

The Politics of a Gilded Age Scandal

Peters Shawn Francis. *When Bad Men Combine: The Star Route Scandal and the Twilight of Gilded Age Politics*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2023. 376 pp. \$50.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9780807179000.

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Shawn Francis Peters's *When Bad Men Combine* provides essential insights into the workings of the federal government during the Gilded Age. Peters wisely illustrates how the Star Route controversies, a series of political scandals revolving around alleged bribes and U.S. mail service routes, which are most closely associated with the administrations of James Garfield and Chester Arthur, also plagued the presidencies of Ulysses S. Grant and Rutherford B. Hayes. Peters rightly points out that this monograph is the only published work on the scandals, some of the most decisive and fascinating in all of U.S. political history. The author, however, does not just fill a gap in the scholarship. Rather, he argues that such a book is necessary because the Star Route scandals directly shaped American civil service reform and contributed to the election of a Democrat for the first time in twenty-eight years during the 1884 presidential election. But the bolstering of government power was unsteady, as Peters shows. The gradual expansion of the federal government encountered constant obstacles and setbacks, offering a compelling comparison to the national government's frustrations in securing civil rights for African Americans in the same period.

Peters ably navigates the complexity of the Star Route scandals. He shows how the overestimation of Star Route contracts allowed U.S. Post Office officials, politicians, and businessmen to embezzle thousands, if not millions, of dollars from the federal government. The two main defendants in the major Star Route trials of 1882 and 1883 were an assistant postmaster, Thomas Brady, and a U.S. Senator from Arkansas, Stephen Dorsey. Despite the lack of archival evidence from either Brady or Dorsey, Peters has constructed a comprehensive picture of their dealings by mining the transcripts of the resulting court cases and the findings published by the congressional committees that investigated the scandals. The prosecution was constantly at odds with itself and struggled to prove specific charges of conspiracy to defraud the U.S. government. The simultaneous prosecution of Garfield's assassin, Charles Guiteau, further hampered federal efforts in the Star Route trials. The prosecution's lack of coordination, combined with the pointed oratory and deft organization of the defense team, led to the failure to convict anyone in the final major Star Route trial in 1883. Throughout the trials, such ineptitude led the press to question the integrity of both the prosecution and of President Arthur.

When Bad Men Combine is part of a fine tradition in the historiography of Gilded Age politics. There have been major works on the four presidential elections from 1876 to 1888 in the last quarter century, and Peters uses the newer works on the first three, Michael

Holt's *By One Vote* (2008), Benjamin Arrington's *The Last Lincoln Republican* (2020), and Mark Wahlgren Summers's *Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion* (2000), to understand the electoral context and the various actors involved in the growing political demand for civil service reform. The Star Route scandals, for instance, engulfed the Stalwart faction of the Republican Party and sparked tension between a faction that helped elect Garfield and Arthur as well as the presidents themselves who, as chief executives, sought to preserve the integrity and reputation of their administrations. All the while, the book ably complements Morton Keller's *Affairs of State* (1977) and Mark Wahlgren Summers's *Party Games* (2004), building on their incisive analyses of how corruption grew as the federal government struggled to fulfil expanded duties.

The nineteen chapters of *When Bad Men Combine* cover the chronology surrounding the expansion of the U.S. Post Office and the events of the Star Route scandals. Peters writes in clear prose and provides essential details and background for the major individuals covered in his narrative. He even provides brief descriptions at the beginning of the book with a listing of the dramatis personae. This subject is a complicated one, and Peters takes various steps to help guide the reader through the twists and turns of the scandals. He assembles conversations from archival documents and inserts them into the chapters, thus creating a narrative to engage readers who otherwise could be left bewildered or exhausted by the many names, dates, and factions mentioned throughout the book.

For its contributions to the historiography of civil service reform, as well as for what it reveals about the workings of the federal government in the early 1880s, *When Bad Men Combine* will be a necessary read for any scholar seeking to understand the political culture of the Gilded Age. Peters's work will be of interest for undergraduate readers who might otherwise assume that Gilded Age politics simply involved presidents, legislators, and bureaucrats obsessed with tariff policies. *When Bad Men Combine* shows how the heart of Gilded Age politics grew out of the demise of Reconstruction and the federal government's experience trying and failing to protect its citizens. While Reconstruction saw the passage of multiple constitutional amendments and enforcement mechanisms, such as the creation of the Justice Department and an overall expansion of the government for the purposes of protecting citizens' civil rights, the government failed in its overall goal. That failure was mirrored elsewhere. The Gilded Age administrations of Garfield and Arthur, for instance, tried to prosecute men that they credibly suspected of theft. In sparking resistance and crashing against stubborn political obstacles, political initiatives during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age witnessed stark tensions both leading to and following the expansion of the federal government.