
Robert Moses Narrative

- ☐ I can use the story of Robert Moses to assess his Progressive ideas for planning New York City and evaluate their impact.
- ☐ I can analyze how unelected public officials can manipulate systems for personal power.
- ☐ I can identify the benefits of moderation and deliberation support self-government in a democracy.

Essential Vocabulary

immoderation (extremism)	Acting in excess or to an extreme. Lacking restraint.
moderation	The avoidance of excess or extremes.
bonds	debt instruments through which governments or companies borrow money from investors and repay it with interest

In the late 1920s, New York was on the verge of becoming a modern metropolis. The city had become one of the world's major financial and cultural centers, skyscrapers of steel and glass climbed high above the streets, and rising prosperity led to growing suburbs, consumer goods, and greater leisure. However, the city still teemed with many problems that had plagued it for decades. Millions of New Yorkers suffered dilapidated, crowded tenements, grinding poverty, and inadequate infrastructure of roads and bridges. Soon, the Great Depression would exacerbate these problems.

One unelected official in seemingly unimportant local offices, Robert Moses, would soon use the power he amassed to achieve his vision for ushering New York into the modern age. Moses was a reformer who studied at Yale, Oxford, and Columbia University. He believed that political parties and politics were filled with corruption, bribery, and patronage. Moses adopted the views of Progressive reformers from the first decades of the twentieth century.

Progressives believed that the solution to the corrupt political system was rule by academic experts in executive branch agencies at federal, state, and local levels of government. These experts were guided by the principles of scientific management, efficiency, and reason to bring order to society and serve the public good. They wanted to create a more orderly and planned society free from the messy and time-consuming politics of deliberation, compromise, and consensus-building in Congress, state

legislatures, and other representative bodies and elected officials.

During a 40-year public career, Moses pursued his vision of a planned society for the public good from a dozen appointed offices, most of which he held simultaneously. He won and exercised greater power to control projects and public money to implement his vision of a planned society. As he gained this power, he increasingly became **immoderate** in his use of public power—imposing his will, silencing his opponents, brushing aside community concerns, and ignoring the ways his decisions affected others' lives. He was excessive and lacked restraint in exercising his power. He sought to crush any who got in his way, because he thought he knew better than everyone else how to create a better city for all New Yorkers.

In the mid-1920s, New York governor Alfred Smith appointed his young ally, Moses, to be the Long Island Park Commissioner for a 6-year term with a special provision preventing even the governor from removing him from office. Moses used millions of dollars from the state legislature to buy land and sometimes strong-arm farmers into selling. He himself wrote in the law the power simply to appropriate land for public use. He built extensive and elaborate facilities at Jones Beach with adjoining parking lots for the public to enjoy. He had no authority to build highways to reach the beaches, so as the parks commissioner, he built roads called “parkways” as extensions of the state park. Soon, hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers were enjoying their leisure time driving their cars to the beach for a day excursion.

Moses heavily publicized his achievements and won great public praise promoting himself. He used this newfound popularity to build an even greater base of political power in the city. In the mid-1930s, he won appointment to head a variety of other executive positions including NYC Department of Parks Commissioner, the Emergency Public Works Commissioner, and most importantly, the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority. At the same time, President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal agencies such as the Public Works Administration and Works Progress Administration sent tens millions of dollars to the city for relief and public projects, which Moses controlled.

Moses used the windfall of federal funds to build swimming pools, parks, playgrounds, sports fields, parkways, bridges, and tunnels into a planned and efficient whole. He became increasingly popular, using the media to craft his public image and touting his achievements in grand ceremonies. He was shaping the city largely according to his own vision with thousands of engineers, architects, and workers under him. He was increasingly becoming as powerful as any mayor or governor in the Empire State and won several disputes with them. His success made him increasingly indispensable.

The Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority chairmanship afforded Moses the greatest means of increasing his power. A “public authority” was a corporation established by the state legislature to benefit the public and was usually related to infrastructure projects. Moses discovered that they had the power to issue **bonds** for related projects and could set tolls on bridges and roads to collect revenue to pay off the **bonds** or to fund other projects. Moses used the revenue (amounting to millions of dollars annually) to fund projects that he controlled. By acquiring the power to build “approach roads” to his bridges and tunnels, he built a massive network of roads, few of which he did not control.

During the New Deal and postwar periods, Moses controlled more than \$1 billion of federal and state spending on housing in New York City. Congress aimed the Wagner-Steagall Act (1937) at the creation of public housing and the Federal Housing Act (1949) at slum clearance and development by private-public partnerships. Moses directed the projects in order to redesign and modernize the city according to his vision from a variety of administrative positions including the State Department of Public Works, the Slum Clearance Committee, and the City Construction Coordinator.

Moses leapt into action and employed his legions drafting architectural plans, evicting tenants, and razing buildings. However, his all-consuming **immoderate** commitment to his plan for New York trumped his concern for individuals, families, and communities, especially the poorer ones. He grew arrogant and dismissive of any opposition. He did not care about democratic processes and sought to silence any voices who dared criticize or resist his expert plans. As a result, fissures began to appear in the political empire of Robert Moses.

In the postwar era, New York's citizens began to speak up against Moses' imperious ways. More than 170,000 New Yorkers were evicted from their homes after the war, and many could not afford to relocate and received little assistance. His decisions changed entire neighborhoods and affected shopkeepers, schools, houses of worship, and friendships. In 1956, a group of educated mothers were outraged when Moses wanted to turn a part of Central Park into a parking lot and quickly mobilized their legal, media, and political connections to whip up a frenzy of popular wrath against Moses, who finally relented. When he tried to ram an expressway through Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village in the early 1960s, the citizenry, newspapers like the Village Voice, and public intellectuals attacked Moses relentlessly. They also hired their own experts to develop alternative plans for consideration, but Moses ignored them. Soon, his aura of political control and invincibility as a crusader for the public good was shattered. He seemed to be a man who exercised power without restraint.

Moses resigned several of his positions in frustration and disgust but still kept a firm grip on the Triborough Authority. He was offered the presidency of the 1964 World's Fair, hosted by New York. It seemed like a fitting position as a crowning achievement for his 40 years of public service. However, the fair was plagued by highly-publicized financial troubles when Moses gave lucrative contracts to favored contractors and tried to use leftover ticket receipts to restore the site and build a park. Financial investigations followed, and many others in city and state governments were simply tired of Moses' **immoderate** manner.

Over the next few years, Governor Nelson Rockefeller and Mayor John Lindsay took on the politically vulnerable Robert Moses. They ignored his ultimatums and let him follow through on his threat to resign. Eventually, they removed his power base by folding the Triborough Authority into a larger Metropolitan Transportation Authority. Moses was effectively done.

Robert Moses was a grand builder who used the levers of political power in obscure New York City offices to create a planned society for the modern era. New York City stands in many ways as a monument to Moses's achievements. Its standing as the financial and

cultural capital of the modern world can be attributed in no small part to the triumphs of Moses. However, he **immoderately** believed that only he held the key to the city's greatness and did not want to listen to anyone else. Only he had the vision and the will to make it a reality. He rejected deliberative democracy and representation in democratic institutions to get things done his way and shape the city according to his own wishes. The people and their representatives eventually deposed him from power to govern themselves democratically.

Analysis Questions

1. How did Robert Moses's ideas reflect the Progressive reform movement?
2. The essay emphasizes Moses's "immoderation." What does that mean in this context? Provide specific examples of how his immoderate actions helped and hurt New Yorkers.
3. How did New Yorkers push back against Moses's decisions? What do these examples show about the role of civic action in a democracy?
4. How does the story of Robert Moses raise questions about the balance between efficiency and democratic deliberation in American government?