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Thomas Brackett Reed - Exemplification of Effective Debating . . .

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Thomas B. Reed served the First Maine District in the House of Representatives for twenty-two years, from 1877 to 1899. Although he is not remembered today as well as his contemporaries Blaine, McKinley, Beveridge, Lodge, and Roosevelt, he achieved great prominence in the 1890's because of his ruling over the House of Representatives as Speaker "Czar" Reed during the 51st., 54th., and 55th. Congresses. Beginning with 1887, he was nominated for the Speakership in six consecutive Congresses and elected in three. His name thus became one of the nine Speakers who were elected for three or more Congresses. (1) Actually, he was the acknowledged leader of the Republican party for the twelve year period from 1887 until his retirement in 1899. (2)

Reed was accused of many things during his life, but never did anyone say he lacked ideas. Besides speaking on a variety of subjects, he wrote considerably. In a series of articles in the NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW, he discussed the function and nature of debate. Congressional debate, he said, was speaking "made and listened to for the purpose of elucidating the principles of a law proposed or of settling its details, and . . . for the purpose of enlightening the outside world." (3) Or, as he explained further and more vividly: "Debating . . . is not in itself an end or aim. A Pullman car is a most admirable adjunct to travel, but staying in a Pullman car which does not go out of the station is not travelling. Endless debate which leads no whither is just as much a prerogative of parliament as if the veriest tyrant did it." (4) In other words, the paramount function of debate, in Reed's opinion, was to evaluate legislation so as to make its passage or defeat possible.

What was the nature of debate which would achieve this function?

First, it should be short. Reed distinguished between speech making and debate. Speech-making was the long, oratorical outburst which a Congressman made to satisfy himself and his constituents. Debate, on the other hand, consisted of short speeches—usually not exceeding ten minutes (5)—dealing with reasons why legislation should be passed or defeated. (6) As he expressed it: "When debate becomes the rule and speech-making the exception, we shall have a better state of things in that regard; for speech-making contributes more than anything else to the ruin of debate." (7)

Second, debate should be impromptu speaking. A Congressman then would say "only such things as he knew well enough not to need a manuscript to aid his faltering brain." (8)

Third, it should be fresh. It should not consist of "solemn repetitions of stale arguments" nor should it "meander through the dreary hours with oft-repeated platitudes." (9)

Lastly, it should arise out of the rough and tumble of Congressional combat. It required an audience so that it could fulfill its function of aiding in deliberation. "Deliberation implies thought, and not necessarily words, except as they are food for thought." (10) If an audience is absent, there can be words, but no interplay of thought. A Senator might deliver a great oration to four bare walls, but this would not be debating. (11)

This, then, was Reed's conception in brief of the function and nature of debate. How well did his speaking exemplify his own standards of effective debating?

According to one of his biographers, "Reed fulfilled all his own requirements for the first class debater." (12) If one studies the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD, he becomes aware of this fact. Reed's speeches were frequent, short, spontaneous rejoinders. For example, in the 52nd Congress alone (1891-'93), Reed arose on ninety separate occasions to take part in debate. (13) As a matter of fact, during his twenty-two years in the House, Reed gave only three long so-called "set speeches" which were carefully prepared in advance. (14)

Furthermore, there were in his debating no repetitions of "oft-repeated platitudes" nor "stale arguments." His spoken as well as his written style was "punchy", epigrammatic, possessing a kick. One of his Congressional associates, J. H. Walker of Massachusetts, once said that should the Book of Proverbs be lost, Tom Reed would be the best man in the world to rewrite them. (15)

In addition, he possessed a cutting, satirical wit which enraged his opponents and delighted his colleagues. His replies to incidents which occurred in the House were instantaneous. It seemed as though he thought in a satirical vein and could not change the habit. It was a natural tendency he was unable to control. (16) Once a member of the House hesitantly began a speech with "I was thinking, Mr. Speaker,—I was thinking—" when in the brief pause Reed replied: "The Chair begs that no one will interrupt the gen-

tleman's commendable innovation."⁽¹⁷⁾ One of his special targets for sarcasm was Representative Springer, from Illinois. On one occasion, Springer asked for unanimous consent to correct a misstatement. Reed, then not the Speaker of the House, piped up: "No correction needed. We didn't think it was so when you made it."⁽¹⁸⁾

Reed also possessed the ability to state precisely the heart of an argument stripped of all its verbiage. For example, when Congress was debating paying indemnity to the College of William and Mary for Civil War damages, Reed opposed the measure in these words:

"You may bring together Bunker Hill and Yorktown, Massachusetts and Virginia and tie them together with all the flowers of rhetoric that ever bloomed since the Garden of Eden, but you cannot change the plain historic fact that no nation on earth ever was so imbecile and idiotic as to establish a principle that would more nearly bankrupt its treasury after victory than after defeat."⁽¹⁹⁾

Joe Cannon once remarked about this ability of Reed's to state a proposition succinctly: "I have never heard my distinguished friend from Maine take the floor upon any subject but that I did not feel sometimes regretful that I could not crystallize an idea, if I had one, as he does, roll it up with my hands into proper shape and hurl it at the head of my opponent."⁽²⁰⁾

Henry L. Stoddard's tribute to Reed as a debater is particularly significant because Stoddard rode the Blaine, Harrison, McKinley bandwagons and was therefore less attracted to Reed: "No Congressional leader was ever so perfectly adapted to the function of leadership in majority or minority. . . . He knew the peril of too great brilliance and too little facts, and always thoroughly prepared for debate. . . . My judgment is that he was the ablest debater the Republicans ever had in Congress."⁽²¹⁾

We have seen that Reed had a clear notion of what Congressional debate should be and that his debating fulfilled these standards. Even more important was the fact that his whole Congressional career was devoted to the setting up of conditions in Congress which would make true debate possible. The outcome of this devotion was REED'S PARLIAMENTARY RULES. But what is left in history is the misconception that Reed was an enemy of debate who wished to gag and kill it. This idea arose no doubt from his own statement: "Thank God, the House is no longer a deliberative body." This was a facetious statement and what he really meant by it must be interpreted in light of the circumstances which gave rise to it. Beginning with

1882, Congress became, year after year, more and more impotent as a legislative body. The question was not what legislation should be passed, but whether Congress could legislate at all.⁽²²⁾ Obstructive tactics of refusing a quorum, putting dilatory motions and using indefinite speech-making literally stopped the wheels of Congress. In 1889, Representative Weaver of Iowa, by the illegitimate use of legitimate parliamentary motions, completely tied up Congress for eight days. Reed himself estimated that in the 50th Congress, with the taking of 458 needless roll calls, at least thirty legislative days were wasted!⁽²³⁾ These obstructive tactics, which hindered debate and prevented the passage of legislation, were things Reed was determined to stop.

The means he employed as Speaker were revolutionary. He refused to recognize any member whose purpose, he thought, was to make a dilatory motion. On the "no quorum" tactic, he simply instructed the Clerk to add enough names to the roll of those members present but not voting so that a quorum existed.⁽²⁴⁾ The irony of this whole situation was that had those who refused to vote, voted in the negative, whatever was proposed would have been defeated and Reed's rulings would not have been necessary. What he did in the 51st Congress was to curtail mere talk and to restrict irrelevant and time consuming speech-making which he would not admit to be deliberation. Thus, through his Rules, Congress was streamlined so that "men will have less temptation to irrelevancy, and true debate will flourish."⁽²⁵⁾

Looking at Reed today over a perspective of fifty years, we do not perhaps completely sense his contributions to American life. His contemporaries, however, eulogized him as "a distinguished statesman, a lofty patriot, a cultured scholar, an incisive writer, a unique orator, an unmatched debater, a master of logic, wit, satire, the most famous of the world's parliamentarians, the great and representative citizen of the American Republic."⁽²⁶⁾

(1) Alexander, De Alva Stanwood, HISTORY AND PROCEDURE OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, Houghton Mifflin Co., N. Y., (c 1916), pp. 393-5. These nine Speakers were Nathaniel Macon, Henry Clay, Andrew Stevenson, Schuyler Colfax, James G. Blaine, Samuel Randall, John Carlisle, Thomas B. Reed and Joseph Cannon.

(2) *IBID.*, p. 131

(3) Reed, T. B., "A Deliberate Body," NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW, v. CLII, Feb. 1891, p. 154

(4) *IBID.*, p. 149

(5) Alexander, *OP. CIT.*, p. 132

(6) Reed, T. B., "The House of Representatives, How It Does Business," SATURDAY EVENING POST, v. 122, no. 47, May 19, 1900, p. 1067

(7) Reed, T. B., "Obstruction in the Nation-

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torney with offices in the Hospital Trust Bldg., Providence, Rhode Island.

Jerome N. Curtis (WR) is an attorney with offices in the Union Commerce

Bldg., Cleveland, Ohio.

Gordon Mills (WAY) is Director of Forensics at Los Angeles (California) Junior College.

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- al House," NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW, v. 149, October 1889, p. 425
- (8) Reed, "A Deliberative Body," OP. CIT., p. 150
- (9) IBID., p. 151
- (10) IBID., 1. 150
- (11) LOC. CIT.
- (12) Robinson, Wm. A., THOMAS B. REED, PARLIAMENTARIAN, Dodd, Mead and Co., N. Y., (c 1930), p 257
- (13) By actual count, taken from the INDEX to Vol. 23, Parts 1-7, 52nd Congress, 1st Session, Dec. 7, 1891 to Aug. 5, 1892, and INDEX to Vol. 24, Parts 1-3, 52nd Congress, 2nd. Session, Dec. 5, 1892 to March 3, 1893.
- (14) These speeches were: (1) Against the Mills Tariff Bill, May 19, 1888; (2) In favor of repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act, August 26, 1893; (3) Against the Wilson Tariff Bill, Feb. 1, 1894.
- (15) Robinson, OP. CIT., p 262
- (16) Leupp, Francis E., "Personal Recollections

- of Thomas B. Reed," THE OUT-LOOK, v. 96, Sept. 3, 1910, pp. 36-40
- (17) IBID., p. 37
- (18) Alexander, OP. CIT., p. 126
- (19) Robinson, OP. CIT., p. 261
- (20) IBID., p. 262
- (21) Stoddard, Henry L., AS I KNEW THEM, Harpers, N.Y., (c 1927), p. 192
- (22) Roosevelt, Theodore, "Thomas Brackett Reed and the Fifty-First Congress," THE FORUM, v. 20, December 1895, pp. 410-418.
- (23) Reed, "A Deliberative Body," OP. CIT., p. 155
- (24) The complete story of this dramatic battle is told in the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD, First Session, Cong. 51, vol. 21, January 29, 1891, pp. 948-1024.
- (25) Reed, "A Deliberative Body", OP. CIT., p 156
- (26) Resolution by Rep. Sherman, N.Y., in the House of Representatives, upon the death of Reed, December 8, 1902.

Discussion Method in War Industry . . .

taught the leadmen. The leadmen taught the workers. Handed down in this fashion, the J.T. formulas reached ten million workers in a mater of months.

It is important to know that the democratic method of group discussion had again proved itself an effective educational and problem-solving device. It is important to know that this effectiveness was demonstrated on a nation-wide scale. But probably most important of all is the fact that the job was done so quickly.

Democracy has been criticized for being slow. To convey information or to solve problems by means of group and public discussion, it is said, requires a distressingly long time. By contrast, the propaganda methods of authoritarian societies are thought to be inherently quick-acting and more efficient. The T.W.I. project stands in rebuttal.

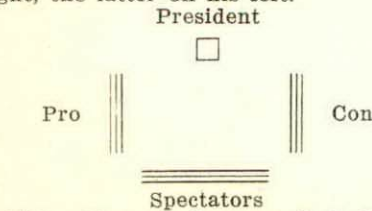
Teachers may well face this fact: So vast a project in group discussion was conceived and effected by leaders from the fields of industrial training and industrial engineering rather than from the field of speech. The speed with which

the War Production Trainers were produced is especially provocative. To teachers of speech the idea of covering the art of conference leadership in a one-week course may seem absurd. A year's course in Fundamentals of Speech, followed by a year in Public Discussion and Debate, plus about two years of extra-curricular speech activities, might not seem excessive. Thus, T.W.I. measures in days what we measure in years. Perhaps theirs is "too little" and our "too late." It is a stimulating challenge to re-examine our whole approach. For despite many limitations and failures, the T.W.I. Institutes have demonstrated that adequate conference leaders can be trained in a much shorter time than many of us had previously thought possible.

1. Stuart Chase, "Show-How: A Revolution in Management," READER'S DIGEST, October, 1943.
2. Stuart Chase, "To Do It Easier and Do It Better," READER'S DIGEST, November, 1943.
3. Stuart Chase, "Teaching Foremen That Workers Are People," READER'S DIGEST, September, 1943.

English-Style of Debate . . .

sit facing those who oppose it, the former ranging themselves on the President's right, the latter on his left.



(10) The speeches are clocked by a

timekeeper. Members must bring their remarks to a close upon receiving his signal.

(11) A member may speak on any phase of the subject he desires. The President will, however, rule out of order any member who attempts to introduce material which is obviously not germane to the discussion.

- (1) Representatives of Denison University, Kenyon College, Oberlin College, Ohio Wesleyan University, Otterbein College, Oxford University, and The Ohio State University participated.