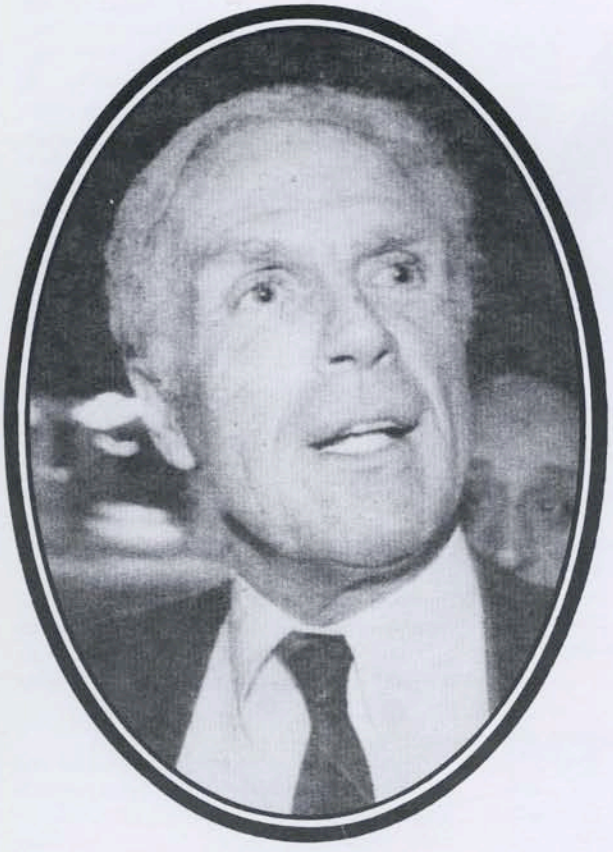
In the last few years of Daley's administration, private investors poured more than five million dollars into the downtown area. Daley constructed a record 45,000 low-income housing units in the North-, West-, and South-Side ghettos and virtually transformed one of the city's most decayed neighborhoods by giving it a branch of the University of Illinois. Most miraculous of all, Daley did it all without a budget deficit. As a result, Chicagoans generally forgave him his famous malapropism such as "We must rise to ever higher and higher platitudes," and "The police are not here to create disorder. They are here to preserve disorder."

If Boston has not been as consistent as Chicago in delivering services, it has certainly provided two of the important bosses in James Michael Curley and Kevin Hagan White. Curley was a unique figure, having served four terms as mayor, once as Governor of Massachusetts, twice as congressman and virtually dominated Massachusetts politics for forty years.

When Curley was first elected mayor in 1913, he assured voters that he and his wife would remain "just folks" and continue to live in their simple, frame house in Roxbury. Instead, he built a large brick Dutch-Colonial house on the exclusive Jamaica Way. The new Curley home had a forty-foot-long, mahogany-paneled dining room, fourteen-foot ceilings, a massive chandelier, gold-plated fireplace equipment for the marble fireplace, and an impressive winding staircase. The neighbors did not take offense until he installed white shutters with cutout shamrocks.



James Michael Curley



Kevin Hagan White

No one was ever sure how Curley acquired the money to pay for such a mansion, since he earned only $5,000 a year as mayor. It was assumed that no city contract was ever awarded without a cut for Curley, but no graft was ever proved in court of law. Although he was known as "Mayor of the Poor," he dressed stylishly and aspired to be among the mighty.

Similarly, Kevin White flies first class, stays in first-class hotels, and cultivates expensive tastes. If he stays in New York City, he pays as much as $250 for a suite; if he travels to Washington, D.C., on city business, he hires chauffeured limousines to carry him from agency to agency at a one-day cost of $1,820. He maintains the Parkman House, a city-owned Beacon Hill mansion, as a combination office, personal retreat, and banquet hall. Recently, he spent $10,300 of city money to furnish a campaign "office" in his personal residence, including a $2,700 sofa. In reply to his critics, he insists that he must maintain the dignity of his office and that Boston is a "world-class city."

White has a patrician appearance, having been educated at Williams College, wears expensive suits and keeps his long white hair carefully sprayed to cover the baldness. While he considers his $60,000 a year salary a disgrace, it has not altered his life style.

White also shares with Curley a flamboyant, charismatic reputation. People are inherently drawn to White just as they were to Curley, even though White is not an electrifying Curley-style orator. While building his political career, Curley studied the orations of Disraeli, Gladstone, Burke, Lincoln, and Daniel Webster, reciting them in his resonant voice and taking note of melodic-sounding words. He also studied breath control and arm gestures to prepare him to become one of the best rabble rousers of his time.

Curley, like White, was famous for the colorful, angry put down. After campaigning for Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932, he expected to be rewarded with a cabinet appointment. Instead FDR offered him the ambassadorship to Poland, and described it as a sensitive post. The incredulous Curley exploded, "If it's such a goddam interesting place, why don't you resign the Presidency and take it yourself?"

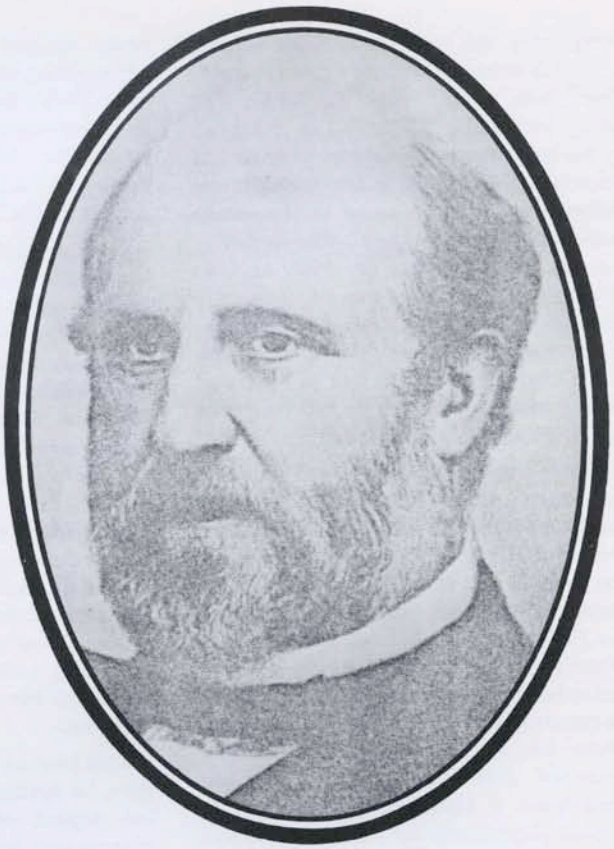
In a similarly candid comment, White explained his approach to city problems as a result of the controversial tax reduction bill known as Proposition 2 ½. "I'm teaching department heads to stay within their budgets for the first time. And they're breaking their asses and doing a good job." When asked if that confirmed critics' suspicions that he condoned poor spending practices, White reacted angrily: "The state can't hold a candle to my management techniques. I hire better talent and manage better than the state or any big city in the country."

Both Curley and White earned reputations as city builders. When Curley began his tenure, he organized a cascade of public works programs. Tunnels were dug under streets, the electric streetcar system was extended, brick-piece city streets replaced rat-infested tenements, swamps were filled and beaches came into existence, and hospitals were cleaned and painted. His many years of service left a physical imprint on the city.

White also changed the face of Boston, a fact which will secure him a notable niche in history. The transformation of Quincy Market into a stunning success attracting more than one million visitors a year is one notable example of White's dedication to urban redevelopment. The Boston waterfront is bristling with new and rehabilitated buildings, condominiums and hotels, with more planned.



Richard J. Daley



William M. "Boss" Tweed

Although he has been the underdog in each of his election campaigns for mayor, his career has been more consistent than Curley's. One of Curley's unique characteristics was his ability to lose an election when he seemed invincible, and yet rise from the graveyard to win an "impossible" victory. His four terms were intermittent, spread over thirty-six years from 1913 to 1949, as contrasted with White's unbroken string of victories since 1967. White is much more vital and durable at age fifty-three than Curley was in his final term at age seventy, suffering from diabetes, high blood pressure, and failing eyesight. Curley served in the interim periods as congressman and governor, but it was evident that his fondest love was the mayoralty.

Curley sought his last term as mayor with a felony charge hanging over his head. In 1945, at age seventy, he won election prior to being prosecuted for mail fraud. In the middle of the proceedings, the judge allowed a court recess so Curley could go home to Boston for the inauguration. Although there has been heavy conjecture as to whether the guilty verdict was politically inspired, Curley was sentenced to prison for six to eighteen months.

When he went home to Boston he was not ostracized, but greeted by a cheering crowd at South Station and a band playing "Hail the Conquering Hero Comes." Pending his appeal, Curley went to work at City Hall every day, collecting income from both his mayor's job and his congressional seat, from which he had not yet bothered to resign. Joe Kennedy implored him to resign the seat so his son Jack could run for it, but Curley insisted on pulling down two salaries until the end of 1946.

Curley was ordered to begin serving his term at Danbury Prison in June, 1946, even though his health was failing. Incredibly, "Curley's Law," passed by the legislature, allowed him to retain his office and salary while in jail, and John B. Hynes, city clerk, to serve as temporary mayor until his return. Just before he died at the age of eighty-four in 1958 at City Hospital, after being moved from the operating table across bumpy floors, Curley dramatically announced that the first plank in his platform for reelection as Mayor of Boston would be to "have the goddam floors in City Hospital smoothed out."

When Curley died, observers said that the heyday of the boss and the political machine was at an end. Others said the same in 1976 when Richard J. Daley died. Certainly it is much more difficult to construct machines that deliver the vote in the 1980s, but it is not impossible as Kevin White's career attests. White did not start out to become a machine politician. In 1967, he campaigned against the fiesty Louise Day Hicks for more humane, neighborhood-oriented city government. He was considered a bland campaigner, but he argued idealistically for improved schools, hospitals, and residential areas. He was not a radical, but he was sympathetic to the problems of the ghettos. He won by one of the smallest pluralities in the city's history, 12,522 votes of 192,860 cast.

The heyday of political machines is over. Kevin White has relinquished his hold on Boston.

White was immediately cast in the glamorous mold of the progressive mayor of New York, John Lindsay. Both were reform-minded liberals with humanitarian interests in contrast to the city boss who concentrated on services such as garbage removal. White's star rose so dramatically that he tried to step up to the governorship of Massachusetts in 1970, but he was no match for the more telegenic Republican Francis Sargeant. White did not even carry Boston.

Although again the underdog in his 1971 re-election campaign, White was becoming the consummate politician, and he defeated Hicks for the second time but by a much more impressive margin, 62.8 percent of the vote. His biggest disappointment was being passed over for the vice-presidential nomination on the Democratic ticket with George McGovern in 1972. He had always had national ambitions, but the lustre that surrounded the glamorous mayors of the 1960s faded in the 1970s. John Lindsay never realized his amibitions for higher office either, and left office embarrassed by New York's fiscal problems. It was all the more impressive, then, that White managed to remain viable in a financially secure Boston as the last of the bright young urban leaders of the 1960s.

In his 1975 third term bid, White squeaked through with a scant five percent margin against Joe Timilty. He was embarassed by Timilty's allegation of campaign abuses and was hurt by his identification with the turmoil over bussing. After the election, White concentrated on oiling his political machine. As he switched his interest to providing efficient, reliable services, he was compared increasingly with Daley instead of Lindsay. He was attracted to economic and urban redevelopment as a means of pleasing a wider constituency. He was more conservative in his approach to public housing and tenant rights. His whopping victory over Timilty in 1979 attests to his adoption of the Daley-style machine.

This year as White contemplated a fifth term, he confronted scandal in a way that is too typical of the boss. The federal government is investigating allegations of financial misconduct by city officials. The probers include the FBI, the IRS, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Postal Service and U.S. Attorney William Weld. The mayor has not yet been implicated, but thirteen city employees in the past two years have been indicted on various charges, including fraud and corruption. Two of them are doing time in federal prison. A federal grand jury is even investigating the possibility that some of the four hundred donors to an aborted birthday celebration for White's wife were participating in a sophisticated money-laundering scheme.

It may be as the *Globe's* Mike Barnicle has said that no one will ever convict Kevin White of extortion, because he is just too arrogant to have participated in it. But no one doubts that he faced his most severe challenge as the investigations came dangerously close to the city's top office holder. Had he run for a fifth term, he would have matched Daley's twenty years in office and competed with Curley's coveted title of THE MAYOR, and he would have only been fifty-eight years old. Instead, White decided to step aside after sixteen tumultuous years.

The heyday of political machines is over. Kevin White has relinquished his hold on Boston, and in other major cities, machines are losing their leverage and their credibility. With the election of its first black mayor, Chicago, the quintessential city of machine politics, has turned its back on patronage. In spite of his checkered past, Harold Washington blatantly presented himself to voters as an anti-machine politician. In Philadelphia, another black politician, Wilson Goode crushed old-style political boss Frank Rizzo. It is not an unwarranted or unexpected development.

Urban America today has a more educated, more sophisticated electorate. Talented, energetic young people who might have become political bosses at the turn of the century are more likely to end up in the executive suite. Civil service regulations make it harder to practice patronage politics; and federal laws and careful press scrutiny make it more difficult to hide the rewards of graft. Corruption can never be condoned, and machine-dominated cities have always been costly operations. Nevertheless, the machines, in their own unique way, were enormously effective in solving immediate problems. By providing services to disparate interest groups, they obtained support for their policies and acted as effective brokers for fragmented communities. Current distrust of machine politics aside, it cannot be denied that bosses made a distinctive contribution to urban America. In the midst of seemingly insurmountable challenges, they actually made the cities work.



Photo by Alan Behunin

Dennis L. Lythgoe, Professor of History at Bridgewater State College, received his B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Utah. He is primarily interested in American Political and Western History, and has written numerous articles and book reviews for professional journals, more than one hundred newspaper articles, and currently writes a weekly history column for the Sunday magazine of the Desert News *in Salt Lake City, Utah. His book,* Let 'Em Holler: A Political Biography of J. Bracken Lee, *(1982) was published by the Utah Historical Society and is a study of a major Utah politician. He is planning a book on the presidency of John F. Kennedy and serves on the academic advisory board of the Kennedy Library. He and his wife Marti live in Abington with Darrin, Kelly, David, Charlie, and Spencer.*