

Lincoln Steffens: Interviewer

Steffens' ability to gain rapport, induce confidence and secure often startling admissions rested on the nature of his relationships with potential informants within interview sessions.

► A fellow journalist once observed that "there are men who have refused to look at [Lincoln Steffens] while he was in the same room, for fear he might get them talking and saying things they did not want to." While Steffens would have scoffed at the idea of possessing any hypnotic power, he was confident of his ability to induce a near-confessional mood in hundreds of individuals whom he interviewed during a long career of writing for newspapers and magazines. The traditional reportorial interview became in his hands a finely-precisioned instrument. William Randolph Hearst, who proffered substantial job offers to him on several occasions, was deeply impressed by these talents in 1906 after the two men had engaged in five lengthy conversations. For the only time in his life, Hearst felt it necessary to defend for quotation the content and policies of his newspapers. The publisher afterward confided to editor Arthur Brisbane that Steffens "was the best interviewer he had ever encoun-

tered." Readers trusted Steffens' muckraking articles in *McClure's*, *The American* and similar magazines in the opening years of this century for the reliable inside information secured in such interviews, for the extensive material obtained through his related investigations and for his evaluations of these findings.¹

Their trust in his interviewing was usually justified, though not always for the reasons they or Steffens believed. By the time he acquired national fame as a muckraker, he had in a decade of New York journalism already developed some notable talents in interviewing. Steffens' ability to gain rapport, induce confidence and secure often startling admissions rested primarily on the nature of his flexible relationships with potential informants within the interview sessions. Sensitive to their feelings, believing his empathy embraced all men regardless of their behavior or moral character, Steffens was nevertheless intent on judging their personal guilt or innocence against unstated and partially-resolved moral standards; he would then report the interview statements in order to awaken readers to take certain actions. It was not surprising that men who shared his views and expected favorable publicity became valued informants. What was noteworthy was that others who incurred Steffens' disapproval also became important informants. This unusual success in gathering informa-

¹ Louis Sherwin, "Speaking of Roving Reporters, Lincoln Steffens Faces 'Em All," *The [New York] Evening Post*, April 14, 1931; W. A. Swanberg, *Citizen Hearst* (New York: Bantam Books, 1963), pp. 292, 294-5; Lincoln Steffens, *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1931), p. 341. (The one-volume edition is hereafter cited as *Autobiography*.)

► Dr. Stein is assistant professor of history at Pennsylvania State University. This article is drawn from a full-length biography of Lincoln Steffens which the author is currently writing.

tion suggests that Steffens' stature as an interviewer also rested upon his willingness to print views favoring men and causes to which he was publicly opposed.

He remarked later that "I was happily unaware that I was just a nice, original American boob" upon arriving in New York City late in 1892. A native Californian educated at the University of California, he had just returned from three years of desultory wandering in Europe and erratic studies in its universities. A chance letter of introduction sent him to E. L. Godkin's *The Evening Post* that December where its editors, who liked the young man's obvious intelligence and alertness, gentility, energy, good education and strong Mugwump sympathies, hired him for local reporting. Proud to write for "the cleanest daily in town," he remained as its reporter until accepting in 1897 the city editorship of another small-circulation New York daily, *The Commercial Advertiser*. Although the full flowering of his interviewing talents did not occur until after joining *McClure's Magazine* in 1901, Steffens was already showing reportorial promise. Norman Hapgood, a colleague on both papers and later the editor of *Collier's Magazine*, judged him the best all-around journalist on *The Evening Post* and the best general reporter in the city. After four months with Godkin's prestigious journal, and as the Panic of 1893 approached, Steffens, now 26, was made financial reporter, a highly sensitive post for a pro-Wall Street paper. His editors, impressed by his Wall Street accounts and anxious to begin coverage of crime news, assigned him in November 1893 to serve as the daily's first police reporter. His duties included reporting and assisting the Reverend Henry Parkhurst's attacks upon Tammany Hall and its corrupt alliance with criminals and the police. Steffens also hoped that his articles and personal influence could pave the way

for a good government administration in New York City.²

On Wall Street, as a police reporter and later as city editor, Steffens had little or no difficulty interviewing individuals who thought, acted or seemed much like himself. Business executives, good government reformers, professional men, individuals who in general were his social equals usually granted him an immediate entree. Shared similarities encouraged initial rapport and cooperation. "The President of the Board of Education said of me the other day, 'There's the gentleman reporter,' and he invariably gives me all the news he can," Steffens noted. Yet similarities were not guarantees that such men would trust him sufficiently to furnish exclusive information unobtainable elsewhere. To earn that unhesitating cooperation, he had to demonstrate that he was useful to them, and this he did through his sympathetic financial reporting of the "men who have succeeded by dint of their own efforts." This reporting was immediately recognized as quite valuable for soothing readers' anxieties about the depression, and the correspondent was rewarded daily with private and detailed information from knowledgeable individuals on anticipated or announced business upheavals. In that shaky period, trust promoter James B. Dill and other Wall Streeters probably enjoyed reading the *Post's* accounts of their good will and sound actions; many of them would continue volunteering information to the muck-raking Steffens of the next decade. As a police reporter, Steffens found that the Reverend Parkhurst very much

² *Autobiography*, pp. 166, 181, 184-5, 197; Lincoln Steffens to Frederick M. Willis, Dec. 19, 1892, in *Lincoln Steffens Papers*, Columbia University. (Hereafter Steffens will be cited as LS. All letters are in the Columbia Library collection unless otherwise specified.) Norman Hapgood, *The Changing Years* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1930), pp. 107-8; LS to Joseph Steffens, Jan. 6, 1895 in Ella Winter and Granville Hicks, eds., *The Letters of Lincoln Steffens*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1938), I, pp. 108-09. (Hereafter cited as *Letters*.)

needed the *Post's* favorable publicity in battling Tammany Hall; by late 1894 he could brag of having "almost an exclusive hold" on the crusading minister.³

Steffens and Theodore Roosevelt, reform president of the city's police commission for two years, also fed one another's ambitions and causes. T. R. was happy to provide introductions to important New Yorkers, colorful accounts of his exploits and some hint of his anticipated actions to Lincoln Steffens and other newsmen who listened and reported appreciatively. The *Post* reporter, believing himself to enjoy T. R.'s intimate confidences, was soon to campaign regularly in newspapers and magazines for Roosevelt as governor and president. In the autumn of 1898, T. R. inspired him to print an exclusive account of the new war hero's crucial private meeting in Manhattan—as the press hovered outside—with Boss Tom Platt. Since returning from Cuba, Roosevelt had been maneuvering for the New York governor's mansion. Anti-machine Independents believed that he had agreed to head their separate ticket, but the Rough Rider, apparently fearing defeat by Platt's powerful Republican organization, decided such a course unwise. But how to soften the blow to prevent widespread defections by the Independents? Steffens' inspired reportage of the meeting with Platt and his subsequent interpretation of the candidate, both

addressed to the insurgents, furnished one answer. He reported in *The Commercial Advertiser* that T. R. had decided to decline nomination as an Independent prior to seeing Platt, not while they talked. Furthermore, he emphasized, Roosevelt made no promises in exchange for Platt's proffered, and accepted, Republican nomination. Candidate Roosevelt, he argued, was "an ambitious man, not for high places but for the opportunities high places give for just deeds." Steffens always believed that Roosevelt in Albany and Washington often confided in him on important matters partly because of this and other sympathetic interpretations of Roosevelt's behavior.⁴

► Lincoln Steffens' slowly maturing talents as an interviewer were crucially advanced when he was forced to deal with New Yorkers who had reason to feel hostile or suspicious of his views and employers. When assigned to police headquarters in 1893 and thrown into the first of some 40 years of contact with petty hoodlums, party hacks, corrupt officials and policemen, ward bosses, shady businessmen, labor leaders and the foreign-born poor, Steffens felt repelled and fearful of ever learning to communicate with them. Steffens rightly feared that his own innocence of their ways would lead to exploitation by these shrewd, often crude and violent men. Intent upon probing for the truth beneath appearances, he dreaded becoming lost in the interconnected criminal, political and police labyrinths of the city. Even professional failure loomed up suddenly. Steffens initially tried to persuade *The Evening Post* to bribe a wire service reporter at police headquarters to furnish stories to him secretly, but editors refused. He was left to his own abundant resources.⁵

Dread became confidence soon enough. Within a year he could brag of having "almost an exclusive hold" on the corrupt, Tammany-appointed chief of police, a hold equal to that on the

³ LS to Joseph Steffens, January [19,] 1893; LS to Harlow Gale, March 18, 1893, in Harlow Gale Papers, University of Minnesota Archives; *Autobiography*, pp. 181-6, 192-6; LS to Joseph Steffens, Nov. 28, 1894.

⁴ Theodore Roosevelt to Horace Elisha Scudder, Aug. 6, 1895, in Elting E. Morison, ed., *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), I, p. 473. (Hereafter cited as *Letters of Roosevelt*.) *Autobiography*, pp. 257-65, 275, 350. Steffens' accounts on the gubernatorial candidate appeared in *The Commercial Advertiser* between Sept. 25 and Oct. 15, 1898. LS, "The Real Roosevelt," *Ainslee's Magazine* 2:478-84 (December 1898) cf. G. Wallace Chessman, *Governor Theodore Roosevelt* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), pp. 42-3.

⁵ LS to Joseph Steffens, Nov. 3, 1893; *Autobiography*, pp. 199, 201-6; LS to Joseph Steffens, Jan. 15, 1894.

Reverend Parkhurst. An ingredient of this success was his curiosity about this netherworld. New Yorkers like the police chief and his patrolmen seemed exotic and terribly exciting to the genteel Steffens. In customs, moral values and ethical practices he expected them to be different from criminals, just as he thought businessmen differed from journalists, financiers from lawyers. As a reporter he was passionately interested in understanding and communicating to readers how each of these groups behaved uniquely, particularly how each perceived its behavior in moral terms. He hoped that his specific accounts would lead to larger generalizations about human behavior. More immediately salient than studying behavior during his long professional career was Steffens' desire to wring substantive, quotable material from members of all these groups while preventing any of them from exploiting his ignorance, high hopes and enthusiastic curiosity about their deeper practices and outlooks.⁶

A highly flexible personal approach to his interviewing clearly emerged out of these mixed hopes and expectations. His interviews in the 1890s and thereafter tried to communicate to potential informants that he was "wise" to their ways, knowledgeable and unruffled by their private and public activities, and willing to alter his own opinions. Sometimes all this sophistication was pretense. This approach, which resembled procedures of more experienced colleagues, was modified by Steffens' attempt to avoid their cynicism, blanket condemnations or evasion of moral judgments. Such attitudes, he thought, were unduly rigid and could by their very predictability be manipulated or shunned as obviously dangerous by informants. He did not want men to tell him only what they thought he might wish to hear and so cultivated a seeming elasticity in dealing with them. Steffens knew that many individuals privy to newsworthy events

were in their normal affairs accustomed to informal and often confiding relations among themselves but taciturn with outsiders, especially journalists. His interest was in creating and cultivating personal contacts with a broad strata of groups in circumstances where distrust or anxiety could be reduced and overcome to the point of removing the boundary between the interview and relaxed, richly-informative gossiping. Into his own home in 1897 came those whom he described as "a mixed and interesting lot of people, mostly writers and artists, police officers and politicians, from Capt. Schmittberger, the notorious Lexow [Hearing] witness, last week, and Hapgood, the critic, yesterday to Abraham Cahan, the Russian-Jew novelist of the East Side, tomorrow night." Steffens had the talent to interest all of these men, and the interviews emerging from their frequent conversations reflected how he continued to interest them.⁷

Steffens' care for flexibility in interviews was reinforced by his own uncertainties about informants of lower social status or those unsympathetic to his moral code. His newspaper accounts in the 1890s contained a highly contradictory mixture of moral disapproval, grudging admiration and fascinated curiosity about such people, and this mixture was reflected in his interviews. He fervently attacked them and their practices, always advocating "some moral stomach in the community which will expel proven corruption," but liked many of them individually. He respected the rugged individuality and loyalty to their own kind exhibited by machine leaders, police officers, burglars and others; and he sentimentalized in sketches the good-hearted

⁶ LS to Joseph Steffens, Nov. 28, 1894; LS, "The New School of Journalism," *The Bookman*, 8:176 (October 1903); LS to Harlow Gale, March 18, 1893 in Gale Papers; LS, unpublished articles on ethics of businessmen, c.a. 1900 in Steffens Papers; *Autobiography*, p. 180.

⁷ *Autobiography*, pp. 223, 226-32; LS to Joseph Steffens, Oct. 13, 1897.

prostitute, the self-detached ward chief, the honest immigrant, the self-reliant poor, the brave policeman and fireman. These, however, were patronizing pieces, repeating the negative stereotypes of his uptown readers. He sympathized with the frustrated anger of men who were the recipients of continual public abuse from reform-minded newspapers and tried to emphasize a selective independence from his employer's hostile views. He believed prostitution and uncontrolled liquor sales were morally wrong, but since these conditions were inevitable, the actions of participants or those failing to enforce relevant sumptuary laws should not be condemned. While publicly admiring the political effectiveness of Tammany Hall and its chief, Boss Tom Croker, he called Tammany followers benighted and easily led moral inferiors. He regularly condemned men of his own background and education for ignoring politics just as he assailed good government advocates among them for staying out of political machines which, he said, they could conquer from within and turn toward moral ends.⁸

► Steffens was unaware that his interviewing methods reflected a vacillating, inconsistent pattern, and the abundant information he received from a host of New Yorkers appeared to legitimize his procedures. He encouraged emulation of his approach by the young city reporting staff he gathered for *The Commercial Advertiser* between 1897 and 1901. Whenever possible, he continued using these methods when interviewing figures of note, like Colonel

and later Governor Roosevelt. Just as on *The Evening Post*, however, his interviewing talents continued to be vitiated by the editorial demands for short, genteel accounts about local events of limited interest to readers, by wearing deadlines and by inconsistent and partially-understood feelings about the men and events he happily observed.⁹

The perfecting of Steffens' talents in interviewing came swiftly in the wake of national acclaim and a sympathetic editorial environment for his muckraking. Readers, editors and friends after 1902, enthusiastically responding to his articles in various muckraking magazines, encouraged him to reflect upon and improve his manifold skills.

Each interview session presented dramatic, singular qualities to Lincoln Steffens, who never lost a love for the theater or an eye for human spectacle. He had a keen, sometimes overly-quick ability for setting and character which influenced his approach to men and vivified his writing. In 1904 he met Boss George Cox for the first time after climbing to the "mean little front hall-room" office over the Republican's boisterous Cincinnati saloon.

A great hulk of a man sat there alone, poring over a newspaper, with his back to the door. He did not look up. 'Mr. Cox?' I said. There was a grunt; that was all. 'Mr. Cox,' I said, 'I understand that you are the boss of Cincinnati.' His feet slowly moved his chair about, and a stolid face turned to mine. Two dark, sharp eyes studied me, and while they measured, I explained that I was a student of 'politics, corrupt politics, and bosses.' I repeated that I had heard he was the boss of Cincinnati. 'Are you?' I concluded. 'I am,' he grumbled in his harsh, throaty voice. 'Of course, you have a Mayor, and a council, and judges?' 'Yes,' he admitted; 'but—' he pointed with his thumb back over his shoulder to the desk—'I have a telephone, too.'¹⁰

City detectives assigned by Cox to watch Steffens and possible witnesses

⁸ I rely particularly on scrapbooks in the Steffens Papers which contain his unsigned articles in the two New York dailies and on lengthy columns I identified as Steffens' in *The [Sacramento] Daily Record Union*. LS to Joseph Steffens, Nov. 8, 1894; *Autobiography*, pp. 235-6, 312, 330.

⁹ Hutchins Hapgood, *Types from City Streets* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Co., 1910), pp. 108-11; LS to Joseph Steffens, March 23, 1898; *Autobiography*, pp. 312-21, 348.

¹⁰ LS, "Ohio: A Tale of Two Cities," *McClure's Magazine*, 8:297 (July 1905).

failed to frighten him. Nor did Cox's extensive and casual lying frustrate him; Steffens' careful investigations wore Cox's lies down into accurate admissions. Years later Steffens ascribed the boss' subsequent willingness to admit the truth to the fact that "Cox was 'square' and . . . I had made him feel that I was trusting him. And I did, and he rose to it." This remark reiterated Steffens' conception of himself as an interviewer who never badgered or denigrated his subjects. As a traveller from city to city, he was prepared to interview subjects in whatever setting was most comfortable to them, usually their home or place of business. In these localities he began as an outsider, but by his second visit he was often warmly greeted. In 1908 he sought out Martin Lomansey, an important Democratic ward boss, in his Boston pool room. Lomansey, who began by shouting, "What's your graft?" and followed by a string of charges apparently intended to throw the writer on the defensive, indicated in his notes that Steffens conveyed throughout the ordeal an impression of amusement, unflagging interest and cool composure. Within the first visit, the boss continued, "I gave it to him straight" on all questions asked.¹¹

Cox, Lomansey and a host of Americans were enveloped in Lincoln Steffens' aura of expertise. The aura was formed in part by his public image of being a knowledgeable "insider." It was a potent reputation, and he carefully fostered it. It was fed by rumors in various communities that he was preparing to muckrake their localities and that everyone should be ready for the exposure sure to follow. Many potential informants knew that he had access to explosive material from powerful national figures in newspaper offices, city halls, governors' mansions, the Congress and the White House. They watched him talk to dozens of men in their own towns, some their declared opponents, and suspected

these people of passing on confidential information. When Minneapolis reformers permitted him to borrow the Big Mitt Ledger, an exact day-by-day accounting of bribes paid by two crooked gamblers to their predecessors in office, he immediately carried it to the hiding place of the two men. By waving it in their faces, and thereby proving to them that "though a reporter, I was 'wise,'" he intimidated them into supplying more information on the city's graft operations.¹²

All of these interviews meant balancing the actions of the "insider" against personal detachment. If Steffens appeared too innocent to informants, it could make communicating with him seem hopeless. If he appeared too knowing, it could discourage a friendly witness' enjoyment in initiating him into secrets, or dispel any expectation that something new could be told him, or make a potential informant fear that Steffens knew too much about him already.

Shouters like Lomansey, stolid liars like Cox, the frightened and close-mouthed, even talkative Progressives who might have swamped him in a sea of enthusiastic trivia, failed to shake his cool poise. He would lean forward expectantly in a chair or perch casually on a window sill, blue eyes twinkling behind pince-nez glasses, smiling easily. When with a reformer, the two would joke, laugh, and together wax indignant about the hated System. When with those he privately considered crude, distasteful, or immoral, he remained the courteous "gentleman reporter."

► Steffens remained alert in interviews to hesitating remarks, incomplete statements, embarrassed silences, am-

¹¹ *Autobiography*, pp. 484-6; Lomansey's notes quoted in Leslie G. Ainley, *Boston Mahatma* (Boston: Bruce Humphries, 1949), pp. 182-4.

¹² "Steffens Not After Toledo," *Toledo Blade*, Jan. 7, 1904; "Rhode Island May Get Bumped" and "Is Rhode Island Corrupt?," *Providence Journal*, Aug. 17 and 18, 1904; George F. Ormsby to LS, Feb. 20, 1906; Theodore Roosevelt to Robert Joseph Collier, Oct. 27, 1904 in *Letters of Roosevelt*, IV, pp. 999-1000; *Autobiography*, pp. 380-4.

biguous comments and purposeful lies. Interviews were shaped around the informant rather than conducted in a formal, structured manner. In attempting to take advantage of unpredictable turns in discussion, he pressed for elaboration and clarification, reworded prepared questions, and, when suspicious, sought verification of assertions. "But you know, and I know," he informed President Roosevelt, "that big business men and politicians regard lying (to a 'muckraker') as virtuous." He rarely hesitated to challenge politely the accuracy of what was said. Casually he would cite a legislative document, newspaper clipping, or statement from his informant's enemy. He would read goodnaturedly from a telegram, shipping manifest or letter stolen by an angry employee from his informant's private files or furnished to Steffens by an important political or business figure. Or he would return the next day to confront the potential informant with additional proof. Not that he expected distortions, evasions or silence always to be lies. Some individuals simply were incapable of admitting their real intentions, in which case Steffens used the projective device of asking them "about other men, and usually the witness would attribute to all others the motives and purposes which guided him." For those informants who failed to understand the significance of events about which they had first-hand knowledge, Steffens would conscientiously and kindly press them, rephrase their awkward and ambiguous statements, reorder the sequence of events correctly in their minds, and shape and edit their final admissions before publishing them.

¹³ LS to Theodore Roosevelt, March 6, 1907; *Autobiography*, p. 489. Publisher Samuel S. McClure and Theodore Roosevelt thought his quotations sometimes inaccurate, but the muckraker, proud of never having been sued for libel, ignored these criticisms.

¹⁴ LS to William C. Bobbs, May 13, 1908 in *Letters*, I, p. 190; LS to Theodore Roosevelt, c.a. March, 1907; Theodore Roosevelt to LS, Nov. 4, 1907 in *Letters of Roosevelt*, V, pp. 829-30.

Since Steffens considered words less important than the larger truths they might expose and project, though some editors and occasional informants disagreed, he therefore felt justified in occasionally paraphrasing statements and offering these as exactly quoted remarks.¹³

The same flexibility was apparent in his repeated use of gossip. He thought that abundant hearsay on a topic usually indicated the truth and offered leads to crucial facts. Gossip, he told a disbelieving Theodore Roosevelt, "is only a guide to what I have to prove or convince myself of." In interviews, Steffens sometimes bluffed a witness into verifying the factualness of hearsay and adding to it. But gossip was only one element in the unstated bargaining and barter in his investigatory interviews. He was ready to trade from a considerable store of factual knowledge in exchange for information. He held substantial information before an interview, often more than he ever used in magazine pieces, and did not depend upon gossip for bluffing.¹⁴

At the height of national fame, Steffens described how he scrutinized important personages for muckraking articles. It was necessary

first, to clear your mind of all prepossessions, then go to the enemies and the friends of your subject. Take all that they all give you of charges, denials and boastings; see the man himself; listen sympathetically to his own story; and, to reduce to consistency the jumble of contradictions thus obtained, follow his career from birth through all its scenes, past all the eye-witnesses and documents to the probable truth. This sounds long and hard, and it is long, but it isn't hard with ordinary men.

The opening statement of this description contradicted his often-expressed conception of the central importance of moral judgment for any journalist. While trying to appear agreeable to and communicate empathy for all, so as to create rapport and induce candor, he

also firmly believed that a journalist "has to judge" his varied informants. His was the strong personal desire "to be the judge of the guilt or innocence of the men I write about . . ."¹⁵

In judging innocence or guilt, he advocated a detached and tolerant stance. The journalist should stand as a friendly intermediary between the interviewed person and the American public reading about him. Steffens was prepared to pledge anonymity for quotations, protection from prosecutors for self-incriminating statements and tolerance in unfolding to readers a man's often inglorious career. His muckraking was never a merciless exposure of individuals by name, and in interviews he usually tried to appear unthreatening. He would even intimate to hesitant informants that it was the readers, not Lincoln Steffens, who were the fair, final and democratic judge of whatever had transpired.¹⁶

Steffens' aim as an interviewer and writer, then, was to help the American people evaluate men and events in a manner that spurred them into action. Sharing these commitments, and anxious for publicity, most hard-battling Progressives were quite candid when he came to talk. While Progressives recognized him as an ally, political stand-patters, ward heelers and timber thieves could discern an enmity which sharply qualified the writer's declared role of friendly intermediary. Steffens boasted in 1905,

I am perfectly willing to take information from grafters so long as they know I come as an enemy and mean to treat them as such. But to go to grafters as friends and to take help from them which could put me under obligations always seemed to me to be bad journalism.

In this context, withholding damaging confessions made in interviews acquires a different perspective. "I don't have to tell all the truth," he said, "one-tenth is sufficient to make any decent man rise feeling outraged."¹⁷

Sure of his own purposes, Steffens believed that he could fathom those of informants and procure their information, no matter what they had done or wished to happen or wanted him to think or write. He sometimes obtained valuable confessions from thieves, policemen, politicians or their businessmen cronies when they turned against one another over division of a city's booty and were predisposed to inform on former compatriots.

Steffens could also have thanked his ability to understand, sometimes in exactly, that garrulous informants, whether of his sort or not, had immediate wants which an honest interview could instrumentally serve. In other words, any explanation for Steffens' skill in obtaining valuable interview material derived from the subtle interactions he developed within interviews, and also from his ability to assist, knowingly or unknowingly, an informant's compelling concerns. When officials of the Gould railroad system promised in 1903 to provide witnesses and secret information to *McClure's Magazine* if Steffens would expose Pittsburgh's corruption, he suspected their generosity was aimed at forcing the Matthew Quay Republican organi-

¹⁵ LS, "Hearst, The Man of Mystery," *The American Magazine* 68:3-4 (November 1906); LS, "The New School of Journalism," *op. cit.*, 176; LS to Theodore Roosevelt, March 6, 1907.

¹⁶ Sherwin, "Speaking of Roving Reporters," *loc. cit.* Steffens' desire to appear friendly in interviews included permitting some important informants to censor statements about them and others appearing in his manuscripts prior to publication. Theodore Roosevelt to LS, April 19, 1900 in *Letters of Roosevelt*, II, p. 1267; LS to John Reed, June 6, 1914 in *Letters I*, p. 342; Eugene V. Debs to LS, Sept. 21, 1908.

¹⁷ "Lincoln Steffens in Colby's Train," unidentified [October] 1905 New Jersey newspaper clipping in Steffens Papers; *Proceedings of the Atlantic City Conference for Good City Government and the Twelfth Annual Meeting of the National Municipal League* (unp.: National Municipal League, 1906), p. 35; LS, *The Shame of the Cities* (New York: McClure, Phillips Co., 1904), p. 34; "Philadelphians are Grafting—Not the Ring Alone, but Philadelphians High and Low," says Lincoln Steffens," *The [New York] World*, May 21, 1905; Anonymous, "An Exposer of Municipal Corruption," *The Bookman*, 13:251 (November 1903).

zation and its allied Pennsylvania Railroad to grant city terminal space to the Gould line. Nevertheless, "It was a great chance for me." He thought "that the Goulds' plan was to talk business diplomatically to the faces of the Pittsburgh bosses while I was kicking them from behind, but I didn't care." That the Gould officials reneged on the offer was no fault of Steffens'.¹⁸

His relationship with George Cox and trust-promoter James B. Dill reveal how situational needs of informants could encourage sporadically truthful accounts in interviews. In 1904 and again in 1905 Steffens investigated Cincinnati's politics for *McClure's*. He told Roosevelt that although local insurgents might successfully challenge the Republican boss in the autumn of 1905, "Cox rules Cincinnati absolutely; I never say anything like it." Cox had repeatedly bragged to him of the machine's proven effectiveness and of his being its unquestioned leader; he seemed unafraid of any reform journalist's castigation. "There's only one divides [the graft] here," Cox stated for quotation. The *McClure's* correspondent added that the boss' increasing age and vanity compelled this boast and that it applied "only [to] political graft, the campaign fund, police blackmail, contracts, etc., etc., and even that goes partly to others." Steffens' emphatic reiteration of Cox's suzerainty could help to keep followers faithful and potential challengers among Cox's lieutenants quiescent at a time when local insurgents were pressing hard upon their organization. Cox did not especially fear a *McClure's* piece would damage his candidates among voters. In addition, Steffens' national publicity, which elsewhere brought outside support to Progressives, in this case in-

formed interested business and political leaders elsewhere that if they wished to cooperate with any political boss in the Queen City, they would have to conduct their affairs only through George Cox. His magazine attack ironically substantiated Cox's rule.¹⁹

Steffens' close acquaintance with James B. Dill, who befriended him as a young Wall Street reporter in 1893 and frequently discussed business and politics with him thereafter, was unusually fruitful for a writer who considered Dill an important figure in the dastardly System. Steffens admired and respected the attorney and knew him as the author of New Jersey's corporation law of 1889, which, in national anti-trust sentiment, made the state the first systematic perpetrator of trusts. Dill told the shocked Wall Street correspondent that he also "had led and inspired and provided the ammunition for the exposure of the James B. Dill laws of New Jersey" so that indignant national publicity, to which Steffens had already contributed, would attract through Dill's capable hands, as it did, many additional incorporations in the state. The promoter also regaled the young reporter with tales of business skulduggery which appeared too shocking or incredible to report in *The Evening Post*. Later, Steffens' own investigations led him to trust Dill's veracity. One of Upton Sinclair's revelations in 1905 was suggestive of how Dill's needs were served by reformers. The attorney admitted to Sinclair that he was secretly directing a publicity bureau in New York City for the purpose of inspiring reform journalistic exposure of the supposedly corrupt management of the Equitable Life Assurance Society. Sinclair was convinced that Dill's was a power play using naive reform journalists to force the Equitable and other insurance corporations into the hands of J. P. Morgan and Thomas F. Ryan's men. The same year, while investigating New Jersey for what became two authorita-

¹⁸ *Autobiography*, pp. 399-402.

¹⁹ LS to Theodore Roosevelt, Aug. 7, 1905; LS, "Ohio: A Tale of Two Cities," *op. cit.*, 309; Frank R. Kent, *The Great Game of Politics* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1928), p. 93.

tive articles, Steffens often conversed with Dill, apparently one of two unnamed insiders whom he reported as offering to "furnish the facts if I would write an article showing the methods by which some typical big corporations were being 'wrecked.'"²⁰

Fully realizing Dill was no reformer, Steffens knew that Dill wanted change in institutions the promoter had helped to create, and that Dill appeared to arrange interviews and information accordingly. After two decades of firm control, Steffens wrote, New Jersey's political-financial masters had decided that the state's unrestrained practices had become "a menace to corporate and all other businesses" throughout the nation. His articles, reporting Dill's central role in the initial enactment, publicizing and implementing of its corporate legislation, described New Jersey as "abused by her progeny, the trusts; betrayed by the agents of her treason; outdone in self-prostitution by sister States, younger and even more reckless" in copying New Jersey's vile practices. Dill and leading corporate figures, recognizing that New Jersey-type regulation had become vexatious to

interstate corporations, had joined President Roosevelt in endorsing federal corporate regulation. This recent reversal of business sentiment "makes me think," Steffens stated—and then fell silent. For Dill and his friends, the muckraker's careful tracing of New Jersey's failure at corporate regulation and his publicizing of substitute federal regulation were probably quite satisfactory. The articles, after all, came from one with impeccable reform credentials, wove in details the promoter and his friends provided, and spoke to readers, unaware of Dill's campaign, who would believe that Steffens' arguments struck manly blows at The System. The communicator, communication and audience corresponded.²¹

²⁰ *Autobiography*, pp. 193-6; Upton Sinclair, *The Brass Check* (Pasadena, Calif.: The Author, [1920]), p. 228 cf. Morton Keller, *The Life Insurance Enterprise, 1885-1910* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 247, 326fn. LS, "New Jersey: A Traitor State, Part II," *McClure's Magazine* 25:41-55 (May 1905).

²¹ LS, "New Jersey," *loc. cit.*; Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), pp. 63-4; Robert Wiebe, *Businessmen and Reform* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 50.

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I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete.
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