

A Man of Character

The best-remembered incident in the life of James W. Grimes is that which occurred in the Senate of the United States on May 16, 1868, at the impeachment trial of President Andrew Johnson. By a single vote the verdict as to whether the President was guilty of high crimes and misdemeanors in office was turned to a denial of the charges. In the tense situation created by the closeness of the decision, the conduct and character of James W. Grimes, Senator from Iowa, stood out conspicuously.

Senator Grimes declared his conviction of "not guilty" from the Senate floor to which he had to be carried due to an attack of paralysis several days before. Far from using his illness to avoid the issue, he insisted upon recording his judgment in spite of the severe criticism of friends and even the calumny of political opponents which he anticipated and received.

His decision in the matter was clearly impartial. No personal loyalty influenced his judgment, for he did not admire the President and he had had no personal contact with the chief executive for two years before the trial. Nor did he agree with

him in policy. While acting in a judicial capacity during the trial, he stated: "Nor can I suffer my judgment of the law governing this case to be influenced by political considerations. I cannot agree to destroy the harmonious working of the Constitution for the sake of getting rid of an unacceptable President."

The speeches of Senator Grimes on bills before the Senate and the letters written by him to his friends bring to light instances of this same capacity for disinterested judgment and, with it, the courage to act decisively, which have contributed in making him an example of greatness in public service. His vote in the impeachment trial was the act which in his whole public life gave him the most satisfaction. And if distinterestedness may be interpreted as an expression of a strong sense of justice, it is evident that that characteristic was as much a habit of mind as it was a principle.

Toward a man less prominent than the President, Senator Grimes had earlier demonstrated this quality of justness and of courage. When General John C. Fremont was accused of fraud and was threatened with the loss of his military position, Senator Grimes studied the case thoroughly and found insufficient evidence of guilt to justify the humiliation contemplated for the General. Despite the fact that he himself doubted

Fremont's capacity for high military authority and believed that he had at times acted unwisely and extravagantly, Senator Grimes was aware of political implications and he urged "strenuously and persistently", at whatever cost to his own career, that General Fremont receive complete justice.

The inevitable conflict between abstract principles and partiality for his constituents was recognized by Senator Grimes. What, for example, was the course of action to be taken when opportunity for State prestige and political patronage was balanced against his sense of economy and the general interest?

A United States marine hospital had been established at Burlington where Senator Grimes had lived since coming from New England to Iowa at the age of twenty. Among the officials at the hospital he had many friends. However, in urging economy as he did on many occasions, he stated frankly that, as the hospital had proved of little benefit to the government, its existence was no longer justified and he advocated that it be discontinued. In regard to other Federal offices, such as custom houses, he said: "I do not wish the State to be dotted over with Government offices and buildings, and filled with Federal offices. I do not wish the General Government to be aggrandized at the expense of the States."

His force and effectiveness as a person and as a speaker, the logic and the knowledge implied in his speeches in the Senate and earlier as Governor of Iowa were well recognized by his associates. He obviously was devoted to the practical aspects of a situation, to directness and firmness in action. On these qualities which he had observed with respect in another person he once commented, "There is nothing ornate about his style, no figures or tropes, no husks, all solid meat."

"No figures or tropes" also ruled his taste in social life. After he began his life in Washington he wrote to Mrs. Grimes: "You cannot imagine how I dislike this fashionable formality. It is terribly annoying, and I think I shall repudiate the whole thing." And after his introduction to Washington social life, he gave the same evidence of his tastes in his appraisal of one of its leaders: "Though a rather elderly lady, Mrs. Crittenden is one of the leaders of the *ton* in Washington. . . . She is a very kind, amiable lady, but there is so much precision and mock dignity about everything she says and does, that intercourse with her is not so pleasant as it would be if one could only persuade himself that her heart would come gushing out of her mouth once in a while." Although Mr. Grimes did not mingle in Washington society more than his position demanded, it can

easily be imagined that his appearance alone made him a presentable figure in it. He was tall and handsome, and his experience in public life added much in grace and suavity to his natural dignity.

A reserved manner manifested toward some with whom he was unacquainted or for whom he had no liking was sometimes taken for an unsympathetic nature. But an anecdote told of him during his first years in Burlington supports a contrary opinion. Mr. Grimes as a young attorney attended a sheriff's sale at which a farmer, because of financial difficulties, sold his land and cattle. Grimes himself bought the property, but a few days later he returned the cattle to the farmer because, he said, having sold the land again for enough to reimburse him, the cattle had cost him nothing and therefore the former owner should have them again. "My father", wrote the son, who told the incident, "was simply a chance acquaintance who never figured in politics."

If reasons for such habits of mind are to be sought, there is some explanation to be found in the ancestry and early life of James Wilson Grimes. Born on October 20, 1816, in New Hampshire of Scotch-Irish descent, he first lived in a community of intelligent and independent farmers. The youngest of seven children, he is said to have resembled his father in temperament

and appearance, who was a man of "unpretending goodness, warmly attached to his family, hospitable and kind to all, of thrifty habits . . . highly esteemed among his neighbors in the surrounding region for sterling integrity and worth." And from his mother, Betsey Wilson Grimes, he apparently inherited energy and determination.

James Grimes attended Hampton Academy in New Hampshire and then Dartmouth College for two and one half years before beginning the study of law. All the self-reliance, independence, and determination of his cultural and inherited background came to his aid when, in 1836 at the age of twenty, he left home to go West. In Ohio and Illinois his attention was directed to the new town of Burlington in the "Black Hawk Purchase", then in Michigan Territory, where he arrived on the fifteenth of May and began as attorney-at-law to take part in business and civic life, but his abilities and interests soon led him to enlarge the scope of his activities to include politics. One of his earliest public offices was that of city solicitor. Afterward he served as Representative in the first Territorial Legislative Assembly in 1838 and again in 1843; in the General Assembly of the State in 1852; as Governor of Iowa from 1854 to 1858; and finally in the Senate of the United States from 1859 to 1869.

His political career presents an odyssey in public service. His unusual success, however, did not develop such a love of public life that he was loathe to leave it. This was most obvious when he handed in his final resignation upon realization that his health would never be fully restored. He declared that he did not care to go back to the Senate even if he regained his health. "Why, the war has corrupted everybody and everything in the United States", he wrote in 1869. "Just look at the senatorial elections of the last winter! . . . It is money that achieves success in such affairs nowadays. Thank God, my political career ended with the beginning of this corrupt political era!" Of his own career he wrote: "There are no events in my life worthy of record. I have done nothing to distinguish me above the great mass of my fellow men."

His attitude toward public life was perhaps modified by the particularly fortunate circumstances of his personal life. Often he expressed his desire to live quietly at his home. He had married Elizabeth Sarah Neally in 1846 at Burlington.

Aside from the associations he formed in his political career, personal friends played a large part in his life. A striking relationship was that between Senator Grimes and Senator William P. Fessenden, who was ten years his senior. At the

time of parting, Grimes wrote to his friend: "I need not tell you that for six years I have been drawn toward you by an invisible power, magnetic it may be, that I could never resist, even had I desired to resist it. During the time I have been in the Senate you have exercised an influence over my wayward nature such as was never exercised by any human being except my wife. . . . If at any such moment of my weakness I ever gave you a pang of painful feeling, I now most sincerely crave your pardon, begging you to remember that the recollection of any and every intemperate declaration of mine gives me more sorrow than it can possibly give to you."

In a letter of response, Mr. Fessenden professed the same friendship: "I wish to assure you, my dear friend, that there are few people in this world for whom I have so high a regard as for yourself. There was no man in the Senate with whom I was on such close terms of intimacy, or who knew so much of me as you did. . . . I want your aid and counsel more than ever, and trust you will not withhold either."

Perhaps the most intimate friend of Senator Grimes in Burlington was Lyman Cook, to whom he wrote, upon his retirement from public life, while traveling abroad in search of better health. From Paris, Berlin, London, and from the moun-

tains of Switzerland he gave his views of events in America. He reveled in the natural beauty which he found and enjoyed the repose he had in spite of the intense suffering which his illness caused him.

Returning to America in the fall of 1871, he came home to Burlington but lived only a short time. He died on February 7, 1872. Echoes of the impeachment trial could still be heard, but the sentiment of the country had already turned to approval of his attitude. His integrity was not only recognized but vindicated within his lifetime.

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