

THE BELKNAP SCANDAL DURING THE GRANT ADMINISTRATION

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1932

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Submitted to the Department of History
Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

1940

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Preface

It is my aim in this thesis to give a complete account of one of the most noted scandals during the administration of President Grant, that of William Worth Belknap, Secretary of War.

I have tried by research to bring the material together in such a manner as to give a complete view of both sides of the question.

I wish to acknowledge the assistance given me by Dr. T. H. Reynolds, head of the History Department, and also to extend thanks to the Library staff, whose kind and efficient service has been of great importance to me.

Ira Sharp

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Chapter I

W. W. Belknap as Secretary of War

William Worth Belknap was born at Newburg, New York, in 1829. He was graduated from Princeton in 1848 and settled as a lawyer at Keokuk, Iowa. He entered the Union Army as major of the Fifteenth Iowa Volunteers and was engaged at Shiloh, Corinth, and Vicksburg. He first gained prominence in Sherman's march on Atlanta.¹

On the fifteenth and sixteenth of December, 1868, the societies of the armies of the Cumberland, Tennessee, Ohio, and Georgia held a joint reunion at Chicago at which over two thousand of the surviving officers and soldiers of the Civil War were present. In Crosby's opera house was held a joint meeting at which General George H. Thomas presided. General Belknap, the speaker for the army of Tennessee, gave one of the finest addresses heard at the reunion.²

At this time the Army had one constitutional commander-in-chief of both Army and Navy and one actual commanding officer. Thus all parts were brought into real harmony. Political changes, however, demanded a separate Secretary of War. President Grant asked General W. T. Sherman to

¹ William T. Sherman, Personal Memoirs, II, 437.

² New International Encyclopaedia, III, 96.

scan the list of volunteer generals who had served in the Civil War for prospects for this appointment. Of the four names submitted, that of W. W. Belknap, the internal revenue collector of Iowa, headed the list. President Grant authorized Sherman to ascertain if Belknap would be willing to come to Washington as Secretary of War. Belknap consented; his name was sent to the Senate, and he was promptly confirmed. On October 25, 1869, President Grant appointed him Secretary of War.³

Being commander of the Army as well as in charge of the legal and financial matters which pertained to the War Department, Belknap issued orders granting leaves of absence, transfers, and discharges of soldiers for favors. He soon made himself unpopular with various of the officers. Sherman once sent Colonel Audenried to Belknap with a message. Audenried, upon his return, asked never to be sent to Belknap again. He explained that he had been treated with a rudeness and discourtesy most unbecoming to a gentleman and in a manner never displayed by any officer to a soldier. Colonel Audenried was one of the most polished gentlemen in the Army, noted for his personal bearing and deportment. Sherman promised on future occasions to send some other man or to go himself.⁴

In 1870 Sherman received from Hugh Campbell of St.

³ Sherman, op. cit., II, 438.

⁴ Ibid.

Louis a message complaining that Belknap had removed a Mr. Ward, post-trader at Fort Laramie, leaving him only a month in which to dispose of his large stock of goods and to make room for his successor.⁵ The Indian Peace Commission had been much indebted to Ward for advances of flour, sugar, and coffee to provide the Crow Indians, who two years previously had come down from their reservations in the Yellowstone to meet Sherman. For a time Sherman could not comprehend the nature of Campbell's complaint, so he telegraphed to the department commander at Omaha, General C. C. Auger, to learn if any such occurrence had happened and the reason. He received the prompt answer that the report was substantially true and that the shift had been ordered by the Secretary of War. During General Grant's command of the Army Congress had given to the general of the Army the appointment of post-traders. Grant had devolved this power on the subordinate divisional and departmental commanders, but legally the power remained with the general. Sherman went to the Secretary of War, showed him the correspondence, and pointed out the existing law in the revised statutes. General Belknap was visibly taken aback and explained that he had supposed the right of appointment rested with him.⁶ Sherman told Belknap to revoke his order and to leave the matter to those to whom

⁵ Sherman, op. cit., II, 438.

⁶ Ibid., 445.

it belonged - the local council of administration and commanding officers. Ward was unanimously re-elected and reinstated.⁷ He remained the trader of the post until Congress repealed the law and gave back the power of appointment to the Secretary of War; then, of course, he had to go. But meantime he was able to make the business arrangements necessary to save him and his partners the sacrifice which would have resulted from earlier removal.⁸

Sherman spoke frequently to President Grant of the growing tendency of the Secretary of War to usurp all the powers of the commanding general. President Grant as frequently promised to bring them together to agree upon a just line of separation of their respective offices, but he never did.⁹

In the meantime, John S. Evans secured permission to establish a trading post at Fort Sill, Indian Territory. Because he was a good merchant and dealt justly with the people at the fort, he was considered successful. He had buildings erected, stocked them with the best of merchandise, and made other extensive improvements. Just at the time that he was planning a more comprehensive trading program, however, he was told that he would have to get a new permit from the Secretary of War. To vacate at that

⁷ Sherman, op. cit., II, 445.

⁸ Ibid., 446.

⁹ Ibid.

time would have meant financial ruin.¹⁰ Evans applied to Belknap for a renewal of his permit, saying that acting upon the belief that his appointment was in conformity with the existing laws regulating traders and that the appointment would be of a reasonably permanent character, he had in good faith, with the view of a satisfactory provision for the prosecution of his business and "in the interest and convenience of the troops, with care for objects beyond those leading to personal aggrandizement," made extensive improvements in buildings and had made heavy investments amounting in the aggregate to more than eighty thousand dollars. He also stated that he had formed a partnership with a Mr. E. H. Durfee, then trading at the same place under like authority, and that their combined investments at Fort Sill exceeded one hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars.¹¹ Accompanying this letter was the endorsement of nineteen officers ranging in rank from second lieutenant to lieutenant-colonel. General Grierson, stationed at the post, also sent a recommendation for Evans.¹² He stated that Evans was gentlemanly, obliging, generous in his dealings, a universal favorite, and in every way well fitted for the position; that he had expended a much larger amount of money in improvements

¹⁰ Carl Coke Rister, The Southwestern Frontier, 89.

¹¹ Cong. Record, 44 Cong., 1 sess., IV, part 7, 202.

¹² Rister, op. cit., 92.

than had the other traders and had kept on hand a very extensive assortment of goods, "the only stock suited to the wants of officers and soldiers of the garrison." Grierson suggested that in case there should be but one trader allowed at the post Evans was better entitled to the position than anyone else, as he attended strictly and personally to his business.¹³

One would think that with this recommendation Evans would have been immediately reappointed, but the reappointment was delayed because of Mrs. Belknap's intervention. When Belknap entered the Cabinet, his wife, who had been a Kentucky belle, rented the Rogers house on Lafayette Square. She was a woman of social ambition and liked to dress expensively. On her husband's salary of eight thousand dollars a year she had a luxurious household, possessed expensive carriages, and gave dinners with the best of foods. She charmed everyone with her grace and cordiality.¹⁴ Her receptions were always crowded. It was said that to see her face was enough to enliven anyone, for she appeared thoroughly to enjoy herself and to be on good terms with all the world. The social critics were quick to heap praise upon Mrs. Belknap this first season.¹⁵

¹³ Cong. Record, 44 Cong., 1 sess., IV, part 7, 201.

¹⁴ Allan Nevins, The Inner History of the Grant Administration, 580.

¹⁵ Claud Gerarde Bowers, The Tragic Era, 256.

The Belknaps and Mrs. Bowers, the sister of Mrs. Belknap, spent the summer at Long Branch, where Mr. and Mrs. C. P. Marsh were staying. Mrs. Belknap and Mrs. Bowers, on leaving, visited with Mrs. Marsh in New York. Mrs. Belknap became ill, and the visit was prolonged. To repay Marsh for his kindness to her while in his home, she asked that he apply to her husband for a trading post. At first, he refused to do so, but when Mrs. Belknap insisted, telling him that it was in the power of her husband to confer such rights, he promised that if she would use her influence with the Secretary she would be rewarded from the profits of the enterprise.¹⁶ Upon her return to Washington, she importuned Secretary Belknap to make the appointment. This the Secretary agreed to do, and Marsh was invited to come to Washington to make his application.¹⁷

Marsh applied for the valuable post at Fort Sill. Belknap immediately announced that Marsh was appointed as post-trader at Fort Sill, Indian Territory, and would assume his duties within ninety days from the date of the appointment. He was to report to the War Department through the Adjutant-General's office the acceptance or non-acceptance of the appointment.¹⁸

Marsh also received an intimation from either Mrs.

¹⁶ House Report 186, 44 Cong., 1 sess., I, 3.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Cong. Record, 44 Cong., 1 sess., IV, part 7, 301.

Belknap or the Secretary that he had better see the incumbent, John S. Evans, who was in Washington pressing for reappointment. Marsh saw Evans, and after some negotiation the two agreed Evans should retain the post. The elements of their agreement were as follows:

1. The agreement was made on the basis of seven cavalry companies of the United States Army, which were stationed at Fort Sill.

2. If at the end of the first year of the agreement the forces at Fort Sill should be increased or diminished not to exceed one hundred men, the agreement was to remain in full force and unchanged for the next year. If the forces should be increased or diminished beyond the number of one hundred men, then the amount to be paid under the agreement should be increased or reduced accordingly. This rule should be applied at the close of each succeeding year for as long as the agreement should remain in effect.

3. The agreement should remain in effect as long as Marsh should hold or control either directly or indirectly the position of post-trader at Fort Sill.

4. The agreement should take effect from the day the Secretary of War signed the commission of post-trader at Fort Sill. The commission was to be issued to John S. Evans at the request of Caleb P. Marsh for the purpose of carrying out the provisions of the agreement.

5. Exception was made, however, in regard to the first quarterly payment under the agreement. It was agreed that

it could be paid at any time within thirty days after the Secretary of War had signed the commission.

6. Marsh was at all times to use any proper influence he could with the Secretary of War for the protection of Evans while in the discharge of legitimate duties in the conduct of the business as post-trader at Fort Sill.

7. Evans was to conduct the business of post-trader at Fort Sill solely on his own responsibility and in his own name. It was expressly agreed and understood that Marsh should assume no liability whatsoever.

8. It was agreed that the stipulations and covenants were to apply to and to bind the heirs, executors, and administrators of the respective parties.¹⁹

As a result of this agreement, on October 8, 1870, Belknap received a letter from Marsh asking that the appointment which had been given him be made in the name of John S. Evans, as it would be "more convenient for me to have him manage the business at present."²⁰

Evans, as will be made evident, was fearing removal and had agreed to pay his rival twelve thousand dollars a year to allow him the appointment. The agreement was originally for fifteen thousand dollars, but Evans became alarmed over a rumor that forces at the post were to be reduced. Therefore, the final understanding was that the

¹⁹ Senate Document 84, 44 Cong., 1 sess., 2-3. Impeachment of Belknap.

²⁰ Ibid., 253.

annual sum was to be reduced or raised in proportion to the withdrawal or addition of troops at Fort Sill.

The Secretary acted favorably on Marsh's recommendation, and the reappointment of Evans was duly made.²¹ After the contract had been awarded, the Secretary issued an order giving Evans sole rights at Fort Sill.

At that time the status of post-traders was defined. Belknap stated that no tax or burden in any shape would be imposed upon sutlers. They would be permitted to erect buildings for the purpose of carrying on their business. They would be allowed the exclusive privilege of trade upon the military reserve to which they were appointed, and no other person would be allowed to trade, peddle, or sell goods, by sample or otherwise, within the limits of the reserve. They were under military protection and control as camp followers. Commanding officers were to report to the War Department any breach of military regulation or any misconduct on the part of the traders.²²

Mrs. Belknap's interference in affairs of state was short-lived. The busy social season had left her worn out. It was noticed that June at the West Point commencement that when she danced with the cadets her face seemed sad in repose. A few months later she died.²³ Hamilton

²¹ Cong. Record, 44 Cong., 1 sess., IV, part 7, 30.

²² Ibid., 204.

²³ Bowers, The Tragic Era, 283.

Fish, General Horace Porter, and General Sherman were among those who carried her casket into St. John's Cathedral.

After Mrs. Belknap's death her household and orphan baby remained in the care of her sister, a charming and dashing young widow. Surrounded constantly by men, Mrs. Bowers very evidently was a woman of fascinating qualities. She became a familiar figure at dances and receptions. Before her marriage to Bowers she, too, had been a dashing Kentucky belle, lively, prettier even than her sister, and kind-hearted. With the War, she had become a partisan of the Union, making a silk flag herself and presenting it to Colonel Landrum's regiment.

When the rumor spread of her engagement to the handsome Belknap, the gossipers were frowned on.²⁴ Yet the rumor was true. However, she seemed none too eager to settle down, so she postponed her wedding for a year and went to Europe. The Parisian journey was meat for the scandal-mongers, who went so far as to mention in connection with her two men of political distinction, but without justification.²⁵ With a gay group she enjoyed the Parisian luxury, fashionable profligacy, and personal display. She learned, too, something of her powers of fascination. Someone who saw her in her widow's cap and later in the delicate hues of the rainbow expressed amazement that

²⁴ Bowers, op. cit., 283.

²⁵ Ibid., 257.

she had so many natures.

Home she came to marry, but not to settle down. Belknap took a house in the fashionable West End, filled it with the rare and costly furniture she had collected in Paris, and installed a French cook. Her teas, dinners, and receptions were soon the talk of the town. With her Parisian costumes, her parasols, and her many pairs of shoes, she was proving her position as the arbiter of fashion. Her wardrobe was opulent, from the loosest negligee to the most elaborate evening gown.²⁶ It was said that when Worth, the designer, received the order for her trousseau, he retired to a cave and fasted for seven days.²⁷

As she rode by in her carriage her bright face beamed, and pedestrians paused to prolong the pleasure. Mrs. Belknap was considered by many the most beautiful woman in Washington. Men lingered long about her carriage door to fold her white cloak about her white arms and shoulders.²⁸

After the first Mrs. Belknap's death, Marsh called on the second Mrs. Belknap to see the baby the former wife had left. He told her the child would have money coming to it for a great while as a result of the Fort Sill trans-

²⁶ Bowers, op. cit., 257.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 258.

action. Mrs. Belknap stated that the mother had given the child to her with the direction to take the money coming from Marsh and keep it for the child.²⁹ In truth, the money delivered to her was all spent on luxuries to maintain the ambitious woman's commanding status in society.

Evans, who had formed a partnership with a Mr. Fisher in order to handle more efficiently his increasing business, found it necessary to charge abnormal prices for his goods in order to meet the agreement with Marsh and have a margin of profit left. As a result of this state of affairs, those at the fort who had to buy from the traders raised a serious complaint that they paid exorbitant prices for their goods. The traders assured them it was necessary to sell them goods above the usual price since they were paying the Secretary of War and Caleb P. Marsh twelve thousand dollars a year for agent rights. When this reason was first given to some of the officers, it was hardly believed; when it became known, however, that other irregularities were reported at different posts in the Indian country, more credence was given to Evans' statement.³⁰

General Grierson, very much upset, wrote to the Adjutant-General, saying that repeated complaints had been made to him by the soldiers of the exorbitant prices at which goods were sold by Evans and Fisher. Grierson

²⁹ House Report 186, 44 Cong., 1 sess., 4.

³⁰ Rister, The Southwestern Frontier, 93.

urged Evans and Fisher to present the reason for the high prices in writing to him in order that he might lay the matter before the proper authority. However, they declined to do so, stating that they feared their permit to trade would be taken from them.

It was also reported that Evans charged enlisted men greater prices for the same article than he did officers. Grierson thought that if Evans had not paid this exorbitant price for permission to trade, his goods should be seized and sold for the benefit of the post fund. He recommended that at least three traders be appointed and the appointments be made upon the recommendation of the officers at the post.³¹

Although the petty thievery Belknap represented was of minor importance compared with the unjust tariffs and tax laws and the wholesale looting of the West by railroads and mining corporations, it did have great importance as a symptom of the general opinion which permitted these larger offenses against the American people. Half awakened to what was going on, the public was now more nearly unanimous that Grant should not be permitted a third term than it had been eight years earlier.³²

³¹ Cong. Record, 44 Cong., 1 sess., IV, part 7, 206.

³² Nevins, The Inner History of the Grant Administration, 810.

Chapter II

The Scandal

Scandal was sifting into the Cabinet and leaving its traces upon the Secretary of War and his beautiful wife, Mrs. Belknap, queen of the administration social circle.¹ On March 2, 1876, Congressman Clymer reported that the House Committee on Expenditures in the War Department had found at the very threshold of their investigations uncontradicted evidence of the malfeasance in office of General William W. Belknap.² The committee reported it to be their duty to lay the matter before the House. They unanimously demanded that William W. Belknap be dealt with according to the laws of the land. They submitted the following resolutions, with the recommendation that they be adopted:

That W. W. Belknap be impeached for high crimes and misdemeanors while in office.

That a committee of five members of the House be appointed and instructed to proceed immediately to the bar of the Senate and there impeach Belknap in the name of the House of Representatives and of all the people of the

¹ Bowers, The Tragic Era, 469.

² House Report 186, 44 Cong., 1 sess. Report on the case of W. W. Belknap.

United States of high crimes and misdemeanors while in office, to inform that body formal articles of impeachment would in due time be presented, and to request the Senate to take such steps as that body deemed appropriate.³

Early in the morning of the day of the committee report a friend on the committee had notified Belknap of its findings, and, reading the handwriting on the wall, Belknap tried to escape his fate by resigning.⁴ Before ten o'clock he arrived at the White House with his resignation and asked that it be accepted immediately.⁵ It was a bold move to forestall impeachment, for the committee could not report before afternoon.

Grant accepted the resignation immediately,⁶ and Belknap was out of office forty minutes before Clymer charged him with malfeasance in office. Grant said the next day that he had accepted the resignation under a wrong impression, as he had not fully understood the statements of Belknap, who was very much overcome and could hardly speak. He spoke of Belknap's defection, saying that he had really in the first part of the day been unable to comprehend its magnitude and importance, that the surprise

³ House Report 186, 44 Cong., 1 sess.

⁴ Charles A. and Mary R. Beard, The Rise of American Civilization, II, 307.

⁵ House Report 186, 44 Cong., 1 sess., 11.

⁶ Ibid.

was so great it was really not until evening that he could realize the crime and its gravity. He spoke of his long acquaintance with Belknap in the Army, of his having known his father as one of the finest officers in the old Army, when he himself was a young lieutenant.⁷

It was well understood that Grant never forsook his friends but stood by them when they were under fire. In this case expectation was not disappointed.⁸ He told his wife he would be severely criticized for what he had done for Belknap but that he would not do less and only wished he could do more.⁹

According to one report, Grant was so unnerved by the ordeal that he spent the whole afternoon with his son, walking on the river bank in the rear of the White House, talking to relieve his mind.¹⁰

Clymer furnished a list of witnesses to call which included Caleb P. Marsh. Mrs. Marsh, remembering a nasty quarrel with Mrs. Belknap, demanded that he tell the truth rather than try to shield Belknap.¹¹ Marsh slipped into Washington, however, to consult with the Belknaps and spent the night at their home. It was Mrs. Belknap who

⁷ Nevins, The Inner History of the Grant Administration, 805.

⁸ George F. Hoar, Autobiography, I, 256.

⁹ Jessie Grant, "A Boy in the White House," Harpers, CL (March, 1925), 468.

¹⁰ Bowers, The Tragic Era, 473.

¹¹ Ibid., 469.

proposed that he perjure himself with a fantastic story of her concoction. She suggested to him that he go before the committee and state that they had had business transactions for many years and that the money he had sent to the Secretary was money she had deposited with him as a banker. She insisted that he say she had instructed him to send it to the Secretary for her.¹² He declined.

According to Marsh's testimony, he told Belknap the latter had better get out of the country, for he would not perjure himself for anyone. Belknap replied he did not wish Marsh to do so, that they could find some other way. He said, however, that it would ruin him if he left. Marsh replied, "If I go before the committee I will surely ruin you, for I will tell the truth." He then left for New York. On reaching home, he consulted his attorney, Mr. Bartlett. He stated the case to him and asked him if the committee could reach him by subpoena if he left the country. He said that he had received a telegram from the Sergeant at Arms calling him to appear before the committee. His attorney told him that as a subpoena had not been duly served the committee could not reach him if he were out of the country. He also stated that if the committee had leave to sit during the recess Marsh could not come back until the session of Congress had expired.¹³ Marsh

¹² House Report 186, 44 Cong., 1 sess., 5.

¹³ Ibid.

then went home and found there a dispatch from Dr. William Tomlinson, Belknap's brother-in-law, telling him not to leave - that he had good news and would come to Marsh's house to discuss it. Marsh had determined, however, that it would be best to go away. He suspected Tomlinson wished only to fix up some new story, and he was determined not to be a party to it. He ordered his trunk be packed.

At about midnight Doctor Tomlinson, brother of the second Mrs. Belknap, arrived at the home of Marsh and stated that he had conferred with Ives Blackburn, a member of the committee. Blackburn had suggested that if Marsh would write a letter something like the one Tomlinson would suggest there would be no further investigation; that if there were, the committee would ask no questions that would be difficult to answer. Mr. Blackburn said that if the committee still wanted to examine Marsh they probably would appoint a sub-committee to go to New York for the examination.

Marsh wrote the letter from the sketch of Tomlinson's in an endeavor to exculpate the Secretary. Marsh said there was nothing in the letter untrue to the best of his recollection but that it did not state the whole truth.

At midnight on Friday he was roused and had the subpoena of the committee served on him. He called on Mr. Bartlett, his attorney, and told him the whole truth in the presence of Doctor Tomlinson. Bartlett said Marsh could not manufacture any story if he wanted to, and must not if

he could.¹⁴

Tomlinson said he would return to Washington but would send a telegram which Marsh would understand. The message, "I hope your wife is well," was to be interpreted to leave the country. The message, "I hope your wife is better," meant to go to Washington.

Marsh said that on going home and thinking about the conversation at the time of the funeral of the first Mrs. Belknap he made up his mind that although he had stated to Bartlett that he had had some conversation at that time with the Secretary of War about sending the money, he was so undecided about it that he was willing to give the Secretary the benefit of the doubt.¹⁵

On Saturday evening he received a telegram from Mrs. Belknap which said, "Come to Washington tonight; it is necessary." The next morning he received the dispatch from Tomlinson, "I hope your wife is better," which, according to their agreement, meant to come to Washington. In the afternoon he got a second dispatch from Tomlinson: "Come without fail. Answer." Marsh replied that he would come that night. It was believed that Marsh was glad not to have to leave the country, the conviction having grown on his mind that it would do no good. He and his wife left immediately for Washington and stopped at the

¹⁴ House Report 186, 44 Cong., 1 sess., 5.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Arlington Hotel.

In his testimony before the committee Marsh said that at about seven o'clock they were shown to temporary rooms. At about eight o'clock Tomlinson called him to the door of the room, saying he had seen Blackburn, who still thought the matter could be fixed up without any trouble. Tomlinson asked if Marsh had the letter he had written to the committee on Thursday night. When Marsh said he did not, Tomlinson replied, "Blackburn says you had better write another of the same purport and send it up to the committee, with a note explaining why it did not come sooner." Marsh complied with the request.¹⁶

At about two o'clock the next day Marsh went to the Capitol to meet the committee, and Tomlinson found him in the corridor near the committee room door. He asked Marsh to remember in his testimony before the committee that there was no arrangement between him and the Secretary at the time of the funeral, that the money he had always paid to General Belknap was for Mrs. Belknap, and by her directions. Marsh replied that he was going before the committee to tell the whole story as far as he could remember it.¹⁷ After his testimony he prepared a statement for Tomlinson of what had happened in the meeting.

That evening when Tomlinson went back to the hotel

¹⁶ House Report 186, 44 Cong., 1 sess., 6.

¹⁷ Ibid.

rooms Marsh asked if he had seen Blackburn since the committee meeting and what impression the statement had made upon the members who had heard it. Tomlinson would not say he had seen Blackburn, but he did say he had seen one committee member, who expressed the opinion that his statement would involve the Secretary.¹⁸ Tomlinson then made a strong appeal to Marsh, saying that he was a good friend of the Secretary and if this terrible affair came out it would ruin Belknap. He said Mrs. Belknap was in great distress about it, and he himself, as her brother and friend of the family, was in great trouble. Marsh then read the written statement to Tomlinson, who replied he could not see but that it was all right. Tomlinson thought perhaps things could be explained yet if they could prove that the money was originally sent to General Belknap by Mrs. Belknap's order. He thought Secretary Belknap would be subpoenaed and could prove to the committee that Mrs. Belknap's estate was entirely separate from his, and that the money received through Marsh had always been kept distinct from his and for her.¹⁹

Tomlinson asked if Marsh had ever had any business relations of any nature whatever with either the late Mrs. Belknap or the present Mrs. Belknap other than those arising from the Fort Sill transaction. Marsh replied

¹⁸ House Report 186, 44 Cong., 1 sess., 7.

¹⁹ Ibid., 7.

negatively. He was also asked if he had now or had ever had any sum or sums of money or any evidence of indebtedness or securities of any sort belonging to either of the women. Again Marsh gave a negative answer. He did say, however, that years previously the present Mrs. Belknap may have consulted him on business matters but that there was no monetary transaction between them other than those he had stated.²⁰

According to Marsh, the payments to the Secretary were made in bank notes by Adam's Express and on one or more occasions by certificate of deposit on the National Bank of America in New York. Sometimes payments were made to him in New York in person. Except for the first payment in the fall of 1870 and the last in December, 1875, all payments were made to the Secretary in the modes stated, except for perhaps one or two occasions when, at Belknap's insistence, Marsh had bought a government bond with the money arising from the contract with Evans and had either sent or handed it to Belknap.²¹

The amounts of money Belknap received from Marsh for having appointed Evans to maintain the trading establishment were as follows:

November 2, 1870	\$1500
January 17, 1871	1500
April 18, 1871	1500

²⁰ House Report 186, 44 Cong., 1 sess., 7.

²¹ Ibid., 8.

July 25, 1871	\$1500
November 10, 1871	1500
January 15, 1872	1500
June 13, 1872	1500
November 22, 1872	1500
April 28, 1873	1000
June 16, 1873	1700
November 4, 1873	1500
January 22, 1874	1500
April 10, 1874	1500
October 9, 1874	1500
May 24, 1875	1500
November 17, 1875	1500
January 15, 1876	750
	<u>\$24450</u> ²²

The first payment to Marsh by Evans was in the fall of 1870, at the rate of twelve thousand dollars a year. He paid at that rate about a year and a half or two years, and afterwards at the rate of six thousand dollars a year. It would aggregate about forty thousand dollars, one-half of which he had disposed of as stated.²³

Blackburn said that on the morning of February 24, 1876, William Tomlinson called at his rooms and asked him to go with him to attend to some business, without stating what it was. They went to the residence of General Belknap, and upon arriving there the doctor informed Blackburn that Mrs. Belknap desired to see him. Blackburn requested Tomlinson's presence at the interview, and Tomlinson assented. In this interview Mrs. Belknap said that the testimony of Marsh before the committee on expenditures would tend to implicate her in matters that would occasion

²² Cong. Record, 44 Cong., 1 sess., IV, part 2. Impeachment of W. W. Belknap.

²³ House Report 186, 44 Cong., 1 sess., 8.

criticism but that the testimony would utterly fail to show any complicity upon the part of General Belknap in the matter of the Fort Sill trading transaction. Blackburn told Mrs. Belknap that he felt assured no member of the committee would desire to push the inquiry further than to ascertain that neither the Secretary nor any subordinate of the War Department was involved. He said to her further that he would communicate the facts as stated by her to Messrs. Clymer and Robbins of the committee and would state to them the assurance he had given her. This he did immediately, stating fully to them all that had taken place, whereupon these gentlemen approved what he had said and done and thoroughly concurred with him in the desire to make no investigations that did not tend to implicate or involve the Secretary of War or his subordinate officials. This was the only assistance given or conversation had by Blackburn or any others of the committee.²⁴ Clymer and Robbins later verified this report.²⁵

The Committee on the Judiciary reported that, in pursuance of the instructions of the House, they had prepared articles of impeachment against Belknap for high crimes and misdemeanors while in office but that since preparing them they had been informed that Caleb P. Marsh, on whose testimony before the Committee on Expenditures

²⁴ House Report 186, 44 Cong., 1 sess., 10.

²⁵ Ibid.

the articles were framed, had gone beyond the jurisdiction of the Government of the United States, that probably his attendance as a witness before the Senate, sitting as a court of impeachment, could not be procured. They believed, however, that other evidence might be had sufficient to convict Belknap of the charges.²⁶ Accordingly, they recommended the adoption of the following resolutions: that the Committee on the Judiciary send for persons and papers; that it sit during the session of the House; and that it be ready to report at any time.²⁷

It was said in the Senate the plea that Belknap had resigned office before charges were filed against him was not sufficient to exempt him from answering the articles of impeachment. At the time of the commission by Belknap of the acts set forth in the articles of impeachment he was an officer of the United States and continued to be an officer until the second day of March, 1876, and until the House had completed its investigation of his official conduct. It was said that Belknap, being aware at the time of such an investigation, had resigned his position to evade the proceedings of impeachment.²⁸

²⁶ House Report 222, 44 Cong., 1 sess., 1. Report on impeachment of W. W. Belknap.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Senate Document 92, 44 Cong., 1 sess., 2. Impeachment of W. W. Belknap.

Chapter III

The Acquittal

Belknap remained at home during the time of the scandal, receiving any friends who called to divert him. The storm had broken on Thursday; on Sunday wild rumors were afloat that the Belknaps planned flight. They were to go by river to Norfolk, thence to Boston, thence by the Cunard Line to Belgium, with which country the United States had no extradition treaty. Whether the report was true or not, a warrant was sworn out, and the once proud couple tasted the dregs of humiliation. Arrested at his home for misdemeanor and high crimes while in office, Belknap was permitted to remain there under guard. The curious pedestrian passing the house at night noticed only a lone policeman in front, leaning against a tree. Low lights burned on the lower floor, but above they were brilliant, and figures could be seen moving about the room.¹ On one night Mrs. Belknap appeared at the door to beg the officer to come inside and watch there, but, finding other officers in the rear, she drove him out again.

The night the news was spread, Belknap appeared

¹ Bowers, The Tragic Era, 475.

furious. He hotly exclaimed that he would face his accusers and demand a retraction. However, this was but a pose, for he had previously told one of the committee members that he would confess to anything if Mrs. Belknap could be protected and the investigation stopped.²

Within three days Belknap was arraigned in police court and gave bond. The guards were removed, and the pretty Mrs. Belknap recovered her erstwhile poise. Company poured in upon her and was received with the familiar smile and charm. Soon her carriage was seen rolling through the streets. The lady was as beautiful as ever and as proud.³ One visitor reported that he found her lying on a satin sofa in an exquisite morning robe covered with the richest laces, and immediately his feeling of sympathy subsided.

Notwithstanding the fact that Belknap had vacated his office, the trial was gotten under way after considerable time had been spent in trying to determine whether Congress had jurisdiction in the case.⁴ It was finally decided in the House of Representatives that a person who had held civil office in the United States is impeachable and that the Senate has jurisdiction to try him, although years might elapse before the discovery of the offense subjecting him to impeachment.⁵

² Bowers, op. cit., 471.

³ Ibid., 475.

⁴ Rister, The Southwestern Frontier, 186.

⁵ House Report 222, 44 Cong., 1 sess., 1.

Several Cabinet members showed what Hamilton Fish, Secretary of State, thought an improper sympathy for Belknap. And Mrs. Grant, according to Fish, threatened to overstep all bounds of prudence. On March 26 she informed the Cabinet members by messenger that she wished to see them after their meeting that day. They duly filed into one of the private rooms of the White House. Mrs. Grant, shedding tears, her voice quavering, urged them to show some token of regard for the Belknaps.⁶ She wished them and their wives to call at the Secretary's home. Mrs. Belknap, she explained, was overcome by her disgrace. She had asked permission to see Mrs. Grant at the White House, promising to manage the call so as not to be recognized. Mrs. Grant, refusing to let her come in secret, had permitted her to call openly the previous Sunday. The Cabinet discussed the subject. It appeared that three members, Robson, Jewell, and Zach Chandler, had called upon Belknap. Fish was shocked. He said with some sternness that he had not called because he felt it better for both the administration and the Belknaps that he stay away. Robson was apologetic, explaining that he had made his first call on Belknap as a fellow Princetonian and his second because the disgraced man had specially requested him to come. He, said Fish, was perhaps excusable; the other two were not.

⁶ Nevins, The Inner History of the Grant Administration, 825.

Belknap was on trial for a grave offense against the government, and any indication that he was being given advice or moral support by the administration would be most unfortunate.⁷

Fish expressed regret that Mrs. Grant had received Mrs. Belknap. He pointed out how important it was to the Belknaps themselves that they speak to no one except their counsel upon the charges against them. By this time Mrs. Grant was again in tears. "I suppose you are right," she said from her handkerchief, "but I do feel so sorry for them."

More dramatic was the scene in the House. In a death-like stillness, pale and wretched, Clymer rose to propose the impeachment of his former school chum. His voice trembled, and once or twice he choked with emotion and was compelled to pause. Quite as sympathetic was Blackburn, for the night before the lovely Mrs. Belknap had clasped her baby in her arms and had walked alone against the wind and rain to the Blackburn home to throw herself on her knees before him. She took all the blame on herself and pleaded against an impeachment.⁸ It was not easy, for the haughty woman had been prone to make the most of the advantage of her higher official position over Mrs. Black-

⁷ Nevins, op. cit., 808.

⁸ Bowers, op. cit., 473.

burn, with whom she had played in childhood. The vision of that face was before Blackburn as Clymer rose to speak. Nearby sat Blaine, Speaker of the House, pale and haggard, shaking his head and sighing.⁹

Blaine attempted the hypocritical pose that one side of the House was interested in securing an indictment, and, striking a plumed-knight attitude, he defied the Democrats to withhold the evidence. Lamar, Secretary of the Interior, answered, denouncing the court summons "as an outrage on the privileges of this House." Blaine, unhappy in a contest with Lamar on a legal question and gently led into traps, had recourse to the bloody shirt, referring to "another gentleman from Mississippi, Jeff Davis." Lamar closed with the demand that the House see to it that its constitutional rights and its powers were respected, and the committee was instructed to ignore the summons of the court.¹⁰

There can be no doubt that politics played its part. Matt Carpenter, attorney for Belknap, stooped to remind the Representatives and Senators that, while Belknap was a "union man" and a Republican, the accusers were merely Democrats.¹¹

The debate was brief. Hoar of Massachusetts fought

⁹ Bowers, op. cit., 473.

¹⁰ Ibid., 476.

¹¹ Ibid.

for time, challenging the right to impeach after a resignation had been accepted. Blackburn, irritable from the memory of the night before, replied hotly:

The action of the President in accepting the Secretary's resignation under the circumstances was unprecedented, and this is the first instance in the history of the country where any man claiming manhood and holding an exalted station has sought to shelter himself from legitimate investigation by interposing the dishonor of his wife.

The House stirred uneasily. It was not the first time that that sentiment had been heard. Blackburn demanded:

If the man who uttered the memorable sentence, 'Let no guilty man escape,' holds it in his power to rob an American Congress of its right to inflict punishment or to pronounce censure on a publicly convicted criminal, where is the barrier to be found beneath whose shelter the liberties of the people can rest secure?¹²

In the Senate the fight for Belknap was renewed. A bitter debate dragged along through the month of May. Morton and Conklin denied jurisdiction, while Thurman and Baynard asserted it. But in the end the trial was ordered to proceed.¹³

Finally, on August 2, 1876, the House reported that the defendant had been acquitted on all the articles presented against him, less than two-thirds of the Senators present having voted guilty. The final vote was 37 to 25. One Senator criticized a portion of the articles of impeachment and stated that the offenses charged in the arti-

¹² Bowers, op. cit., 473.

¹³ Ibid., 475.

cles were not proved beyond a reasonable doubt.¹⁴ AUG 16 1840
 almost a party vote. As the necessary two-thirds vote was
 wanting, conviction was not obtained, but twenty-three of
 those who voted not guilty declared they did so because
 they believed that the Senate lacked jurisdiction on
 account of the resignation of the defendant. Nevertheless,
 few had any doubt as to the guilt of Belknap. His disgrace
 was complete and added to the already heavy load under
 which Grant and the Republican party were staggering.¹⁵

Belknap, however, stepped forth free and independent
 to practice law in the capital and maintain his pretty
 wife in Paris during the next twelve years. Appearing at
 the inauguration of Harrison in the dining room of the
 Arlington, Mrs. Belknap resumed her magic sway over the
 imaginations of men. That summer she was the sensation of
 Coney Island, then a fashionable resort. In a French
 bathing suit of red and white, with bare arms, short skirt,
 and silk stockings, she captivated the men on the sands
 and outraged their wives on the piazza of the Oriental
 Hotel. She figured again in the public prints. Once more
 she was installed in an establishment her husband could
 not afford, but she was little at home, preferring to roam
 about to livelier places. Thus she was away when Belknap

¹⁴ House Report 791, 44 Cong., 1 sess., VI, 1.
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¹⁵ Hoar, Autobiography, I, 364.

died in his law office. He was carried to St. John's Cathedral for his funeral; distinguished men bore him to Arlington Cemetery. Harrison ordered the War Department draped, to the disgust of some who thought it an offense to public morality.¹⁶

With the wide publicity Belknap had received, Grant wanted to remove the appointment of post-traders from the War Department to the hands of Congress, but Congress refused to accept the power of appointment. Grant finally offered the appointing of post-traders to the authoritative heads of the various church denominations, both Protestant and Catholic, and every Protestant denomination but one recommended men who were duly licensed post-traders. As a result, of all the appointees recommended by the various denominations, only those endorsed by the Catholic Church proved incorruptible.¹⁷

Although no basis in this affair was found to incriminate the Secretary of War with irregular Indian trading other than at Fort Sill, it is not entirely improbable that such basis did exist. The guilt and careless indifference of the Secretary in the Fort Sill affair undoubtedly encouraged the lawless traders and Indian agents to be more bold in their irregular relations with the

¹⁶ Bowers, op. cit., 476.

¹⁷ Grant, "A Boy in the White House," Harpers, CL (March, 1925), 468.

Indians on the frontier.¹⁸

In the history of the American government only nine officers have had impeachment charges brought against them by the Senate, and Belknap was one of the nine.¹⁹ He is the only Secretary of War to have been so charged. It would have been a wonderful thing if Belknap had been honest and had kept the stain of theft from one of the highest offices of the land.

¹⁸ Rister, The Southwestern Frontier, 94.

¹⁹ James Young, The American Government, 116.

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