The Fall of an Iowa Hero

by

L. Edward Purcell

The astounding news struck Iowa, one local newspaper said, "like a bolt of lightning from a cloudless sky." William Worth Belknap, a resident of Keokuk, a war-hero, and a member of President Ulysses S. Grant's Cabinet, had been accused of corruption and charged with taking bribes. The tall, handsome, blond-haired, blue-eyed Secretary of War was a popular hero to most Iowans. They knew only of his brilliant career and a spotless record until Rep. Hiester Clymer brought his damning accusations against the Iowan on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives March 2, 1876. Perhaps the worst news for Belknap's Iowa friends was the report that "the Secretary has not denied the charge." The sordid and pathetic tale of Belknap's malfeasance was the most dramatic scandal of Grant's second term in office, an administration known even then for its venality and corruption.

Belknap was not a native son of Iowa. Born in New York to Ann Clark Belknap and General William G. Belknap (a regular Army officer) in 1829, he graduated from Princeton in 1848 and studied law at Georgetown where he was admitted to the bar in 1851. Later that year, young Belknap moved to Keokuk, a bustling Iowa town on the Mississippi.

There he entered law practice with Ralph P. Lowe, a future Governor of Iowa and Justice of the State Supreme Court. The legal partnership, dealing extensively in real estate, prospered. In 1857, his fellow citizens elected Belknap, a "Douglas" Democrat, to the Iowa General Assembly, the first legislative session to meet at the new state capital in Des Moines. The popular and congenial Belknap, along with his wife Cora Leroy Belknap, was a prominent member of local society.

At the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, Belknap — a leader of the Keokuk militia — received a commission as major of the Fifteenth Iowa Infantry. In rapid succession during the first two years of the War, Belknap advanced in rank. He was a colonel by April 1863; at the battle of Shiloh he was cited for bravery when his horse was shot out from under him; and while leading his men at Corinth, he caught the attention of his superiors, who elevated him to a position on the general staff. Then, on July 22, 1864, during fighting at Atlanta, he clinched his military reputation with an act of personal heroism. In the heat

of the battle he reached across the breastwork, seized a Confederate major by the coat, and pulled the enemy bodily into the Union fortification. Six days later, Belknap was promoted to brigider general and placed in command of the famous Crocker's Brigade, made up of four Iowa regiments.

Belknap's army career ended in glory. He fought with Sherman on the "March to the Sea" and was at the final battle of the War at Bentonville, North Carolina. Following the Grand Review of the Union Army in Washington, D.C., Belknap was brevetted to the rank of major general and offered a regular commission in the post-war Army.

He refused the field officer's commission, however, mustered out of the Army, and returned to Keokuk. Shortly thereafter, he was appointed Collector of the Internal Revenue for the Iowa First District. By all accounts, he performed his office well, collecting and recording large sums of money without a single discrepancy. Belknap's first wife died during the War, and in 1868, he remarried. The new bride was a young Kentucky girl—Carita Tomlinson.

Belknap's public career reached its zenith in 1869 when President Ulysses S. Grant appointed Belknap to the post of Secretary of War on the recommendation of Belknap's old commander, Gen. William T. Sherman. Belknap assumed office with a pious declaration: "Honored as I have been by the President with a position conferred upon me without solicitation, it will be my endeavor, with the enforcement of rigid economy, so to conduct its affairs as to command the approval of the country, relying on that partiotism which has ever guided the American people . . ."

Belknap in the mid-1870s, about the time of his impeachment. (courtesy Division of Historical Museum and Archives)

Supervising the War Department was an important and complicated task. Perhaps the most perplexing problem facing the Secretary of War was the administration of the Army posts along the Indian frontier. The western posts had long been a source of anxiety and embarrassment to the government. Before 1867, the posts were served by sutlers — combination traders and storekeepers — but the old system had been abolished following the War. At the time of Belknap's appointment, Congress passed a

Amanda "Puss" Belknap (courtesy the Division of Historical Museum and Archives)

new law giving the Secretary of War complete personal control over post traderships. Whoever got these positions stood to make generous profits from both the troops and the Indians trading at the posts. The new law made traderships a part of the political patronage system, a lucrative bauble at the disposal of the administration.

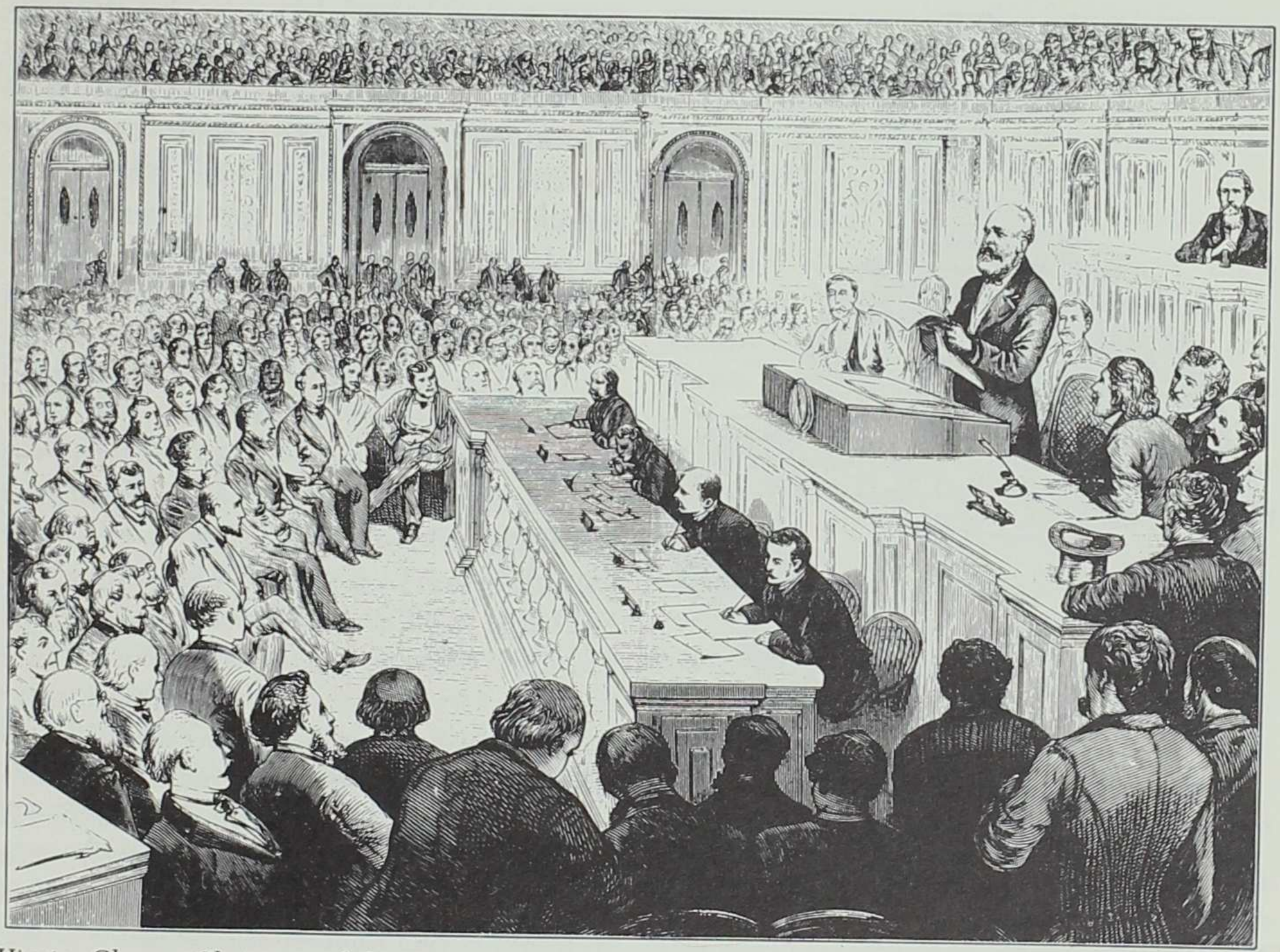
Belknap's own political allegiance had changed during the War. He cast his first Republican vote while serving in the field, and on his return to civilian life, he became active in G.O.P. party politics. The Republicans were, of course, politically supreme following the War, and nowhere more powerful than in Iowa, where the party dominated public office for decades. Belknap's war record, his friendship with party stalwarts, and his own engaging personality, made him prominent in G.O.P. circles. His strong support of the party undoubtedly helped influence Grant's decision to appoint him Secretary of War.

Belknap and Carita set up housekeeping in a fashionable home in Washington, where they entertained on a grand scale. The sumptuous furnishings of the house, including imported carpets, expensive furniture, and the finest crystal and china, provided the setting for lavish dinner parties. The Belknaps were among the foremost Washington socialites, treating their guests with good food and the best vintages.

Carita's health, however, was fragile. Shortly after the birth of her son Robert, she began to decline. A few days after Christmas 1870, she died. Carita's sister, Amanda (known to everyone in Washington as "Puss") assumed care of the infant, but five months later, the child, too, succumbed. In 1873, two years after this third tragedy in his personal life, Belknap married Puss, herself a recent widow.

Puss Belknap was well prepared to take up the social whirl. She was, according to a contemporary description, a "tall, shapely, handsome, brilliant brunette, with fresh complexion and graceful carriage, vivaciously trying her repartee on her companions." Mrs. Belknap was not an empty-headed beauty. Just how complicated, or even devious, she was soon became the focus of national attention.

On March 2, 1876, Hiester Clymer, a Democrat from Pennsylvania and ironically Belknap's roommate in college, strode onto the floor of the House and interrupted debate. As chairman of the House Committee on Expenditures



Hiester Clymer, Chairman of the House Committee on Expenditures in the War Department, addressing the House on the malfeasance of Secy. Belknap. (From Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, *March 18, 1876, courtesy of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Iconographic Collections)*

in the War Department, he had been conducting hearings on post traderships. He announced to the legislators that his committee discovered "on the very threshold of their investigation such unquestioned evidence of the malfeasance in office by General William W. Belknap, then Secretary of War, that they find it to be their duty to lay the same before the House."

Clymer continued, "They further report that this day at eleven o'clock a.m. a letter of the President of the United States was presented to the committee accepting the resignation of the Secretary of War, which is hereto attached, together with a copy of his letter of resignation, which the President informs the committee, was accepted about ten o'clock and twenty minutes this morning."

Before the stunned Iowa House delegation could delay proceedings (John Kasson pleaded for time to absorb the shocking revelations), Clymer moved that Belknap be impeached. The Committee chairman then read the damaging testimony.

The story was complicated. Even at the perspective of a hundred years it is difficult to sort out exactly what happened and who was to blame. The first hint of irregularity in regard to post traderships had come four years earlier

William W. Belknap during the War. (courtesy the Division of Historical Museum and Archives)

in a story in the *New York Herald*, describing the relationship between John Evans, the post trader at Fort Sill, Indian Territory, and a New York businessman, Caleb P. Marsh, who officially held the trader's appointment. The story was almost ignored at the time, and the alleged irregularity was forgotten until the tradership came under the scrutiny of Clymer's committee.

The House Committee on Expenditures, dominated by Democrats who were in control of the House after a slight weakening of Republican national strength, met on February 29, 1876. Democrats Joseph Blackburn of Kentucky and William Robbins of North Carolina joined Clymer, the Democratic chairman; the two Republican members were Lyman Bass of New York and Lorenzo Danford of Ohio.

It was probably true, as many Republicans claimed, that the committee (and several others like it) aimed to embarrass the Grant administration before the general election in November. The Democrats need scarcely to have bothered — Grant did well enough at embarrassing himself. His second presidential term was so riddled with scandals they overlapped one another. Only a few days before the revelations about Belknap, a trial had ended implicating Grant's private secretary Orville E. Babcock in the "Whiskey Ring," an attempt to use official influence to evade taxes on liquor and split the profits with the manufacturers. Grant's Vice-President Schuyler Colfax had been involved in scandal and so had the President's brother, Orvil Lynch Grant. In fact, only recently has Grant's second administration been replaced as the most scandal-ridden and corrupt in American history. The Democrats, hoping to break the G.O.P.'s hold on national office, wanted to make corruption in Washington a major campaign issue in 1876.

Meeting with only the Democrats present, Clymer's Committee called Caleb Marsh to testify. He told a fascinating story. In 1870, Belknap and his second wife Carita visited Marsh's home while vacationing in New York. Carita became seriously ill during the visit and remained in the care of Marsh and his wife while her husband returned to his official duties in Washington. Marsh reported that Carita evidently felt some obligation for their kindness. She drew Marsh aside one day and suggested he apply for a post tradership on the frontier, adding that such posts were light work and very profitable.

Marsh claimed to be surprised by her suggestion and said he understood traderships usually went to disabled sol-

diers. Carita assured him that the posts were in the gift of the Secretary of War and often were awarded to political favorites. She told Marsh she could secure the post for him through her influence with her husband, but she cautioned him not to mention "presents" to the Secretary in regard to the appointment because he was sensitive about such matters.

Within a few weeks Marsh heard again from Carita. She said the post at Ft. Sill was open and he should apply. Marsh went to Washington for an interview with Belknap. The Secretary told Marsh he could have the appointment if proper references were available, although the current post trader, John Evans, was in Washington seeking re-appointment. Belknap suggested Marsh try for an accommodation with Evans. Marsh discussed the post with Evans, and they made a bargain. Marsh was to have the official appointment, but Evans would continue to act at Ft. Sill, supplying the post and collecting the income. In return, Evans signed a contract with Marsh for a yearly payment of $15,000 (later reduced to $12,000) for the privilege of remaining as trader. The deal was not, apparently, unusual. Official cronies often secured lucrative appointments through political influence, then "farmed" out the work and collected profits without actually taking on any duties.

The following November, Evans made the first installment of his yearly payments to Marsh. Then Marsh took the fatal step. He sent half the money to Carita. She certainly must have known the money was an out-and-out bribe, and one she had solicited in return for her influence with Belknap. Whether or not Belknap knew of the payment became a vital question — but the Secretary never admitted knowledge of the arrangement between Marsh and Carita, and no conclusive evidence to the contrary ever came to light.

Carita died within a few weeks, and the plot grew considerably more complicated. When Marsh came to Washington to attend Carita's funeral, he was drawn aside by her sister Puss, then a widow caring for Belknap's infant son. Puss artlessly informed Marsh she knew about the money "due" Carita and said it would go now to the child in her care. When Marsh agreed to continue payments, Puss suggested the money be paid directly to Secretary Belknap. From 1871 until 1876, Marsh gave Belknap more than $20,000, all of it from Evans' pay-off money. Marsh testified that he did not discuss the source of the funds with the Secretary, even after Puss became the third Mrs. Belknap in 1873. The money came to Belknap personally,

Hiester Clymer, Belknap's political nemesis and former room-mate. (From Leslie's, *March 18, 1876, courtesy of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Iconographic Collections)*

in cash or as certificates on the National Bank of America, and he signed receipts for most of it.

Under the Committee's cross-examination, Marsh recalled that he and Belknap had discussed the post tradership only once, four years before, when the *New York Herald* story in 1872 revealed Marsh's relationship to Evans. At that time, Belknap asked Marsh if he had dealings with Evans. Marsh said he had a formal contract, and the subject was dropped.

At no time did Marsh admit talking to Belknap about the source of the payments. Belknap supporters later claimed the Secretary believed the money to come from private investments Puss retained from her previous marriage. The theory was Belknap thought Marsh handled Puss's money and assumed the regular cash payments were only a private business affair.

When Marsh received the subpoena of the committee on February 23, he went immediately to Belknap. At first the Secretary said he did not mind if Marsh testified since there was little to damage him. Marsh then revealed to Belknap the source of the money and the history of the pay-off arrangement. At this point Puss attempted to influence the course of the investigation. She dispatched her brother Dr. William Tomlinson to speak with committee member Joseph Blackburn, a friend and fellow Kentuckian. Tomlinson tried to arrange for the committee to go easy on Belknap if Marsh would implicate only Carita and Puss. Tomlinson met with Blackburn several times and kept in close touch with Marsh who was thinking of fleeing the country. Tomlinson urged Marsh to testify before the committee, but to keep silent about Belknap's knowledge of the bribes.

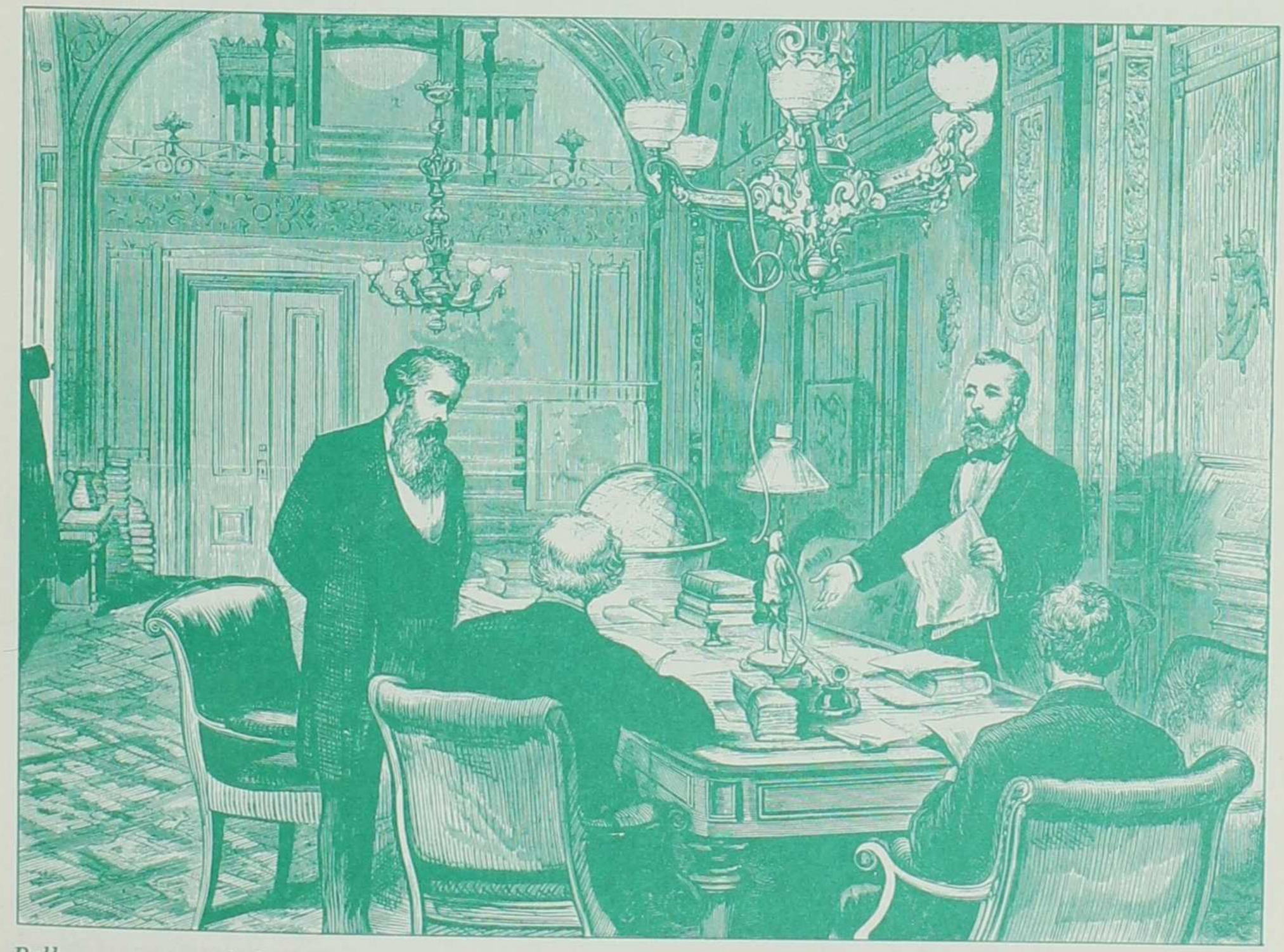
Marsh did exactly as Tomlinson requested. Throughout his testimony both before the committee and later at the impeachment trial, Marsh refused to alter his story — even though he freely admitted that Tomlinson had arranged for him *not* to implicate Belknap. Only Marsh, Belknap, and Belknap's wives knew for certain the true extent of the Secretary's knowledge. No one ever questioned or denied that an illegal pay-off existed after Marsh had testified before the committee on February 29, but none of the principals ever admitted that Belknap was party to the bribe. It is possible that he did not know the large sums passing through his hands were illegal graft, but if he failed to question the source of the money (the total equalling nearly two and one half times his annual salary), then he was either extremely trusting or not very curious.

On March 1, the day following Marsh's private testimony to the Democratic members, the full committee met with Marsh and Belknap. Clymer had the text of Marsh's account read to the Secretary. Representative Blackburn then confessed he had met privately with Puss and her brother Dr. Tomlinson. Blackburn had given them assurances that, if Marsh would not name Belknap directly, the Secretary would be allowed off the hook and no charges would be brought against him. Puss and Carita were to take the blame. Belknap requested counsel, and the committee adjourned until afternoon. At 3:00, Belknap re-appeared with his lawyer Montgomery Blair, who heard the testimony read again. Belknap left the meeting while Blair attempted to work out a deal with the committee. According to an account of the meeting

published in the *Chicago Tribune*, Blair got the committee to drop the names of Carita, her child, and Puss from the charges, on the condition that Belknap would admit taking the money from Marsh (a reversal of Tomlinson's "deal"). Clymer also insisted Belknap resign immediately. Blair agreed and left the meeting with the understanding that if Belknap resigned and admitted guilt for the bribes, then the investigation would be dropped.

This bargain between Belknap and the committee is one plausible explanation of Belknap's subsequent resignation — although his foes at the time and historians since have put another construction on his rather hasty action. The events of the following day made any bargain irrelevent, and none of the principals ever mentioned it. The unsubstantiated newspaper account is the only source for the story — Clymer and Blackburn were unlikely to admit making such a deal after the fact.

President Ulysses S. Grant was due, on the morning of March 2, for a portrait sitting with artist Henry Ulke. Shortly after breakfast, however, Secretary of War Belknap surprised the President with a visit. The Cabinet member, red-eyed and disheveled, handed Grant a curt letter of resignation and spoke of dishonor to himself and his wives. The resignation bewildered



Belknap meets with the Committee. (From Leslie's, *March 18, 1876, courtesy of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Iconographic Collections)*

Puss pleads with Rep. Blackburn for mercy.

Grant, never the quickest-witted of men, who at once wrote an acceptance which he handed to Belknap at 10:20. The former Secretary left, and Grant proceeded with his daily affairs.

Grant's instant acceptance of the resignation created much controversy. According to Secretary of the Treasury Hamilton Fish, Grant told his Cabinet the next day that he had failed to realize the gravity of Belknap's urgent request. Julia Dent Grant, the President's wife, wrote in her memoirs that Grant received a warning to delay the resignation only minutes after Belknap's departure. The important point was that by accepting the resignation Grant removed Belknap from office just hours before Clymer brought resolutions of impeachment before the House of Representatives, creating a difficult problem of Congressional jurisdiction.

When Clymer read the testimony of Marsh to the House, Belknap was already a private citizen. During the brief debate following the charges, committee member William Robbins pointed out that Congress probably had no jurisdiction over a private citizen. Other members argued, however, that im-

peachment was a process of disbarment from office as well as removal, so the action should proceed. Despite Iowa Representative John Kasson's plea for delay, the House voted unanimously to adopt resolutions of impeachment. The Speaker of the House appointed the Committee on Expenditures in the War Department as a special body to inform the Senate pending the drafting of articles of impeachment by the House Judiciary Committee.

John Kasson was not alone in his shock and dismay. The people of Iowa — or at least the newspapers of Iowa — were equally stunned. In Keokuk the *Daily Gate City,* a Republican paper, carried the full details of Clymer's revelations the following day, March 3. Bold headlines proclaimed the charges, Marsh's testimony, and Belknap's resignation. The editor had little to add to the account, except his statement that even though Belknap appeared to be guilty — especially in light of his hasty resignation — it would be best for Iowans to await the full story.

Belknap's war record and his service to the state were so exemplary the emotional reaction of most Iowans must have been one of profound sorrow. Even though he had only recently been defeated in the Iowa Senatorial election, finishing well behind victor Samuel Kirkwood, he was still a popular figure in the state. At one time, it had been proposed that a county be named after Belknap. Pottawattamie County, Iowa's largest, was to be split in two, and one of the halves re-named "Belknap"; however, the voters of the county failed to ratify the move and were spared the embarrassment of living in a county named for an impeached Cabinet member.

The *Davenport Gazette* sounded the dominant reaction of the state:

> The allegations affecting the official integrity of the Secretary will be everywhere received with great surprise by the numerous friends of the gentleman. By none, denial and refutation of the essential facts of those charges can be more ardently desired, or more anxiously awaited, than by the fellow citizens of Gen. Belknap here in Iowa. Should their general correctness remain unchallenged, and their truthfulness be established, the citizens of Iowa, more than those of any other part of the Union will be deeply mortified, and will be moved to the most profound regret.

Even the Democratic papers in the state were circumspect at first about denouncing the Secretary. However, as the early reports were confirmed, the partisan editors took up their cudgels and began to beat the G.O.P. in the person of Belknap. Soon papers such as the *Burlington Hawk-Eye,* the *Chariton Patriot,* and the *Keokuk Daily Constitution* made political points from the scandal.

The *Hawk-Eye* said, "It is shocking, scandalous, terrible. No nation in the world . . . has been burdened with such a shame." The *Keokuk Daily Constitution* served a heavy dose of criticism, yet mixed in a measure of wistfulness since Belknap was a local man. In a long article the editor reported a sampling of reactions taken from Belknap's hometown friends and acquaintances: "We started on a tour this morning for the purpose of ascertaining the sentiment of both friends and foes of Belknap's, and among the former, we found the universal opinion to be that General Belknap's skirts were clear; that through kindness shown to his wife — whom the general fairly worshipped — Marsh's appointment to

the post tradership of Fort Sill was procured; and if any money was received it was received by Mrs. Belknap, whose estate was entirely separate from that of the Secretary, and without the knowledge of her husband."

The political foes of Belknap responded less charitably to the editor's inquiry: "we were greeted with, 'Well, *Constitution*, how would you like a post tradership?' 'How's Belknap stock now?' and when we stated that we came to seek, not to give an opinion, we generally got a reply to the effect although he was honest when he left here, his evil associations had corrupted him, and he was in the same boat now with other 'financiers.' "

Even the staunchest Republican newspapers, such as the Des Moines *Iowa State Register*, were reluctant to defend Belknap. At most, the pro-Belknap faction cautioned against judging before all the evidence was in, yet the underlying tone of their comments hinted they feared the worst. Though Iowa was perhaps the most solidly Republican state in the Union during the post-Civil War period, Belknap's hasty resignation and the Grant administration's sordid reputation — an embarrassment the Iowa party leaders normally ignored — had prepared Republican minds for the ultimate blow. The rapid polarization of papers on the issue along strict party lines underscored the political nature of subsequent proceedings against Belknap. He may or may not have been guilty, but the Democrats nationally and in Iowa seized the opportunity to play up the impeachment trial as an election issue.

Ensconced in his fashionable house, Belknap suffered miserably in the aftermath of his resignation. The city was abuzz with speculation, and as Julia Dent Grant wrote: "Red-mouthed rumor held high carnival at the capital." Marsh had fled to Canada immediately after his testimony to the committee, and many speculated Belknap planned to do the same. One false report said Belknap had committed suicide. An Army officer responded with the comment: "If Belknap had only the courage of a mouse, he *would* kill himself." Others rumored that Puss had a male admirer on the Committee on Expenditures, a would-be lover who used his position to get even for a supposed rebuff.

Cyrus Clay Carpenter, then Second Comptroller of the U.S. Treasury following two terms as Republican Governor of Iowa, went reluctantly to visit the General. He found him a pitiful sight, looking ill and unhappy. Leaving the "broken & sad" man, Carpenter wrote in his diary that he "bawled like a calf" after the interview. Other visitors, none so ardent Republicans as Carpenter who seldom if ever questioned the party line in his long political career, found the ex-Secretary just as pathetic. The *Keokuk Daily Constitution* carried this description written by an Army officer who saw Belknap:

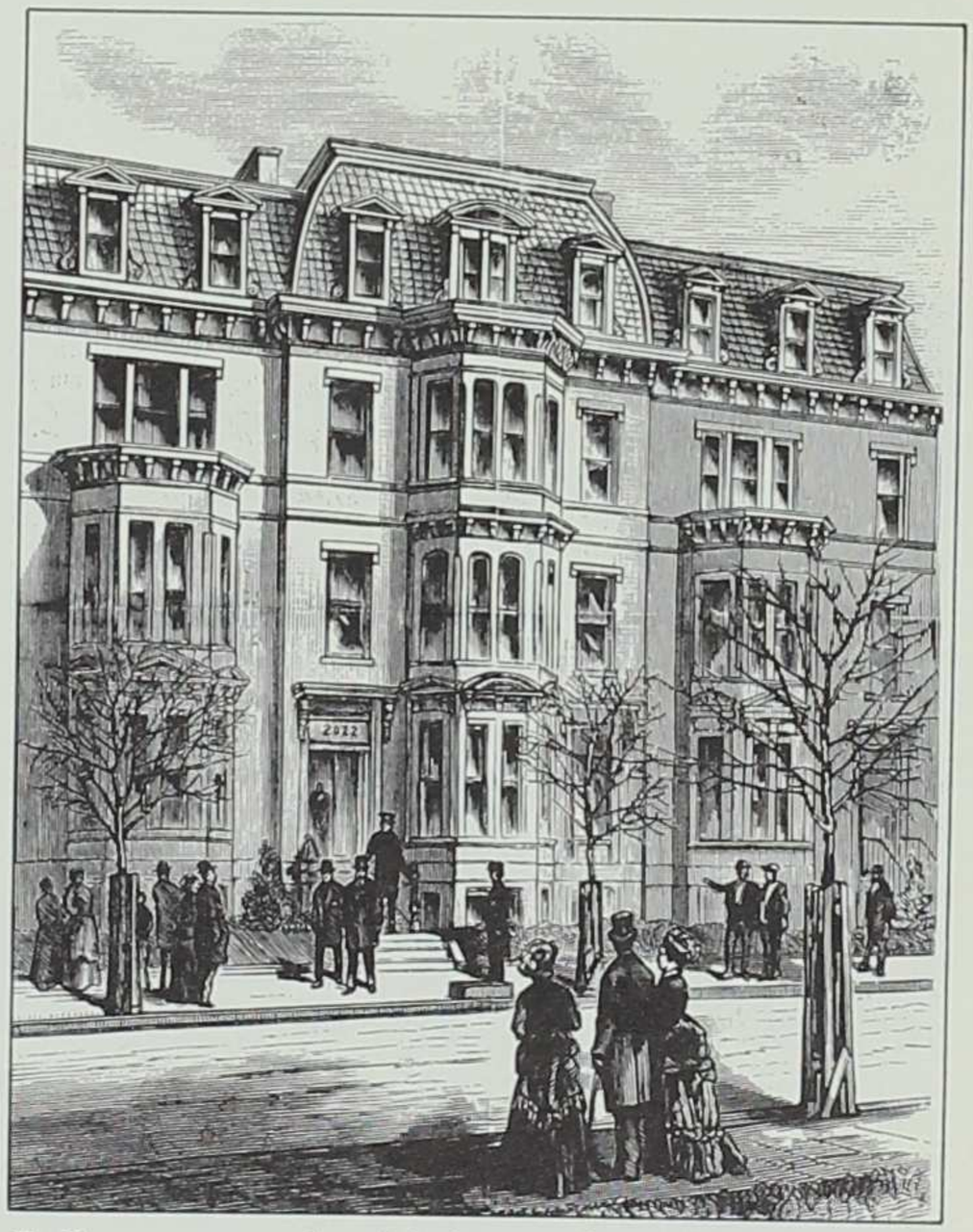
> My God! Words fail to express how this man has aged and suffered during the last few days. His flowing, sticky beard was knotted and tangled; his hair was unkempt; great black rings were under his eyes, and his sunken cheeks made up a picture of woe and despair that would have touched a heart of stone. I was so moved that I sprang forward with a word of comfort. Regardless of truth, I said: 'Mr. Secretary, I believe you to be an honest man.' Belknap at this caught me hard by the hand and burst into tears. He was completely unmanned. He choked

and sobbed several moments, then managed to stammer out, 'I am going to prove it to the people of this country that I am an honest man before this business is over.'

In the week following the impeachment and resignation Belknap was indicted by a civil court and placed under house arrest. At the insistence of his Cabinet, President Grant finally came to understand the seriousness of the charges against his former comrade in arms. Grant directed that criminal charges be brought against Belknap. Edwards Pierrepont, Attorney General of the United States, placed armed guards around Belknap's home. In the end, nothing came of the indictment, and after posting $25,000 bond, Belknap could once again move freely.

The scene shifted to the House of Representatives on March 8, where a long series of legal maneuvers began, leading up to the impeachment trial in the Senate. Between March and June, the House Committee on Expenditures in the War Department held further hearings on irregularities in post traderships. Marsh was enticed back into the country to testify again. John Evans, Orvil Lynch Grant, and James Tomlinson (Puss's brother) appeared before the committee. Perhaps the most colorful witness was General George Armstrong Custer. Testifying in April, the flamboyant general denounced Belknap and several other high officials for their conduct in running the frontier posts. Belknap supporters and Republicans in Congress were outraged, but Custer's annoying presence was effectively and terminally removed by the Sioux on June 26.

Belknap's trial opened in the U.S. Sen-



Belknap arrested and led away for indictment from his fashionable home. (From Leslie's, *March 25, 1876, courtesy of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Iconographic Collections)*

ate on April 4. The House named seven Representatives as Managers to act as prosecution attorneys during the trial. Four of the Managers were first-term legislators, but most of them were experienced lawyers. Chief Justice of the United States Morrison Waite swore in the Senators on April 5, and the opening arguments were set for later in the month.

Belknap's line of defense immediately became apparent. He told the Senate the impeachment was invalid because he was a private citizen when the resolutions were brought against him on the floor of the House. President Grant had offically accepted his resignation at 10:20 AM on March 2, and Belknap had informed the committee of this in writing by 11:00. Clymer's charges were not

officially lodged until the afternoon of the same day.

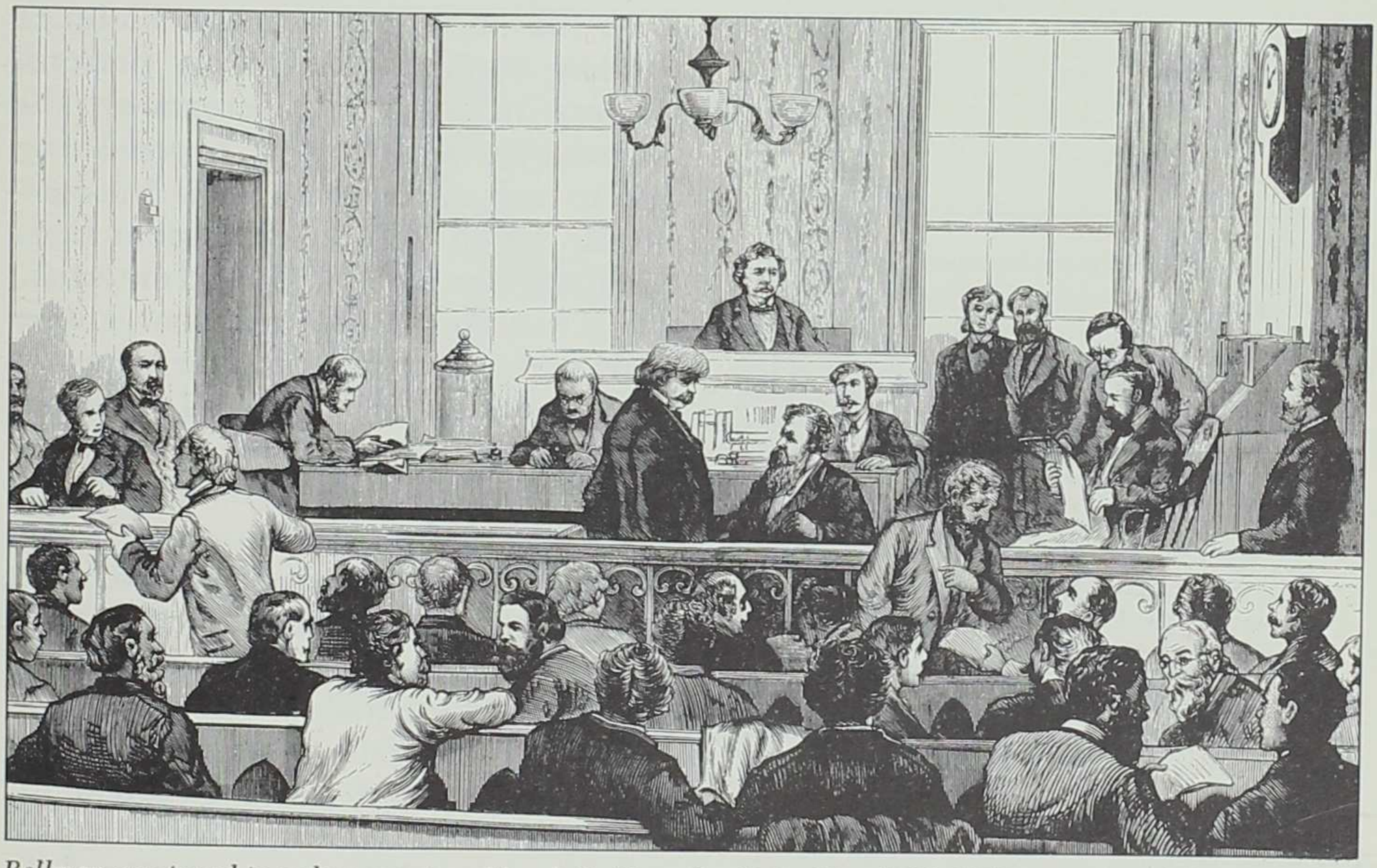
The Senate reacted to this line of defense with a protracted debate over the issue of jurisdiction. On May 8, the trial temporarily adjourned while individual Senators prepared legal briefs on the question. On May 29, the Senate voted 35 to 22 to hear the case. The vote was significant. If 22 Senators voted against the right of jurisdiction (and could not be persuaded otherwise), the two-thirds majority needed to convict Belknap on the charges was foredoomed.

Belknap was represented by three of the finest lawyers in Washington: Jeremiah Black, Montgomery Blair, and Matthew Carpenter. All experienced lawyers and politicians, they were noted also for their oratorical skills in an age which still prized public speaking. Their first move was to refuse to enter a plea to the charge on the ground that the Senate had no right to hear the case. After some wrangling, the Senate overrode the defense and voted to accept an implied plea of not guilty. The defense also was unable to convince the Senate to postpone the trial until after the national election in November.

When the direct arguments began in July, the House Managers, acting as the prosecution, attempted to show that Belknap had not only been a party to the Marsh-Evans agreement, but that the Secretary had lobbied for the law giving the Secretary of War power to appoint post traderships in the first place. In general, the Managers did not present an effective case. They muddled the issues and failed to attack along clear lines. For example, they spent much of their time trying to establish that Marsh was a poor choice for the tradership or that the prices at Ft. Sill were too high.

The defense, on the other hand, responded well to the charges. They pointed out there was no evidence of a deal *directly* between Marsh and Belknap. The money had all been given to Belknap's wives — first Carita and then Puss. Whatever Marsh may have assumed about Belknap's knowledge of the source of the pay-offs, there was no proof the Secretary regarded them as anything but gifts. The defense attorneys called a series of character witnesses to the stand on July 12. Ralph Lowe, Belknap's law partner, Iowa Senators William B. Allison and George Wright, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Samuel Miller (an old Keokuk friend of Belknap), and Iowa Representative John Kasson all testified to Belknap's reputation and high standing in Iowa. Finally, on July 20, a flurry of magnificent oratory from defense lawyer Carpenter ended the arguments.

The vote on the first article of impeachment came on August 1. The Senate voted 35 guilty and 25 not guilty — short of the two-thirds needed for conviction. With minor variations, the tallies remained the same on the following articles. Of the 25 Senators who voted for acquittal, 23 publicly declared they believed Belknap to be guilty of receiving bribes, but they were not con-



Belknap arraigned in police court on March 8. (From Leslie's, *March 25, 1876, courtesy of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Iconographic Collections)*

vinced of the Senate's jurisdiction. Only two Senators, one of them Iowan Wright, declared the evidence insufficient to prove Belknap received the money with the intent to take a bribe. But all the Senators believed he took the money.

Was Belknap corrupt? There is, of course, no definitive answer. He may, however, have had compelling reasons to need extra income. Soon after the first revelations, Gen. William T. Sherman, Belknap's old commander and the man who recommended Belknap for the post of Secretary of War, gave a newspaper interview in which he blamed Belknap's disgrace on the "pressures" of Washington social life. Sherman told the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch:*

> In my opinion his downfall is due more to the vicious organization of Washington society than anything else. I refer to the ridiculous extravagancies of those who move in the first social circles at the capital. Very few Cabinet officers are able to live within their salaries.

This explanation, Belknap's need for ever more money as a reason for taking the bribes, became widely-accepted within a short time. Iowa newspapers echoed Sherman's statement, and Iowa historians have repeated the idea that Belknap was living far beyond his means.

In 1954, however, historian Philip D. Jordon examined Belknap's personal papers in order to determine the Secretary's income and expenditures and to analyze their role in his behavior. Jordan found that Belknap spent fairly large sums on food, drink, and entertainment, but his household expenses were well within the $8000 a year salary he earned as Secretary of War. There were several large categories not accounted for in Belknap's private papers, but it is reasonable to assume along with Jordan that the Secretary had no overwhelming need to supplement his income through graft.

Following the trial, however, Belknap was impoverished. His letters to his family indicated he was strapped for money to live on. Shortly after the aquittal, Puss and her daughters left Washington for Paris, where they lived until Belknap's death. The ex-Secretary moved to Philadelphia for a while, but eventually he returned to Washington and established a successful, if quiet, law practice. In later years, he was active in the Grand Army of the Republic, the powerful Civil War veterans' organization.

His memory is enshrined in most Iowa history references as a noble warrior — perhaps because of the staunch support of his fellow veterans in later years. His biographies in the *Iowa Historical Record* and the official history of the Fifteenth Iowa Infantry discuss his military career at length and only briefly mention he was Secretary of War. Other

Note on Sources

The most important source for this article is "The Trial of William W. Belknap," *Congressional Record*, 44th Cong., 1st sess., Vol. 4, Pts. 2 and 7. Belknap's private papers are preserved at Princeton University and held on microfilm by the Division of the State Historical Society in Iowa City. Several Iowa newspapers were consulted for local reaction to the scandal and are cited specifically in the text. The staff of the Division of Historical Museum and Archives in Des Moines, where many of the papers are located, was helpful.

The best single account of Belknap's troubles is Roger D. Bridges' unpublished M.A. thesis, "The Impeachment and Trial of William Worth Belknap, Secretary of War" (University of Northern Iowa, 1963). Mr. Bridges graciously allowed me to use his thesis in preparing this article. Robert C. Prickett, "The Malfeasance of William Worth Belknap," a Ph.D. dissertation published in *North Dakota History*, 17 (Jan., Apr. 1950), 5-51, 97-134, deals with the story from the western viewpoint.

Biographical sketches of Belknap may be found in *The Dictionary of American Biography* (N.Y.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), 147-48 and *The Iowa Historical Record*, 1, 3 (July 1885), 97-100. Belknap's military career is given in *The History of the Fifteenth Regiment Iowa Volunteer Infantry* (Keokuk: 1887), 18-27. His obituary appeared in the *New York Times* for Oct. 14, 1890. Of special interest is Philip D. Jordan's article, "The Domestic Finances of Secretary of War W. W. Belknap," *Iowa Journal of History*, 52 (July 1954), 193-202.

Also helpful were stories in *Harper's Weekly* and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* for 1876. The comments of the President's wife are from John Simon (ed.), *The Personal Memoirs of Julia Dent Grant* (N.Y.: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1975), 189-92. Chapter 33 of Allan Nevins, *Hamilton Fish, The Inner History of the Grant Administration* (N.Y.: Frederick Ungar, 1936) gives an unpleasant picture of Belknap through the diary of Fish. Cyrus Clay Carpenter's diary is in the Carpenter Papers at the Division of the Historical Society and quoted in Mildred Throne, *Cyrus Clay Carpenter and Iowa Politics, 1854-1898* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1974), 202.

My special thanks for advice and help to Philip D. Jordan, Timothy N. Hyde, Robert K. Bower, and Charles Phillips.

FRIENDLY ADVICE.

UNCLE SAM—"*Here's a Deadhead Pass. So now take your offspring and go West, old man! Go West!*"

A political cartoon, published in April 1876, anticipates Grant's retirement from the Presidency. Uncle Sam offers him a rail pass back to Galena with the comment, "So now take your offspring and go West, old man! Go West!" The teary-eyed sibling on the right is, of course, former Secy. Belknap. (From Leslie's, *April 8, 1876, courtesy of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Iconographic Collections)*

histories, written by men who knew Belknap, play down his impeachment or pronounce him an innocent victim of circumstance. Reading these accounts of Belknap's life, one would scarcely know he was at the center of a major national political scandal.

From the moment of Clymer's revelations until Belknap's death in 1890, the Secretary refused to comment (even privately in correspondence) on his possible guilt. He was consistent in declaring his innocence, and at the same time, reluctant to implicate his family, especially Carita and her sick child. Even a careful sifting of the historical evidence can neither completely condemn nor clear Belknap. A comment, however, directed by the *Keokuk Daily Constitution* at President Ulysses S. Grant seems equally suited as an epitaph for Belknap's public career: "[He] must either be a . . . hypocritical knave, or one of the most witless fools that ever occupied public station." □