THE TRUE STORY OF IMPEACHMENT, THE GOVERNOR & TAMMANY HALL

BITTEN
by the
TIGER

JACK O’DONNELL
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FOREWORD

William Sulzer is remembered by history as a wronged man. He was a reformer destroyed by the corrupt system he was elected to challenge and that he tried to change. As a politician, Sulzer was extremely ambitious and very successful. Under his governorship, New York led the nation in progressive legislation, from workers’ rights (especially protections for women and children) to food safety and the protection of natural resources. From there he became the first—and thus far last—governor of New York to be impeached. Immediately afterward he was returned to Albany after being elected by an overwhelming majority to the Assembly.

A polarizing figure, Sulzer provoked strong emotions throughout his career. His supporters pointed to his accomplishments while his detractors doubted his motives, his tactics, and his choice of allies. Nonetheless, as we shall see, the heavy-handed nature of his impeachment caused a backlash, and Sulzer is remembered in a positive light—when he is remembered at all. As one writer said, “To this day the name William Sulzer evokes in the public mind the memory of an independent governor ‘railroaded’ out of office by a revengeful boss, of an altruistic and devoted friend of the people and champion of good government frustrated by a corrupt and vindictive machine.”

Although defunct and defanged by the 1930s, Tammany Hall still today evokes the corrupt organizations of a bygone era of political bosses, smoke-filled rooms, and stolen elections.
Tammany was constantly criticized by reformers and good-government groups while periodic investigations exposed graft and corruption, resulting in various prosecutions. However, to millions of immigrants, Tammany Hall was their guide to American culture and citizenship. To the mostly Irish and German immigrants, Tammany provided food, shelter, and jobs; the political organization provided the social safety net that helped them survive. To Tammany, they gave their loyalty along with the numerous and reliable votes that kept Tammany in power.

Over time, reputations change. In fact, time and events change both men and history. Political scientist (and later president) Woodrow Wilson saw President Andrew Johnson as a hero, but in his time Johnson left office in disgrace; again today, historians consistently rank his presidency as among the worst in history. Dwight Eisenhower, once perceived as a duffer, has seen a recent upsurge in popularity. So, too, have the reputations of Presidents John Adams and Harry Truman been improved. Seen beyond their own time—and in the context of other times—different values are recognized and appreciated, and the full range of actions can be measured. This book is an examination of Sulzer’s historical legacy.

The greatest thing about history is that, much like beauty itself, it is in the eye of the beholder. As such, Sulzer’s story is complex and confusing. The facts have been clouded by heliographs, propaganda, mistakes, half-truths, and straight-out lies, until the truth itself is difficult to determine.

The author of one of the only objective histories of the events surrounding William Sulzer, Jacob Alexis Friedman, writing in 1939, found that “Despite the importance of the case and the widespread interest it arouses, there is a surprising paucity of reliable material and the facts recorded are of only fragmentary nature.” Friedman continued, “The few accounts published are frankly partisan, being almost wholly anti-Tammany, and are incomplete and distorted. Indignant and denunciatory, almost all writers accept unquestioningly Sulzer’s version of the incidents that led to his break with Sulzer’s nemesis, the Tammany Hall Leader Charles Francis Murphy and the legislative leaders and base their narratives almost solely
on the statements issued by him after the trial.” History, once corrupted, is hard to set straight again.

In this case, the nature of the protagonists served to further distort the record. Sulzer himself spoke regularly and voluminously to the press (except during his impeachment) although his veracity was questionable, while Murphy was nicknamed “Silent Charlie” because of his reticence.

Sulzer’s story reaches its crescendo in 1912. In that year, New York was truly the Empire State and the major player in national politics. A New Yorker was on the national ticket as either a presidential or vice presidential candidate ten out of the eleven campaigns from 1868 through 1908, and in 1904 both presidential candidates were from New York. The 1910 population of the state was 9,113,614 — more than 25 percent of the entire republic. The Statue of Liberty was only twenty-six years old in 1912 and still served as a beacon of welcome for millions of immigrants. These immigrants were the men and women who have made America — and New York City — great. They also created the New York City of William Sulzer and Tammany Hall, a city divided by class. These newcomers were the fuel that powered the Tammany machine.

The cast of characters in the story of Sulzer’s governorship and subsequent impeachment is as rich and varied as the state in which it takes place. These characters include

- **William Sulzer.** A longtime member of Congress and former speaker of the New York State Assembly, he liked to be called “Plain Bill.” In the Assembly he outlawed imprisonment for debt. As a congressman he was national leader as chair of the Committee on Foreign Relations. His gregariousness endeared him to Tammany leaders, who rewarded him and supported him in his campaigns for Assembly, Congress, and governor. His work on Jewish issues in Washington gave him an important political edge and landed him as head of the Democratic ticket in New York in 1912.

- **Charles Francis Murphy.** A saloonkeeper, Murphy rose from district
leader in the Gas Light District to become the undisputed head of Tammany Hall in 1902 until his death in 1924. Unlike earlier bosses, Murphy was a taciturn teetotaler who pushed progressive policies to reward the immigrants who voted for Tammany but also to distance the organization from its past, especially his predecessor, “Boss” William Tweed.

- Al Smith. Elected Speaker of the New York Assembly the same year Sulzer was elected governor, Smith was another politician who had risen through the ranks of Tammany Hall. Close to Murphy he was promoted above several other more experienced legislators to become Speaker. Later president of the New York City Board of Aldermen, Smith was elected four times as governor and was the first Catholic candidate of a major political party for president. He also was president of the Empire State Building Company.

- Robert F. Wagner. Wagner became president pro tem of the New York State Senate in the same landslide that elected Sulzer as governor and Smith as Speaker. Wagner served in the state senate through 1918, when he was elected a Justice of the Supreme Court and, later, four terms as a U.S. senator. Wagner was a member of Franklin Roosevelt’s Brain Trust and the author of groundbreaking legislation especially in the area of labor protections.

- Woodrow Wilson. Wilson’s improbable rise from university president to president of the United States in just two years inspired

* The Tweed Ring, infamous for corruption, was exposed in part by the political cartoons of Thomas Nast. Elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, the New York State Senate, and the New York County Board of Supervisors, Tweed himself was the third largest landowner in New York City; a director of the Erie Railroad, the Tenth National Bank, and the New York Railroad; as well as the proprietor of the Metropolitan Hotel at the height of his influence. A committee of aldermen estimated his malfeasance at between $25 million and $45 million, or roughly $1 billion to $1.8 billion in 2010 dollars. Convicted of corruption, Tweed died in the Ludlow Street Jail after a well-publicized flight from justice.
others, including Sulzer, who shared the ambition to follow in Wilson’s boss-busting footsteps. Wilson was elected president in 1912, the same year Sulzer was elected governor.

- **Theodore Roosevelt.** The former president’s candidacy for president in 1912 split the Republican Party and created the Progressive Party. In New York the Progressives nominated Oscar Strauss, forcing the Democrats to turn to Sulzer to try to win. Roosevelt remained a force in New York politics for years to come.

- **Louis Sarecky.** The least known of the characters, his role as Sulzer’s able lieutenant would be rewarded. He took responsibility for all of Sulzer’s problems.

- **Alton Parker.** Former chief judge of the New York State Court of Appeals, he was the Democratic nominee for president in 1904. He would serve as one of the impeachment managers against Governor Sulzer.

- **William Randolph Hearst.** In 1902 he was elected congressman from the district neighboring Sulzer’s district. They remained friends long after Sulzer left Albany. Hearst’s desire to be elected to statewide office was a driving factor in much of the Sulzer story. A fierce rival of Smith’s, Hearst’s papers later published unsubstantiated rumors that Smith had bribed assemblymen during the impeachment vote.

- **Thurlow Weed.** Sulzer would try to get Weed, a Republican powerhouse, to help save his governorship. Weed served as secretary of war under Presidents William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt and secretary of state under Roosevelt. A U.S. senator from 1909 through 1915, he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1912 for his work to bring countries together in part through his position as chairman of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

- **Henry Morgenthau Sr.** Chairman of the Finance Committee of the Democratic National Committee and later ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, his contributions to Sulzer and testimony in the
impeachment trial would play a major role in deciding Sulzer's fate. His son would serve as secretary of the treasury under President Franklin Roosevelt.

It is easy to agree on the characters. Beyond that, the story becomes murky. To those who are pro–good government and anti–Tammany Hall, Sulzer is Paul, the tax collector who finds religion. They see Sulzer as the sinner turned saint, an important cog in the Tammany machine who discovered good government and was martyred for joining its forces. Others see Sulzer as a selfish, ambitious politician—one who talked loudly of reform in order to conceal his own power grab and was brought down by his former friends to save the state (or at least the party) and whose own personal greed sealed his downfall.

Who is right?

This book attempts to answer that question.
Part One
A REFORMER IS BORN

William Sulzer became governor of New York on New Year’s Day in 1913. It was a cold but clear day in Albany as the new governor exhibited the folksy style that endeared him to many of his new constituents. Dismissing the below-freezing weather and breaking with generations of precedent, Sulzer dispensed with the traditional military parade that had escorted all previous governors to their inaugurations. In keeping with his democratic ideals and playing to his followers, Sulzer walked from the Executive Mansion—which he had renamed the “People’s House”—to the state capitol. This walk sent the crowds into a frenzy, with shouts of “Hurrah!” echoing over and over as they signaled their support by accompanying Sulzer along his way. According to the New York Times, “When the crowd realized that Mr. Sulzer really was to give what it seemed to regard as the greatest exhibition of Jeffersonian simplicity its imagination could conjure, [the crowds] became jubilant and flocked boisterously in the wake of the procession.”

By October, everything had changed. A mere ten months after his triumphant march to the capitol, Sulzer was leaving Albany in disgrace as
the first—and so far only—governor of New York to be impeached. The cold, clear weather from January had given way to a fierce late-fall thunderstorm, the lightning in the sky as electric as the mood in this capital city.

Despite the storm, a crowd gathered to show their support for William Sulzer, now impeached and removed as governor. A Sulzer loyalist described his hero’s exit in an extremely biased account of the impeachment. Nonetheless, the account is striking for the contrast with Sulzer’s entrance into Albany.

Mr. Sulzer: “My friends, this is a stormy night. It is certainly very good of you to come here to bid Mrs. Sulzer and me good-bye.”

A voice from the crowd: “You will come back, Bill, next year.”

Mr. Sulzer: “You know why we are going away.”

A voice: “Because you were too honest.”

Mr. Sulzer: “I impeach the criminal conspirators, these looters and grafters, for stealing the taxpayers’ money. That is what I never did.”

From the crowd: Cheers.

Mr. Sulzer: “Yes my friends, I know that the court of public opinion before long will reverse the judgment of Murphy’s ‘court of infamy.’”

From the crowd: Cheers.

Mr. Sulzer: “Posterity will do me justice. Time sets all things right. I shall be patient.”

Crowd: Cheers.

Thomas, Boss, or the Governor, 3

Although Sulzer briefly returned to Albany as a member of the Assembly, elected as an independent candidate, this exit from Albany was the true end to his political power and the close of a titanic struggle between Sulzer and the party machine that enabled him to reach his pinnacle.
This exchange, apocryphal as it may be, does not tell the whole story. Did Sulzer truly expect he would be vindicated and returned to power? Did he believe he was being punished for speaking the truth or for trying to increase his own power at the expense of his former allies? Could he honestly have believed he was innocent? Or more likely, did he feel that the punishment did not fit the crime? Which was the bigger loss to this man with mysterious motives: No longer having the ability to bring change and reform to the people or losing his political power, personal stature, and hopes of higher office?

It may help to know William Sulzer’s personal story.

Sulzer was born, according to his official biography, “in an old brick house” on Liberty Street in Elizabeth, New Jersey, on March 18, 1863. Originally called Elizabethtown, Elizabeth was founded in 1664 as the first permanent English settlement in the state, part of a 500,000-acre tract of land between the Raritan and Passaic Rivers. Three English settlers purchased the land from the Staten Island Indians in a deal brokered by Colonel Richard Nicolls, governor of all the territories in North America. By the standards of the day, the purchase price was a princely sum: twenty fathoms of trading cloth, two coats, two guns, two kettles, ten bars of lead, twenty handfuls of powder, and 400 fathoms of white wampum, payable in one year after the territory was occupied. The settlement thrived, quickly growing to a population of 700, and became the first capital of New Jersey.

Elizabeth is and was a city rich in history. During the Revolutionary War, Elizabeth was constantly under attack by British forces, while off the city’s coast the newly independent states sunk their first British warship. Alexander Hamilton lived there in his youth, and George Washington stopped en route to New York City to be sworn in as the first president of the United States in 1789.

By the time Sulzer was born, Elizabeth had become a thriving city and a hub for manufacturing. The Singer Sewing Machine Company built its first factory for mass production in town the same year Sulzer was born.
That factory eventually employed almost 2,000 people. Liberty Street itself was a solid, lower-middle-class neighborhood, home to some of the new professionals who worked in the Singer factory and other manufacturing concerns.

William Sulzer was the second son in a family of five boys and two girls. His mother, Lydia Sulzer, was of Dutch and Scots-Irish ancestry. His father, Thomas Sulzer, was born in Germany. While a student at Heidelberg University, Thomas joined the Revolution of 1848, also known as the March Revolution. A popular uprising, the so-called Forty-Eighters were committed to liberal principles, including constitutional government as well as more far-reaching change for the working class. A split between the more moderate middle-class aims and radical working-class goals lead to the collapse of the revolution, defeated by the conservative aristocracy. Thomas Sulzer was captured and imprisoned for his role, eventually escaping to Switzerland and immigrating to New York City in 1851.

The ideals of the March Revolution—including belief in representative government and improved conditions for the working class—would be hallmarks of his son's political career.

William Sulzer's parents bought a farm in Wheatsheaf, a suburb of Elizabeth, and moved the family there while William was just a boy. The whole family pitched in on the farm and William spent time in the country school, but farming did not satisfy William's sense of adventure.

When William was twelve years old, he ran away from home, signing on as a cabin boy on a sailing ship that rounded Cape Horn, a perilous journey in 1875. Aside from visiting trading ports along the west coast of South America, little is known of Sulzer's trip. He rarely spoke of it. Suffice it to say, he returned home nearly a year later and returned to his schooling.

In 1877 Sulzer graduated from grammar school. His parents hoped he would study for the ministry, but he traveled the short distance across the Arthur Kill to Staten Island and continued to the Lower East Side of Manhattan: the quintessential American melting pot. In the daytime Bill
worked as a clerk in a wholesale grocer; in the evenings he continued his education with the free classes offered at Cooper Union. Sulzer became interested in the legal profession and entered Columbia College Law School. He furthered his studies clerking with the firm of Parrish and Pendleton in Manhattan. At the age of twenty-one, William Sulzer was admitted to the practice of law. The year was 1884.

In 1884 New York State was on the move. The year before, the New York and Brooklyn Bridge was opened to traffic in grand fashion. President Chester A. Arthur and New York mayor Franklin Edson crossed the bridge to meet Brooklyn mayor Seth Low accompanied by a band, cannon fire, and fireworks. The bridge cost over $15.5 million to build and cost at least twenty-seven people their lives. A total of 1,800 vehicles and over 150,300 people crossed the bridge on that day, which was the first land passage between Manhattan and Brooklyn. P. T. Barnum, in an effort to prove the safe nature of the bridge, conducted a parade of twenty-one elephants over the bridge, led by the famous elephant “Jumbo.”

That same year saw the cornerstone of the Statue of Liberty laid on Bedloe’s Island. The New York Gothams, soon to be called the Giants, were a new baseball team. An eighty-five-unit apartment building called the Dakota opened on Central Park West. Dow Jones, the editor of a young newspaper called the Wall Street Journal, published the first stock averages. George Eastman patented paper strip photographic film.

The same year, Alaska became a territory of the United States and William Sherman refused the Republican presidential nomination with the famous declaration, “I will not accept if nominated and will not serve if elected.” The Ringling Brothers circus premiered. The Washington Monument, begun in 1848, was finally completed. Nikola Tesla, inventor of alternating current, moved to New York City from Yugoslavia, entering through Castle Clinton at the base of Manhattan (Ellis Island would not open for another eight years). The year 1884 saw Theodore Roosevelt flee New York State for the Badlands and ranch life in the Dakotas following
the death of his mother, Martha Bulloch Roosevelt, and wife, Alice Hathaway Lee Roosevelt, in the same house within hours of each other. His distant cousin Eleanor Roosevelt was born in October 1884.

On Third Avenue near Fifty-Fifth Street, P.J. Clarke’s eponymous saloon was founded. The same year, a new craze swept New York City: skates on wheels. Ice skating had been popular since midcentury but by 1884, residents were roller-skating on streets or in newly built roller rinks like the Cosmopolitan on Broadway in Midtown. Throughout the 1880s and much of the 1890s, roller-skating was the principal pastime of citizens of every age and condition—businessmen went to work on skates, and skating parties were much in vogue among the fashionable.

That was New York in 1884, the world where William Sulzer was going to try to make his name and fortune.