

MR. SPEAKER!

The Life and Times of Thomas B. Reed, the Man Who Broke the Filibuster

“A rollicking biography ... Grant’s Reed encapsulates a political era that is the mirror image of our own ... The result is a lively, opinionated, and timely study of irresponsible politics grappling with a dire economy.”

--*Publishers Weekly*, STARRED review

“The author effectively demystifies economic arcane ... to breezily instruct readers in the intra-Congress, parliamentary maneuvering and mastery of the rules for which the Speaker is best remembered. Likely to become the standard biography.”

--*Kirkus Reviews*

“Thomas Reed—Czar Reed, the all-powerful Speaker of the House at the end of the 19th century—was an architect of the modern American state. Sadly, he has been lost to history. But in this lively, intelligent biography, James Grant brings him back, with gusto, humor, and a sense of tragedy.”

--*Evan Thomas*, author of *The War Lovers: Roosevelt, Lodge, Hearst and the Rush to Empire, 1898*

“No period in American history is more colorful or relevant to our own—for better and worse—than the Gilded Age. James Grant brings it all memorably to life: Mugwumps and Half-Breeds, congressmen of flamboyant plumage for sale, not to mention a political process frozen in partisanship. Looming above it all, literally larger than life, is Thomas B. Reed, perhaps the most fascinating politician you’ve never heard of. A hero to young Theodore Roosevelt, as Speaker of the House Reed singlehandedly crushed the filibuster. (One is tempted to say, Boy do we need him now.) At the same time, Reed’s erudition and stinging wit may well have cost him the White House. In the end, his ambition yielded to his principles, prompting him to resign the speakership rather than endorse the imperial vision of his fellow Republicans. It’s taken a century, but Reed at last has a biographer equal to his story.”

--*Richard Norton Smith*, author of *The Colonel: The Life and Legend of Robert R. McCormick, 1880-1955* and Scholar-in-Residence of History and Public Policy at George Mason University

Thomas B. Reed was the rock-ribbed Maine Republican who single-handedly led the U.S. House of Representatives into the modern era. During the first half of Reed’s quarter-century congressional career, filibustering and other parliamentary foot-dragging on the part of the minority regularly thwarted the will of the majority. In 1890, he unilaterally stripped the minority of the power to filibuster, provoking the rage of the opposition – who dubbed him Czar Reed – and the ire of the voters. In so doing, for better or worse, he ushered in an era of legislative activism and enlarged government spending that is familiar to us today. Drawing on a wealth of **previously untapped** archival sources, James Grant rescues this largely forgotten but fascinating and emblematic figure from undeserved obscurity in **MR. SPEAKER! The Life and Times of Thomas B. Reed, the Man Who Broke the Filibuster** (Simon & Schuster; May 10, 2011; \$28.00). Grant – the influential editor of *Grant’s Interest Rate Observer* and the author of an acclaimed biography of John Adams – is particularly well qualified to illuminate Reed and his era of dramatic financial and political upheaval.

As Grant demonstrates, the Gilded Age produced no wiser, funnier, or more colorful politician than Thomas B. Reed, and none whose interests and struggles more nearly anticipated

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our own. He was three times the Speaker of the House during a time when the foremost issues in America were globalization, money, race, and gender. His political career spanned a period of brazen political corruption when votes were openly bought and sold, of do-nothing Congresses, financial panics, banking scandals, rampant speculation, and populist protests.

Standing well over six feet tall and weighing close to three hundred pounds, armed with a fine mind and a rapier wit, Reed was an imposing presence, who is ranked by many scholars among the greatest of Speakers. He eloquently debated the morality of a war that America chose to instigate. He wrestled with the question of how to protect American workers and their employers from foreign competition in an age of rapidly accelerating international trade. He struggled with the aftermath of slavery and the disenfranchisement of women, at a time when Americans lived under de facto apartheid and women were still decades away from winning the right to vote. Reed led his peers on both issues, earning the admiration of Susan B. Anthony for his support of women's suffrage. But his most important achievement was to transform the U.S. House of Representatives from an institution that could not legislate into one that could.

“Modernity was Reed’s cause”

Moreover, as Grant observes, “modernity was Reed’s cause” from his first Congress in 1877 to the day he resigned in protest over America’s war of choice with Spain. As society was moving forward, he contended, so must the government and the laws. That meant, for instance, the abolition of capital punishment, a cause he championed while representing Portland in the Maine legislature immediately following the Civil War. On the national stage, it meant protective tariffs, peace, women’s suffrage, federally protected voting rights for African-Americans and a modern navy. Furthermore, despite a succession of mediocre presidents, America was becoming an international power economically and politically.

The party labels of Reed’s day may seem now as if they were stuck on backwards. In his time, the GOP was the party of active government, the Democratic Party the champion of laissez-faire. The Republicans’ sage was Alexander Hamilton, whereas the Democrats’ was Thomas Jefferson. The Republicans condemned the Democrats for their parsimony with public funds, while the Democrats arraigned the Republicans for their waste and extravagance. Empowered by the rules Reed himself imposed, the Republican majority of the 51st Congress, 1889-91, passed more bills and appropriated more money than any preceding peacetime Congress. To critics who decried the appropriations record of that Congress – a shocking \$1 billion – Reed approvingly quoted someone else’s witticism: “It’s a billion-dollar country.”

“Reed’s wit was his bane and his glory”

But Reed was rarely at a lack for a jibe of his own. “Reed’s wit was his bane and his glory,” Grant writes. “An acquaintance correctly observed that he would rather make an epigram than a friend. Too often, he made an epigram and an enemy.” “They can do worse,” Reed said of the Republicans who were sizing him up for the GOP presidential nomination in 1896. “And they probably will,” he added prophetically. He once told the everlastingly earnest Teddy Roosevelt, “What I most admire about you, Theodore, is your original discovery of the Ten Commandments.”

Reed cut his political teeth in Congress with his service on the commission to investigate the crooked presidential election of 1876, in which Republican Rutherford B. Hayes eked out a victory over Democrat Samuel B. Tilden. Each party had attempted to steal it, but the Republicans finally out-filched the Democrats. Reed, as partisan a politician as they came even in that partisan age, distinguished himself by bringing to light Democratic malfeasance while explaining away (or trying to) Republican offenses.

In addition, the nature of the dollar was fiercely debated during Reed's years in Congress. Orthodox opinion, to which Reed subscribed, held that money must be intrinsically valuable – a dollar must be worth its weight in gold or silver. On the other hand, Greenbackers believed that the government could and should print enough paper money to keep the economy humming and debtors solvent. Unfortunately for Reed's presidential ambitions, he wavered on the great question and the 1896 Republican nomination went to McKinley. When the issue was put to the test in the presidential election, the GOP **advocate** of hard money soundly beat Democrat William Jennings Bryan, who thundered, "you shall not crucify mankind on a cross of gold."

Breaking the filibuster

Yet Reed's signal achievement was breaking the filibuster. Until what were known as the Reed rules took effect in 1890, the House was hostage to its own willful minority. If members chose to obstruct, they would simply refuse to answer their names when the clerk called the roll. In sufficient numbers, they could stymie the House, which under the Constitution requires a quorum to function. Reed reformed the House by declaring those members present who were actually in the House chamber, whether or not they chose to acknowledge that fact by opening their mouths. Democrats excoriated him, their rage compounded by Reed's seeming imperturbability under fire. The nation's voters, deciding that Reed had overreached, handed the House Republicans – but not Reed – a lopsided defeat in the congressional elections of **1890**. Reed lived to see his rules vindicated, however, as the Democrats grudgingly came to adopt them in 1894.

But Reed's belief in the sacred right of majority rule was sorely tested in 1898, when the sinking of the *USS Maine* in Havana Harbor ignited a war fever, and his beloved principle became a double-edged sword. Reed despised war, especially a war of choice tinged with the imperialistic designs of his old friends Henry Cabot Lodge and Theodore Roosevelt. It was not in his nature to bolt from his party or to condemn its policies overtly. But he let it be known that he wanted no part of McKinley's war and its spoils in the Caribbean and the Pacific.

From the Speaker's chair, Reed engaged in rearguard actions against what he saw as **imperialism disguised as humanitarianism**, while exercising his acid wit. Holding up the Hawaiian annexation measure, for example, he also refused to advance House members' pet appropriation projects – today's earmarks. He facetiously argued that "the money is needed for the Malays," and "This seems like a great waste of money. We could buy 15,000 naked Zulus with that." As Grant observes, the language of McKinley's aggressive foreign policy brought out what may seem now, with a century's perspective, the best in Reed. **With characteristic economy**, Reed simply and winningly said, "Empire can wait."

Moreover, Grant maintains, the tragedy of Reed's political life was that the government he helped to cultivate and finance turned warlike and muscular, just as his Democratic antagonists had predicted it would. His onetime protégé Teddy Roosevelt rode that trend into the history books. The heartsick Reed resigned from Congress and the speakership in 1899, retiring to Wall Street to practice law. He shared both a passionate anti-imperialism and a sardonic wit with Mark Twain, whom he befriended after settling in New York. Reed last traded quips with Twain at the author's sixty-seventh birthday dinner, less than two weeks before being suddenly struck down by kidney failure and appendicitis in December 1902 at the relatively young age of sixty-two.

“He wanted not a big government but a functional one”

Although many of Reed's battles foreshadowed those of the present day, Grant warns, he cannot be judged along today's liberal-conservative dividing lines. Grant writes: “The overtaxed and -governed twenty-first-century reader may wince at the knowledge that the hero of these pages was an architect of the modern American state – certainly, his biographer does. However, Reed did not knowingly set out to create Leviathan. He wanted not a big government but a functional one.”

At once authoritative and engaging, scholarly and entertaining, **MR. SPEAKER!** vividly and insightfully chronicles the eventful life and exciting times of an unfairly overlooked political figure of rare intelligence, wit, and accomplishment who launched the modern age of big government.

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About the Author

James Grant, the editor of *Grant's Interest Rate Observer*, is the author of critically praised biographies of Bernard Baruch and John Adams as well as *Money of the Mind* and *The Trouble with Prosperity*, among other books on finance and financial history. He has appeared on *60 Minutes*, *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, and the *CBS Evening News*. He and his wife, Patricia Kavanagh, M.D., live in Brooklyn. They have four grown children.

About the Book

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By James Grant

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