

Book report of plunkitt of tammany hall essay



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“ An Analysis of Plunkitt of Tammany Hall” William Bryce History 1302 Austin Community College November 30, 2011 The purpose of this book report is to analyze the themes in Plunkitt of Tammany Hall by William L. Riordon.

Riordon’s purpose is to educate people about politics and to stimulate reform in their corrupt political system. The first theme of this book is Plunkitt’s use of patronage. He openly discusses quid pro quo: he gives people jobs, opportunities, and welfare services in exchange for their political allegiance.

For example, he talks about giving young men opportunities to play in the baseball club or sing in the glee club. In exchange, they vote the way he tells them to. Plunkitt also supports his voters in other ways. If there is a fire in his district he would be on the scene as quickly as the fire department. He then helps displaced families get back on their feet giving them shelter, food, and even clothes. ¹ Using these methods, Plunkitt controls more than 14, 000 votes. He has so much power that he controls both the private sector and the public sector.

For instance, the railroad company hires his followers in exchange for public contracts. No job offer is turned down if it has his name on it. The second theme in this book: corruption. Plunkitt uses his political power to make money. Indeed, this theme is discussed in the very first lines of the book where Plunkitt defends himself on the issue of graft. “ Everyone is talkin’ these days about Tammany men growin’ rich on graft, but nobody thinks of drawin’ the distinction between honest graft and dishonest graft. There’s all the difference in the world between the two. Then Plunkitt claims that he is “ gettin’ richer every day, but I’ve not gone in for dishonest graft. ” ² Plunkitt’s main “ honest” money-making scheme: buying land that he knows will be

needed for a public project like a park or a bridge. Then he arranges to sell the land to the city at an inflated price. He also talks about buying excess granite from public projects and reselling it. For awhile, he has a monopoly on the business. Eventually though granite buyers from Brooklyn and New Jersey came to bid against him.

But instead of competing with them he offered to give them the granite they needed as long as they didn't bid against him. In one case, by colluding other potential bidders Plunkitt gets 250, 000 stones for the absurd price of \$2. 50. 3 Although he was making a lot of money from his schemes he was careful to not look rich. " Above all things," he explains " avoid a dress-suit. You have no idea of the harm that dress-suits have done in politics. " He goes on to say that he was once accused of buying a \$10, 000 automobile and a \$125 dress suit right before an election and that he suffered badly at the polls for it. The people wouldn't have minded much if I had been accused of robbin' the city treasury... but the automobile and the dress-suit were too much for them. " 3 Plunkitt also presents an anti-elite-education worldview. In the book he explains how to become a politician and he says that going to college detracts from your political ability, that scholars can't possibly become effective politicians. Plunkitt maintains that a person who goes through college is handicapped and that the odds against him succeeding are 100 to 1.

He also claims that civil service reform is a curse, that giving people qualification examinations is a travesty that will destroy patriotism and cultivate anarchy. He admits that he only went to school for three winters and that some of the Tammany leaders are illiterate. But he defends them,

saying that if they were “book worms” or college professors they might “... win an election once in 4, 000 years. ”⁴ Then he adds that the reason the Democratic Party is failing is because its leaders are reading too many books.

The author is successful in executing his purpose. By using interviews with Plunkitt he paints an unflattering picture of the political boss. The book helped educate the public about the political machines. After it was published, political bosses like Plunkitt were removed from power by the progressive movement and reforms like the Galveston Plan. In 2005, a century after the book was first published, Edward O’ Donnell of The New York Times called the book “a classic piece of American literature. ”⁵ In my opinion the book is very readable, and thought-provoking.

It forced me to compare the political system at the turn of the century with our current system and helped me to realize that they aren’t tremendously different and that’s more than a little depressing. Endnotes 1 Andres Tijerina and William E. Montgomery, vol. 2 of Building A Democratic Nation: A History Of the United States, 1877 to Present (Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company, 2011), 78-79. 2 William L. Riordan, Plunkitt of Tammany Hall (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1994), 49. 3 Ibid. , 76-77. 4 Ibid. , 73. Edward O’ Donnell, “The Sage of Tammany Hall,” The New York Times, August 28, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/> (accessed November 29, 2009).

Bibliography Tijerina, Andres and Montgomery, William E. Vol. 2 of Building A Democratic Nation: A History Of the United States 1877 to Present. Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company, 2011. Riordan, William L. Plunkitt of Tammany Hall. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1994. O’ Donnell, Edward. “The <https://assignbuster.com/book-report-of-plunkitt-of-tammany-hall-essay/>

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