

The Ohio Gang

I. In Ohio

THIS series of articles which will attempt to describe the origins of the Ohio gang, how it got to Washington, and what it did there, ought to begin with a call for two distinguished journalists: Lincoln Steffens and Will Irwin.

Steffens and Irwin!—where are you?

Both of you, as it happens, went and looked at the Ohio gang when it was operating on its native heath. You did so long ago, in those years before the war which now seem so incredibly remote and unsophisticated. You witnessed and described for the world in general the processes of the machine politicians who ruled then as they do today, who reached out in 1920 and took over Washington as in past times they had taken Cincinnati and Cleveland and Columbus and the state government. You discovered and reported there a system stronger, more efficient and intelligent than any individual in it; you told us what happens when the politicians get full and unhampered control. Your predictions have been amply fulfilled in the past three years. Today you may see and the whole world may see what resulted when the state machine, by a series of events which I shall describe a little later, got control of a large part of the federal government. There is food for thought, in the spectacle . . .

I have been told, of course, and with sharpness, that I must not write about the origins of the Ohio gang. For President Warren G. Harding was closely allied with it; President Harding is dead; and of the dead one must speak no ill. To this rule I should be quite willing to yield if it were the fact that nothing is to be gained from such a discussion. But in this case I think the theory is wholly untenable. Corrupt individuals are hiding behind the shadow of death, are counting upon a proper and natural sentiment to keep their dishonest conduct concealed. I believe the future welfare of the country is gravely involved in the question of how the Ohio gang happened to come to Washington and what it did there. Fair-minded persons will agree, I think, that the rule, "*De mortuis nil nisi bonum*" has limits, and that these limits have been passed.

Do not misunderstand me. I have no revelations of personal wrongdoing on the part of President Harding to make. The worst I have to say of him is that he was part of, contributed to, believed in a system which not only permitted wrongdoing by other men but almost inevitably led to that wrongdoing; that he allowed himself, probably in ignorance, to be made the cat's paw

of men with sinister purposes. But there is not a word to be said of him that cannot be said with equal truth of thousands of others in every city in America, Democrats as well as Republicans—men whose personal standards of honor are high, who would not dream of associating deliberately with any criminal (except a bootlegger), men who are admirable husbands and parents—in short, who are a most solid element in our most solid civilization.

I should confess frankly at this point that I have small patience with the Wicked Man theory. Certainly the revelations which have come out of Washington in the past few months are such as to shock and dishearten every good citizen; and certainly those who have broken the law should be punished. But I for one find it impossible to accept the view that a corruptionist in high office is a sort of unpleasant miracle, a freak of nature, without relation to what has happened in the past and will happen in the future. Admitting certainly that there are bad men and good ones, I submit that when a whole group of dishonest individuals suddenly appears in one place at one time it is more than coincidence. I believe it means that a special soil has produced a special crop. In the case of the Ohio gang, that soil was not in Washington, where its most conspicuous deeds were done, but in Ohio itself.

For two full generations—which is as far back as we have any need to go—government in the chief cities of Ohio has been for most of the time in the hands of machine politicians; and by and large, these politicians have been corrupt. Sometimes they have been Democrats; more usually Republicans. From time to time, as in other states, the machine has been defeated in one city or another, and a triumphant group of reformers has taken control only to reveal its own helplessness in the face of the enemy's organization, discipline and efficiency. While some permanent improvement has often been effected, at the next election the machine has usually come back. The bosses of the leading cities, by alliance with one another, have sought to control state politics, and have often succeeded.

In Ohio, as elsewhere, the rule of the boss is a combination of influence through strong personality and through a high-gearred economic organization. The chief holds his place, just as the governor of a Chinese province does, because he is stronger than any of those who surround him. He is also a centre of patronage: he invents as many municipal jobs as he can and sees to it that

every one of them is filled by a member of the machine. For himself and for a few of those closest to him there is graft in large sums, derived chiefly from the public utility corporations, which pay in order to get their franchises through the city council, or in fear of adverse legislation.

There is, of course, nothing remarkable in all this. It is a fair description of political life in a majority of American states and American cities, at present and for many years in the past. Ohio has hardly been more brazen in its shame than most other states, or more hopelessly discouraging to the reformer. Ohio, to be sure, produced Boss Cox. For a generation Cincinnati was chiefly notorious throughout the nation as the home of this fascinating figure, boss of the city, ruler of Hamilton county, in which it is located, and a chief figure in state politics.

The story of Boss Cox is too long to tell here in detail, absorbingly interesting though it is. He got his start in the Blaine campaign in 1884, the year in which a nineteen-year-old youth named Harding was buying a daily paper in the little town of Marion. (It was also in that year that John R. McLean, owner of the Cincinnati Enquirer, became the father of a son, whom he called Edward.) In only a few years Cox was undisputed master of Cincinnati politics, a position which he held until the day of his death, in 1915. Cox was a grafter. It was definitely proved that he had pocketed many thousands of dollars, bribes paid him by banks for illegally depositing with them Hamilton county funds. What additional sums he received from other sources no one knows; but there is every reason to suppose that they were large. Yet in spite of his universally conceded guilt, he was never formally punished. Formidable efforts to bring him to book, made by the decent citizens of Cincinnati over a period of more than six years, were all in vain.

When the reformers sent a delegation to the Ohio House of Representatives and demanded an investigation of the Cincinnati municipal administration, Carmi Thompson, an ally of Cox, who happened to be Speaker of the House, appointed a handpicked committee which could be relied upon to use whitewash. A real committee was secured later and the Ohio State Supreme Court, also packed with henchmen of the boss, ruled that it had no power to act. Another committee was appointed by the State Legislature, and the same Supreme Court abolished it. Effort after effort was made with similar results.

The facts about Cox's personal graft finally were revealed. The county treasurers had received many thousands of dollars in secret payments from the banks which were permitted the use (without interest, of course) of county funds. They had divided fifty-fifty with Cox. They had concealed his part in the transaction at first; and when they

were forced to pay back the bribes, they had to make up his share as well as their own. Naturally, they afterward sought to collect from Mr. Cox. His lawyer, who handled the transaction, actually had the impudence to deduct from the amount he had wormed out of Cox for the treasurers the sum of \$8,000 as his "fee." Yet despite the boss's openly stated dishonesty, Ohio politics was so completely corrupt that it was impossible to get him punished though the public exposure broke his spirit and perhaps his health.

I have mentioned Boss Cox not because he was unusual, but for precisely the opposite reason: because he was characteristic of politics in Ohio as it was then, and, speaking in general, is today. Other men had important places in the scheme of things. Though some of them were bitter personal enemies, and though they differed widely in personal abilities, such men as Mark Hanna in Cleveland, Joseph B. Foraker in Cincinnati, William B. McKinley in the Cleveland territory, Walter Brown in Toledo, Maurice Maschke in Cleveland, Rud Hynicka in Cincinnati (Cox's lieutenant and successor), Malcolm Karshner in Columbus—all and many more played or are today playing their part in the sordid story of Ohio.

Into this story are woven the names of some other men who have come into a national prominence far greater than that of those in Ohio whose subordinates they were. Warren G. Harding, Harry M. Daugherty, Jesse Smith, Howard Manington—for thirty years their activities are inextricably interwoven with those of the individuals I have mentioned. When the Ohio gang moved to Washington in the spring of 1921, it only continued and elaborated on a big scale the political practices of a long apprenticeship at home. What those practices were, and how they were applied in Washington, I shall tell in a subsequent article.

BRUCE BLIVEN.

(Note: This is the first of a series of articles, of which the second will appear in an early issue.)

In Durance

I'll dig under the earth soured with death
And ask the munching worms if they were sired
By nobler than themselves, who, Troy being fired,
Grew fat on heroes, not on bones and breath.
I'll sound the weedy caverns of the seas
To find the carcass of Leviathan,
And of his leathern heart construct a man
Fit to endure such wintry years as these.
I'll climb the air to bring a vulture down,
Bid him pluck out the young buds' shuttered eyes,
Lest they should see the bloom; and where he flies
The dark will scream to give him bleak renown.
Alive or dead, uneasy I must lie
In this cracked world, that is as base as I.

BABETTE DEUTSCH.