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A Question of Dignity

“We think that we have demonstrated that the quarrel between the Council and Secretary has been narrowed down to a mere question of dignity.” And, concluded the *Iowa Territorial Gazette* on December 8, 1838, “We have heard a great deal of *undignified* talk about dignity”.

The history of the first Iowa Territorial Legislative Assembly might be characterized as the impact of character upon circumstance. Pioneer politicians, imbued with high hopes and a sense of the significance of the occasion, gathered at Burlington on November 12, 1838. Uncertain as to the proper scope of their activity but jealous of their position, some of the governmental officials soon found themselves embroiled in a quarrel over penknives.

Responsible for fitting up the legislative rooms, Secretary William B. Conway undertook this task soon after his arrival in the Territory. By November 24th the *Gazette* reported to its readers

that "Mr. Secretary Conway has caused the halls of both houses to be fitted up in a very handsome manner, which does great credit to his industry and taste." On the previous day, however, the Council, all ready to legislate in earnest, felt in need of "pen knives, stamps, half a dozen ink stands, and a tin pan for each stove in the Council Chamber." The Secretary was formally requested to furnish these articles.

Offended by the implied criticism of his work, Conway replied in a flippant and sarcastic manner. The request of the Council, he said, had "received that attentive consideration which the magnitude of the subject appears to demand". A few further remarks, "especially in relation to knives", were deemed necessary by the Secretary in order to maintain "that perfect harmony which has heretofore existed" between the legislature and "the Department of State".

Then, becoming more loquacious and insulting, the Secretary concluded his letter by explaining that much "exertion has been made to get knives, at Burlington, but knives of a suitable quality and in a sufficient quantity, cannot be procured in this town. And the Secretary can't make knives. If he could do so, he would do so, with expedition and pleasure. But if it should comport with his own wishes, and the wishes of all those whom it may

concern, that he should retain his present station until the next session, he will take especial care to supersede the necessity of any further legislation on the subject of knives; for it is the earnest wish of the Secretary that all the members should have knives and stamps, and folders, and all and singular such thing or things, device or devices whatsoever, as may facilitate the operation of the hands in yielding assistance to the deliberations of the head."

Conway's reply to the Council was referred to the committee on expenditures. But the Secretary was almost immediately informed privately "that doubts were entertained whether said reply was not deficient, as regards the respect claimed by and due to, the Honorable Council." On November 27th Conway wrote the Council another note stating that if he were to be accused of disrespect the Council should first inquire whether "disrespect was *intended* by said communication, or not?"

By that time the Council was ready to demand that Secretary Conway treat that body with respect. The committee on expenditures reported to the Council that "it is a source of much regret that the Honorable Secretary should have so far forgotten the dignity which he owed to himself, his office, and the Representatives of the people, as to

attempt to ridicule their proceedings and make their acts a subject of merriment and derision." If the Secretary's failure to obtain supplies was really due to providential interference, as he claimed, the Council did not wish to impute blame "for the frustration of his great designs, by the Creator of the universe," but the committee did think it "somewhat surprising that the acts of God should so far intervene, as to prevent" the Council from "getting upon the credit of the Legislature a few tin cups and a bucket to drink out of". The committee assured the "Honorable Secretary" that "the present Legislature will not tamely submit to the insults and derision of any officer of this Territory; and they, at all times, will defend to the last their honest rights, and the liberty of the people whom they have the honor to represent." This report the Council adopted by a unanimous vote.

Conway, hearing of this action with "perfect astonishment", immediately addressed another letter of rebuke to the Council. The Secretary asked that the "report *should* not only be reconsidered, but rescinded, as regards both *fact* and *principle*." When this blustering letter was presented to the Council the farcical nature of the whole controversy became apparent to the most dignified members. With suppressed mirth Coun-

cilman Payne moved that the communication be laid on the table until the Fourth of July.

Secretary Conway had resented criticism by the Council, but to be ridiculed by backwoods lawmakers was more than he could endure. In a spirit of bitter vindictiveness and self-defense, he wrote an exceptionally long letter on December 3rd, reviewing the entire controversy. He concluded by saying that the "Secretary is willing, Gentlemen of the Council, to renew the kindest relations with you, and with each of you, provided you do unto him, as you would that he should do unto you; — and that is, provided you do him justice. With less he cannot be satisfied, and more he does not ask. He is anxious to renew his friendly intercourse with you, provided this can be done on honorable terms; and these terms are now presented, — that is to say, that your condemnatory Report, *in its moral effect*, shall be rescinded, revoked, annulled, and made void."

Five days later, Editor James Clarke informed the readers of the *Burlington Gazette* that, "It is with much regret that we have heard of the existence of some misunderstanding between the upper branch of the Legislative Council and the Secretary of the Territory; and indeed we are almost ashamed to notice a matter so small as that which appears to be the subject of contention; or, per-

haps, we should have said, as that which gave rise to the unaccountable dispute. But as the matter has now become the *talk* of the town and country, it becomes our unpleasant duty to give it a passing notice."

The facts of the case seem to verify Clarke's interpretation of the situation. Theodore Parvin, the protégé of Governor Lucas, was homesick in September. Partly on that account perhaps, Lucas had prevailed upon Conway to commission Parvin to go back to Ohio as an agent to purchase stationery and supplies for the legislature. Parvin made his purchases in Cincinnati, but found it impossible to bring the articles back with him. Meanwhile, Conway, himself, in order to provide for the comfort of the legislature, had gone to Saint Louis for furniture and other equipment needed by the Assembly. The Mississippi was so low, however, that steamboat transportation was suspended for several weeks and so some of the articles did not arrive in time. In the emergency the legislators proposed to supply themselves at the local stores and charge their purchases to the government of the Territory. The Secretary, however, feeling responsible to the national government for Territorial expenditures, refused to delegate public credit to individuals and requested that the Council members await the arrival of the

supplies that had been ordered from Cincinnati and Saint Louis.

Conway's reaction to the Council's rebuff can be understood in the light of his temperament and previous conduct. Assuming executive authority upon his arrival in Iowa Territory, he had already offended his political superior, Governor Robert Lucas. Vituperative and bellicose, though competent and conscientious, the Secretary was just the kind of a man who would magnify a petty issue.

That the Council would be assertive might also have been expected. Suspicious of the officials appointed by the President, the frontiersmen who gathered at Burlington were earnest in their acceptance of democracy. The organic act being expressed in general terms, the Territorial officials had wide discretion in their interpretation of its provisions. Thus the stage was set for political conflict. The character of Conway as well as the characteristics of the Council was the tinder from which the blaze of a petty quarrel was fanned into a conflagration of political hostility that nearly consumed the whole government.

The insignificance of the quarrel was emphasized by the simplicity with which it was settled. Conway's lengthy communication had been sent to the Council on December 3rd and it was not

until the 27th of the same month that further formal communication was resumed between him and the Council. Associate Justice Thomas S. Wilson prevailed upon the Secretary to adopt a conciliatory attitude. Thereupon, Conway sent a note to President Browne of the Council stating that he would withdraw his original letter of November 24th if the report of the committee on expenditures, "together with subsequent proceedings of the Council, in reference to said communication", were also withdrawn. Judge Wilson had already seen members of the Council and advised Conway that they were willing to accept a reconciliation. Payne, who had been partly responsible for the attitude of the Council, moved that the request of the Secretary be accepted. As a result the quarrel was finally settled.

The pride of position which raised the issue of dignity between the Secretary and the Council was soon to embroil the governmental officials in another quarrel. This time Secretary Conway aligned himself with the legislature in a struggle with Governor Lucas. Dignity was indeed important in frontier days.

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