



Mr. Speaker!: The Life and Times of Thomas B. Reed The Man Who Broke the Filibuster

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James Grant's enthralling biography of Thomas B. Reed, Speaker of the House during one of the most turbulent times in American history--the Gilded Age, the decades before the ascension of reformer President Theodore Roosevelt--brings to life one of the brightest, wittiest, and most consequential political stars in our history.

The last decades of the nineteenth century were a volatile era of rampantly corrupt politics. It was a time of both stupendous growth and financial panic, of land bubbles and passionate and sometimes violent populist protests. Votes were openly bought and sold in a Congress paralyzed by the abuse of the House filibuster by members who refused to respond to roll call even when present, depriving the body of a quorum. Reed put an end to this stalemate, empowered the Republicans, and changed the House of Representatives for all time.

The Speaker's beliefs in majority rule were put to the test in 1898, when the sinking of the U.S.S. *Maine* in Havana Harbor set up a popular clamor for war against Spain. Reed resigned from Congress in protest.

A larger-than-life character, Reed checks every box of the ideal biographical subject. He is an important and significant figure. He changed forever the way the House of Representatives does its business. He was funny and irreverent. He is, in short, great company. "What I most admire about you, Theodore," Reed once remarked to his earnest young protégé, Teddy Roosevelt, "is your original discovery of the Ten Commandments."

After he resigned his seat, Reed practiced law in New York. He was successful. He also found a soul mate in the legendary Mark Twain. They admired one another's mordant wit. Grant's lively and erudite narrative of this tumultuous era--the raucous late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries--is a gripping portrait of a United States poised to burst its bounds and of the men who were defining it.

Mr. Speaker!: The Life and Times of Thomas B. Reed The Man Who Broke the Filibuster Details

Date : Published May 10th 2011 by Simon & Schuster

ISBN : 9781416544937

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Format : Hardcover 426 pages

Genre : Biography, History, Politics, Nonfiction, North American History, American History



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From Reader Review Mr. Speaker!: The Life and Times of Thomas B. Reed The Man Who Broke the Filibuster for online ebook

Aaron Million says

Thomas Reed's claim to fame, as it is, stems from the fact that he pushed through the end of the filibuster in the U.S. House of Representatives. While he was Speaker for six years, and served in Congress for twenty-two years, he had almost no legislation behind his name and never held any other office, despite being a (very) dark-horse candidate for President in 1896. To say he was a candidate is even a stretch as he just sat back and waited to see what happened - which basically was absolutely nothing as far as his perspective was concerned.

We get glimpses of Reed's larger than life personality. He himself was also larger than life physically thanks to his obesity. In addition to an insatiable appetite, he taught himself French, had a sharp, rather biting wit that he employed with impunity in the House, and seemed to be less than faithful to his wife. However, Grant chooses to focus on the professional side of Reed's life. Reed's wife makes occasional appearances, and his daughter even less so. Reed took many trips to Europe, but none are covered in detail. On page 21, Reed goes from finishing up his service as an Assistant Paymaster in the Civil War to being in the Maine legislature. More context and review of Reed's early life and rise in politics is needed.

Instead, Grant forces the reader to slog through page after page of boring House speeches by an interminable cast of members. complete with denotations for when applause occurred and for which political party the applause was for. If this were just one or two key periods in Reed's career, it would be more understandable. But Grant does this constantly. He also tends to shift rapidly from one thing to the next without notice. Additionally, though the book is mainly chronological, often times Grant quickly goes back a year or two and this leaves the reader trying to remember what year the current part of the book is in.

One area that Grant seems especially interested in is the battle over which currency to use in the late 1800s. Page after page is devoted to fiscal policy and discussion of the fight between bimetallists (those who wanted both gold and silver as the standard U.S. currency), soft money persons (those who preferred a paper currency to that of coins), and those advocating either for or against gold or silver. The gold standard and the consequences of being on it or off of it also seems to cause Grant to get bogged down. If anyone has an interest in this particular area of study, they will find this interesting. But if not...

This book will most likely not appeal to many people. Unless you are particularly interested in late 1800s economic policy, currency issues, the House of Representatives, this book will read more as a bland history textbook than the biography of a Speaker of the House.

Converse says

James Grant has written an entertaining biography of the Maine Republican who was Speaker of the U. S. House of Representatives for part of the 1890s and was elected to the House for about 20 years in the decades after the Civil War. The "filibuster" referred to was a different procedure than the Senate filibuster, but with the same object of obstructing legislative work. It required that the minority party in the house be sufficiently numerous so that without them the house did not have enough members for a quorum. The way it

worked was that members of the house although physically present, would not verbally announce their presence during a roll call vote. They claimed that if they did not vote, they were not present, and therefore the House did not have a quorum. For decades both parties had found this procedure so useful when in the minority they had tolerated it. Although Reed had led filibusters in the past, he broke with the procedure when he became speaker, counted all of those actually present, and after a few days the Democratic representatives conceded defeat. After the next election the Democrats were in the majority; after goaded sufficiently by Reed, they took up his procedure of counting all those present, whether voting or not. The precedent thus stuck and that particular form of obstruction has not been revived.

If this event was the only reason to learn about Reed, there would be little interest in a book about him. Fortunately, he was more interesting than that. He had wit, generally expressed in put downs to Democrats during debate. He had a refreshingly low-key and ironic attitude towards his year of rather pacific service in the Union Navy during the Civil War, which was spent on a gunboat stationed on the Mississippi and its tributaries. And after losing control of the House during the run up to the Spanish-American war, he decided not to run for re-election and thus be involved in the politics of a small empire of which he disapproved. After a short but renumerative career as a Wall Street lawyer, he died suddenly, possibly of a combination of a ruptured appendix and Bright's disease, during a visit to Washington D. C. in the 1901.

Robert B. B. says

<http://greasedpig.blogspot.com/2012/0...>

Robert Hoffman says

Mr. Grant does a nice job to make two challenging topics - monetary economics and House parliamentary procedure - easy to understand, as well as relevant for the period being covered and the present day. Speaker Reed sought and achieved a higher level of functionality out of Congress at a time when it was needed. If you think today's government is dysfunctional, you will find that there is a pattern to this craziness throughout our history.

Socraticgadfly says

Cut it one-third and it would be better. Cut that another one-third and add some new stuff and it would be better yet.

James Grant, founder of Grant's Interest Rate Review, adds little to any in-depth understanding of one of our seminal Speakers of the House, Thomas B. "Czar" Reed.

He DOES, though, take the Panic of 1873 and the Panic of 1893 to repeatedly give discourses on monetarism, the gold standard, bimetallism, etc., almost as if he were a kinder, gentler, more academic Ron Paul speaking to the world of today.

Beyond that, Grant buys the "historical party line" on McKinley, a McKinley who in reality was looking to annex the Philippines from the time of his inauguration.

I wasn't thoroughly disappointed, but, I wasn't much more than that, either.

Reed needs a better, more comprehensive account than this, and one that looks at this history of his times in their own right, rather than a cheap didactic sounding board.

Bart says

Modern economic zealotry masquerading as history. Very poor form.

Craig Adamson says

Reviewed in Barron's 9-5-2011. Written by James Grant (of Grant's Interest Rate Observer fame).

Although I was excited about the author, I was disappointed in the book overall. It was not as engaging as I had hoped. There was not as much humor in the book as I'd anticipated based on Thomas Reed's renowned wit.

What the book did delve into quite a bit was procedure and the intricacies of floor debates and rules in the US House. Reed's claim to fame was breaking the filibuster through various maneuverings. In many ways, he is a hero. While Teddy Roosevelt commented that Reed's abilities allowed Congress to do more... both good and bad, it was better than the constant back and forth with no result at the end of the day.

I may come back and read this again one day in the hopes I will find it more compelling. But based on this reading, I will likely filibuster that effort by reading many, many other books in the meantime.

Joe says

Thomas Reed, (1839-1902), was a Republican Congressman from Maine, serving from 1877-1899, and was Speaker of the House during the Presidential terms of both Grover Cleveland and William McKinley. Reed was arguably one of the more influential/powerful politicians to hold that position, nicknamed "Czar" Reed during his tenure. He then resigned from that lofty position and the House of Representatives in 1899, frustrated with his lack of power after the country went to war against Spain - a bold statement indeed.

Reed was "ahead of his time" on such issues as civil rights and women's suffrage, not so much on free trade – he was a pro-tariff kind of guy. He also found the parliamentary machinations of Congress frustrating, constantly battling and goading his peers to change the rule-book – which Reed actually did once he became Speaker - so they could actually legislate and do their jobs. Reed also had a quick wit. When asked about being nominated by his party for the presidency he quipped, "They could do worse, and they probably will." He opined that, "A statesman is a successful politician who is dead." And after being shown the portrait above, he muttered, "Well I hope my enemies are satisfied." (For the record, the artist, John Singer Sargent, was less than satisfied with the end result also. And, yes, Reed and Mark Twain were "buddies".)

Since most of us do not remember him, “a life and times” of Mr. Reed is a worthy effort. Although it should be noted, with this book there’s a very heavy emphasis on “the times” – not a criticism, just an observation. Among the many topics chronicled here – the 1876 Presidential election, which makes the recent 2000 election look like a mere misunderstanding. The much heated and very lengthy monetary debate concerning the gold standard, bimetallism, i.e. silver and gold, greenbacks, the government surplus – the country actually had one back then – and inflation. And one that won’t fail to entertain – “counting the Quorum”. Back in Reed’s time Congress had a quirk in its procedures which allowed members to be physically present, but technically absent – thus allowing said members to “excuse themselves” from matters they didn’t care to contemplate, let alone vote on, without leaving the building or even the room. The author chronicles a few candid moments of such shenanigans which reads like a Monty Python skit.

This book is at its best when delving into and exploring the politics and personalities – including Reed’s - of the late 19th Century – and there were plenty of both. Yet it does drag at times, particularly when explaining/discussing monetary and economic theory, which may even test the patience of policy wonks. Also some of the Congressional transcripts presented here are too long. On the whole though, this is still an engaging and very interesting book. And well worth the read, if for nothing else, highlighting that Congressional partisan obstruction is by no means a new or recent phenomenon.

Brandon Shultz says

This is a great read for anyone interested in turn of the century politics. It goes through the major policy debates of the 1880-1890s including the many debates that started well before hand and were decided during the partisan era of American politics. It displays gilded age politics in a true form and shows the partisan arguments that helped establish policy debates that went on for years in the future.

Bradley America says

Not as raucous as it was made out to be

Ben says

One critic called Thomas Reed "the most fascinating politician you've never heard of", which is actually a seriously qualifying statement, because if a politician truly was all that fascinating, you probably WOULD HAVE heard of him. Much of this book is devoted to rules of order, Congressional administrative procedures, and endless debate on bi-metallism and the gold standard. I actually find the Gilded Age a very interesting period in American history, but as this book proves, all that is gilded is not necessarily gold. (What keeps this book at a solid 3 stars for me: it's nice to look back at a time when Congress was about getting things done - and by Republicans, no less!)

Hadrian says

A very interesting book about a very influential man, but one who has been forgotten from history.

The 'filibuster' of the title is not the one we are only too familiar with in the Senate - instead, it is a sneaky method of preventing a quorum from being reached in the House. Reed smashed that, as well as a famous 'do-nothing Congress', and made the government of his era one of the most active in history.

The details of political minutiae are a bit dull for the unequipped reader, but those who are ready can find a delightful and interesting biography of a forgotten man who shaped our government forever.

Lauri says

Started out interesting but far too bogged down in detail for the casual political/history reader.

Arminius says

Thomas B. Reed served two separate terms as Speaker of the House of Representatives. He served as Speaker during the presidencies of Benjamin Harrison, Grover Cleveland and William McKinley. Ironically he resembled President Cleveland being a little bit larger in physical stature with a 6 feet tall 300 pounds frame.

Reed was born and raised in the state of Maine. He attended Bowdoin College, earned a law degree and served in the Navy during the Civil war. He was very bright with an incredible wit. He used this attributes to win an election to the U.S. House of Representatives in the year 1868.

He served as a mentor to future President Theodore Roosevelt. He also appointed future president and political rival William McKinley to the powerful chairmanship of the Ways and Means committee. This is where McKinley made his name with his tariff legislation.

Reed was a protectionist meaning that he favored tariffs. His overriding philosophy was that the majority ruled. If the majority wanted it, it should be granted.

His was known for increasing the power of the Speakership. He eliminated a common parliamentarian obstructionist tactic known as the disappearing quorum (the minimum number of members present to allow a vote). The disappearing quorum is where house members knowing their side would lose would not show up for the vote. At the time all 166 house members had to be present to have a quorum. So the simple act of not showing up prevented a bill from passing. Speaker Reed combated this by reading a roll call of names not present and telling the Clerk to count each name as present. He turned this procedure in to what was called the Reed Rule. The Reed rule allowed house members who were not present to be counted as present. He also reduced the minimum number required to be present to form a quorum to 100.

Some of his views included being a proponent for women's suffrage, a supporter of high tariffs to protect American Industry, an opponent of the Spanish American War and annexation of Hawaii.

Reed retired from politics in 1899. Soon after his retirement, his mentee Theodore Roosevelt ascended to the

presidency. In political retirement, Reed obtained a lucrative job at the Wall Street law firm Simpson, Thacher & Barnum. There he made over \$50,000 (over \$1.2 million in today's dollars) in earnings. For those who think that politicians just live off the public dole take a look at Speaker Reed's example. He chose a role in government despite having the skills to earn much more money in the private sector. He died as one of the greatest unrecognized political forces in American history in 1902.

Doris says

I remember first encountering Thomas Reed in Barbara Tuchman's *The Proud Tower*. At that time, alas, there didn't seem to be a biography of him in print, but he lingered in the back of my mind. This book remedies that lack.

Reed was twice Speaker of the House during the 'Gilded Age' before resigning his office in protest against the rising American imperialism that led to the Spanish-American war. He was a dark horse candidate for the presidency, and, as the subtitle notes, he was the man who ended the House practice of the 'filibuster'. The House filibuster differed from the Senate filibuster in that the House filibuster apparently refers to the practice of House members refusing to acknowledge their presence, thereby denying the House the needed quorum to conduct business.

House politics of this era was enormously complex in other respects as well: this was a time of contested elections, and monetary policy (i.e., 'free silver') was hotly argued subject. I have to admit that I got rather bogged down in all the political minutiae.

While I appreciated finally having a biography of Reed, for my taste, it fell short. While much was made in the book of Reed's wit, there were all too few examples. (Of course, it may just be a case of much of it being too topical to be appreciated without additional explanation.) Still, it was a worthwhile read.

And, I notice that 'Reed's Parliamentary Rules' are still in print.
