

## SOURCE 7

### A Case of Democratic Success: Muckrakers

During the “Gilded Age” (1870s - 1900s), the US Government neglected its duty to protect and adhere to democratic principles. Then, a group of writers, photographers, and journalists that came to be known as “muckrakers” took it upon themselves to expose the widespread corruption that had been plaguing the nation for years. The work of these muckrakers ushered in a new era called the “Progressive Era,” during which democracy flourished in America.

Excerpt from *The Shame of Cities* (1904) by muckraker Lincoln Steffens

Now, the typical American citizen is the business man. The typical business man is a bad citizen; he is busy. If he is a "big business man" and very busy, he does not neglect, he is busy with politics, oh, very busy and very businesslike. I found him...defending grafters in Minneapolis, originating corruption in Pittsburgh, sharing with bosses in Philadelphia, deploring reform in Chicago, and beating good government with corruption funds in New York. He is a self-righteous fraud, this big business man. He is the chief source of corruption, and it were a boon if he would neglect politics. But he is not the business man that neglects politics; that worthy is the good citizen, the typical business man. He too is busy, he is the one that has no use and therefore no time for politics. When his neglect has permitted bad government to go so far that he can be stirred to action, he is unhappy, and he looks around for a cure that shall be quick, so that he may hurry back to the shop.

Naturally, too, when he talks politics, he talks shop. His patent remedy is quack; it is business. "Give us a business man," he says ("like me," he means). "Let him introduce business methods into politics and government; then I shall be left alone to attend to my business." There is hardly an office from United States Senator down to Alderman in any part of the country to which the business man has not been elected; yet politics remains corrupt, government pretty bad, and the selfish citizen has to hold himself in readiness like the old volunteer firemen to rush forth at any hour, in any weather, to prevent the fire; and he goes out sometimes and he puts out the fire (after the damage is done) and he goes back to the shop sighing for the business man in politics. The business man has failed in politics as he has in citizenship. Why? Because politics is business.

That's what's the matter with it. That's what's the matter with everything,—art , literature, religion, journalism, law, medicine,—they're all business, and all—as you see them. Make politics a sport, as they do in England, or a profession, as they do in Germany, and we'll have—well, something else than we have now,—if we want it, which is another question. But don't try to reform politics with the banker, the lawyer, and the dry-goods merchant, for these are business men and there are two great hindrances to their achievement of reform: one is that they are different from, but no better than, the politicians; the other is that politics is not "their line". ...



The commercial spirit is the spirit of profit, not patriotism; of credit, not honor; of individual gain, not national prosperity; of trade and dickering, not principle. "My business is sacred " says the business man in his heart. "Whatever prospers my business, is good; it must be. Whatever hinders it, is wrong; it must be. A bribe is bad, that is, it is a bad thing to take; but it is not so bad to give one, not if it is necessary to my business." "Business is business" is not a political sentiment, but our politician has caught it. He takes essentially the same view of the bribe, only he saves his self-respect by piling all his contempt upon the bribe-giver and he has the great advantage of candor. "It is wrong, maybe," he says, 'but if a rich merchant can afford to do business with me for the sake of a convenience or to increase his already great wealth, I can afford, for the sake of living, to meet him half way. I make no pretensions to virtue, not even on Sunday."

And as for giving bad government or good, how about the merchant who gives bad goods or good goods, according to the demand? But there is hope, not alone despair, in the commercialism of our politics. If our political leaders are to be always a lot of political merchants, they will supply any demand we may create. All we have to do is to establish a steady demand for good government.



## DEFINING DEMOCRACY

Name:

Period:

1. What problems does Steffens bring to light in this excerpt? How did these problems violate democratic principles?

2. What does Steffens suggest for solutions to the problems he describes?

3. How well does the US adhere to these democratic principles today?