Room One: San Francisco in the New Century

Politics and Politicians

Large cities across America enjoyed strong-willed, if not nefarious, politicians. San Francisco enjoyed a different twist on this theme, a man behind the scenes. Of French and Jewish descent, Abraham Ruef was an intelligent, shrewd man who had been involved in politics for most of his adult life. He joined the Republican Party at the age of 21, but became disillusioned with the confines of formal party structure. Turning toward a more lucrative career as legal counsel for labor unions and other private clients, Ruef saw the advantage of matching politics with parallel enterprises. He established the Union Labor Party in 1901 and plucked Eugene Schmitz from the orchestra pit, successfully installing the former conductor as the head of a puppet city government.

Schmitz may have occupied the Mayor's seat, but Ruef was the real power behind the throne, directing his party to electoral victories in 1903 and 1905. Ruef and his followers declared that they stood for the common man against institutional elitism. Their opponents charged that the Union Labor Party meant graft and corruption. Yet as long as the city prospered, there seemed little Democratic and Republican leaders could do.