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Grafters and Goo Goos: Corruption and Reform in Chicago, 1833-2003

James L. Merriner

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Chicago's reputation for corruption is the basis of local and national folklore and humor. *Grafters and Goo Goos: Corruption and Reform in Chicago, 1833–2003* unfolds the city's notorious history of corruption and the countervailing reform struggles that largely failed to clean it up. More than a regional history of crime in politics, this wide-ranging account of governmental malfeasances traces ongoing public corruption and reform to its nineteenth-century democratic roots. Former Chicago journalist James L. Merriner reveals the battles between corrupt politicos and ardent reformers to be expressions of conflicting class, ethnic, and religious values.

From Chicago's earliest years in the 1830s, the city welcomed dollar-chasing businessmen and politicians, swiftly followed by reformers who strived to clean up the attendant corruption. Reformers in Chicago were called "goo goos," a derisive epithet short for "good-government types." *Grafters and Goo Goos* contends a certain synergy defined the relationship between corruption and reform. Politicians and reformers often behaved similarly, their separate ambitions merging into a conjoined politics of interdependency wherein the line between heroes and villains grew increasingly faint. The real story, asserts Merriner, has less to do with right against wrong than it does with the ways the cultural backgrounds of politicians and reformers steered their own agendas, animating and defining each other by their opposition.

Drawing on original and archival research, Merriner identifies constants in the struggle between corruption and reform amid a welter of changing social circumstances and customs—decades of alternating war and peace, hardships and prosperity. Three areas of reform and resistance are identified: structural reform of the political system to promote honesty and efficiency, social reform to provide justice to the lower classes, and moral reform to combat vice. "In the matter of corruption and reform, the constants might be stronger than the variables," writes Merriner in the Preface. "The players, rules, and scorekeepers change, but not the essential game."

Complemented by eighteen illustrations, *Grafters and Goo Goos* is rife with shocking and amusing anecdotes and peppered with the personalities of famous muckrakers, bootleggers, mayors, and mobsters. While other studies have profiled infamous Chicago corruption cases and figures such as Al Capone and Richard J. Daley, this is the first to provide an overview appropriate for historians and general readers alike. In examining Chicago's notorious saga of corruption and reform against a backdrop of social history, Merriner calls attention to our constant problems of both civic and national corruption and contributes to larger discussions about the American experiment of democratic self-government.

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