

Thomas Brackett Reed Biography

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Biography

As Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Thomas Brackett Reed (1839-1902) was called "Czar Reed." He was one of America's greatest parliamentarians.

Thomas B. Reed was born on Oct. 18, 1839, in Portland, Maine, an origin stamped in the nasal drawl in which he delivered the corrosive witticisms for which he became famous. Graduating from Bowdoin College in 1860, he studied law, traveled to California, and taught school briefly. In 1865 he joined the Maine bar and entered politics, becoming state legislator (1867-1868), state senator (1869-1870), and attorney general (1870-1873). Elected congressional representative in 1876, he served in the House until 1899.

Congressman Reed's first important assignment was to the "Potter Committee," appointed in 1878 to investigate alleged fraud in the Hayes-Tilden presidential election of 1876. Representing the Republican minority, Reed demonstrated that his party was not alone in fraud and even managed to implicate the nephew of Democratic candidate Samuel J. Tilden. During the 1880s Reed emerged as a leading party regular. As Speaker of the House (1889-1891, 1895-1899), he struggled to revise House rules, especially those that allowed the Democratic majority to avoid action through filibustering or absenteeism. His physical appearance, a towering height of 6 feet 3 inches and a weight of almost 300 pounds, contributed to his impressiveness. Although later congresses lessened his power, he helped establish the principle of party responsibility.

Reed was fiercely partisan. Democrats, he said, never spoke without diminishing the sum of human knowledge. "A statesman," he noted in his most quoted epigram, "is a successful politician who is dead." Supporting the tariff, hard money, and internal improvements for national purposes, he believed business stability essential to progress. In advance of his time, he opposed capital punishment and advocated woman's suffrage.

In his later years neither party nor country entirely pleased Reed. "The convention could do worse," he said of his presidential ambitions in 1896, "and probably will." He resigned from the House in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War and then practiced law in New York. He died on Dec. 7, 1902, in Washington.

Considered an archconservative by those who opposed his economic views, Reed displayed a genuine humanity and broad learning in his speeches and articles. As a master of the parliamentary skills that make representative government effective, he has rarely been equaled.