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Ben Butler: A Reappraisal

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A
Tribute
to
Benjamin Franklin Butler
1818 - 1893
*
Attorney at Law
State Senator
Major General, USA
U.S. Congressman
Governor of Massachusetts
*
Alumnus of Colby College
A.B. 1838
A.M. 1852
LL.D. 1862

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THREE recent biographies of Benjamin Franklin Butler are entitled *Stormy Ben Butler; Ben Butler, The South Called Him Beast!*; and simply “Beast” Butler.¹ The appearance of these volumes demonstrates the continuation of the interest and controversy which have always been associated with Butler’s name. They also indicate that while the general has his defenders some parts of the North as well as the South still call him “Beast.” Popular history must have its villains as well as its heroes, and tradition has now firmly established Benjamin Butler in the former role. He is perhaps most widely known as an incompetent general who mistreated the citizens of New Orleans and came home from the war with pockets stuffed full of graft and stolen spoons.

This of course represents the element of caricature with which legend envelops historical figures, but the sober judgment of some trained historians has scarcely been less severe. James Ford Rhodes stated that General Butler “was a man without capacity and without character.”² Most of the standard histories have pictured Butler in an unfavorable light, but in his own lifetime his friends and defenders included some of the most eminent men of the day. During the Civil War he was repeatedly given important assignments, and in peace time the voters continued to elect him to office. It can of course be maintained that voters and governments often go badly astray


² Testimony before the Committee on State House and Libraries of the Massachusetts General Court, February 5, 1914, as reported by H. J. Morton in a letter to Mrs. Adelbert Ames, July 17, 1915.
and that Butler's success is merely one more discouraging proof that crime does pay. Yet there is a reasonable case for Benjamin Butler and some historians have raised serious doubts about the charges made against him. It is neither possible nor desirable to retouch Butler's historical portrait so that the horns of a dubious popular tradition become an equally improbable halo.

In 1864 Butler learned that Senator Garret Davis had offered a resolution for inquiry into his conduct and wrote that the senator "could do him no greater favor" than to have every act of his political and military career thoroughly scrutinized. He concluded: "I have no favors to ask and but one act of justice, that the inquisition may not be ex parte, i.e., one sided."

Only a full scale biography could hope to deal with every aspect of a life so filled with controversy, but as far as possible the present "inquisition" will not be one sided. What will be presented here is an interpretation of Benjamin Butler as a soldier, politician, and citizen who had his full share of failings but who, in the words of General Grant, was "a man who has done to the country great service and who is worthy of its gratitude."

I The Soldier

The central and decisive period in the life of Benjamin Butler, as for most men of his generation, came in the grim, strife-filled years of Civil War. He always regarded his service as a major general as his principal achievement and devoted the bulk of his memoirs to its defense. Butler's military record has been savagely attacked by both his contemporaries and later writers. General W. F. Smith described him as "helpless as a child on the field of battle and as visionary as an opium eater in council." A recent popular history of the war calls him "a problem on two legs . . . a classical example of the bartender politician, with one eye and that usually bleary, two

left feet and a genius for getting them into every plate . . .
In contrast to these and many similar denunciations there is
c onsiderable evidence that General Butler's military career was
by no means without merit or substantial service to his country.
It was during the first confused and crucial weeks of the
war that Butler made his most decisive contribution to the
Union cause. His role involved little if any real fighting but
did require boldness and imagination. What was more im­
portant, it called for a willingness to face the fact that a real and
deadly conflict had begun. In the agonizing days of April 1861
state after state had left the Union and the border region from
Maryland to Missouri seemed likely to follow. Secessionist
mobs had attacked Massachusetts's troops in Baltimore and
had cut all communications between Washington and the North.
In the isolated capital, Maryland officials warned President Lin­
coln that any efforts to bring in reinforcements or reopen com­
munications were sure to result in further bloodshed and the
state's secession.
Butler, an influential Massachusetts Democrat, had already
done much to rally his party to the Union by prompt and
vigorous support of the war. Since January he had encouraged
Governor Andrew's efforts to prepare the militia and was able
to secure the command of the Massachusetts forces when Lin­
coln's call for troops finally arrived.7 Butler's regiments along
with a contingent from New York were responsible for reopen­
ing communications with Washington. Finding the railroad
bridges burned and Baltimore in the hands of a mob the Massa­
chusetts general seized ferryboats and moved his forces to An­
napolis, Maryland. Once ashore Butler brushed aside the pro­
tests of Maryland's wavering Governor Hicks, dealt firmly with
any signs of hostility by the citizens, and soon repaired a branch
railway connecting with the main line to Washington. Along
this new line of communications troops and supplies were
moved into the capital. The blare of regimental bands and the
tramp of northern regiments soon dissolved the nightmare of a
paralyzed government surrounded by hostile territory. It is

6 Fletcher Pratt, A Short History of the Civil War (New York, 1956), 45.
7 Speech by General E. F. Jones before New York Loyal Legion, May 3,
1911; Marshall, I, 6-16; Benjamin F. Butler, Butler's Book, A Review of
His Legal, Political, and Military Career, (Boston, 1892), 161-168.
uncertain whether the plan for a new route to the capital origi­nated with Butler or, as seems more probable, with the railway officials. There is no doubt, however, that it was the general who carried it into effect. 8

Baltimore remained in the hands of Southern sympathizers, who openly collected arms and money for the Confederacy and blocked the direct route between Washington and Philadelphia. The aged General Scott had only a vague plan for its eventual recovery. Meanwhile federal reinforcements were meekly de­toured around the city. Butler’s solution was both more dra­matic and more effective. After some colorful spying and de­ceptive moves the Massachusetts general suddenly arrived at the Baltimore railway station with a thousand troops. This was followed by the first of Butler’s bombastic proclamations and the arrest of the mayor and police commissioners. At Frederick another detachment of Butler’s men seized Ross Winans, a millionaire secessionist. The legislature was at the same time warned that it would meet a similar fate if it showed any signs of passing disloyal resolutions. General Scott was horrified by this “hazardous occupation of Baltimore” and at first refused to believe that action had also been taken at Fred­erick. 9

Butler’s critics have treated his seizure of Annapolis and Baltimore as examples of military incompetence and reckless interference with the proper conduct of the war. Robert Wer­lich has even expressed amazement that these actions did not lead to the secession of Maryland and other border states. 10 These accusations are based upon the assumption that the border states could be saved for the Union only through a policy of extreme caution if not appeasement. This was indeed for a time the policy of Lincoln and General Scott, but the harsh realities of war soon demonstrated that the border states were won or lost largely in terms of energetic action and military force. Butler was hastily removed to another command but the administration essentially vindicated him by adopting his policy. Hundreds of Marylanders of dubious loyalty soon

10 Werlich, 18.
joined the Baltimore officials in prison. Troops continued to overawe the legislature, and even the wavering Governor Hicks was elevated to the Senate with the aid of federal bayonets. In retrospect it is easy to say that Butler’s seizures of Annapolis and Baltimore were obvious moves which involved no fighting and little danger. The fact remains that he was one of the few men in the North who was ready to brush aside the largely fictitious obstacles of states’ rights, secessionist mobs, and military red tape, and act vigorously in defense of the Union.

Butler’s first “battle” was of such a minor nature that it would scarcely be worth noting except for the manner in which it has been treated by his detractors. General Scott had removed his troublesome subordinate to Fortress Monroe where he was allowed insufficient forces for serious campaigning, but was authorized to harass enemy forces in his vicinity. Butler dispatched some 5,000 troops to drive away a Confederate battery which had been established at Big Bethel a few miles from the fortress. A skirmish took place in which raw troops and faulty management by the regular army officers in charge of the expedition caused a precipitant retreat by the Union forces. The victorious Confederates also soon dismantled their battery and withdrew. Big Bethel was typical of the dozens of skirmishes with which inexperienced citizen soldiers began the war. The Union casualties were about 76, of which less than a dozen were dead. It was, however, the first Northern defeat and was vastly magnified by the press on both sides. Twenty years later stump speakers campaigning against Congressman Butler still spoke of it as if it had been another Fredericksburg or Bull Run. What is more surprising is to find historians such as Fletcher Pratt describing the skirmish as Butler’s “march on Richmond” which cost 200 lives. Werlich does even better, or more properly even worse, by making it not only an “insane” plan to take Richmond and a smashing Union defeat but also a diabolical plot to destroy Butler’s subordinate, General Pierce.

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12 Pratt, 45.
13 Werlich, 23-25.
Between Big Bethel and the James River campaign three years later Butler conducted several highly important expeditions, which involved little serious fighting. In the amphibious assaults on Hatteras Inlet and New Orleans he commanded the troops but the issue was decided by the guns of the navy. At Hatteras Inlet the general's notoriously aggressive manner may well have bluffed the Confederates into surrendering to a Union fleet which was itself in a precarious position.\textsuperscript{14} He showed considerable strategic sense and initiative in deciding to hold the captured forts rather than following orders to merely block up the channel. This decision made Hatteras a major base for the navy and changed the expedition from a raid to a permanent contribution toward an effective blockade.\textsuperscript{15} While in command at New Orleans Butler's troops were spread out in operations against small Confederate regular detachments and numerous partisan bands. Only one major engagement was fought. At Baton Rouge his troops decisively repulsed a Confederate attack. The victory was won with heavy support from gunboats and Butler was not in actual command of the operation.\textsuperscript{16} If the battle had been lost, however, it is more than likely that it would have joined Big Bethel in the list of Butler's "smashing defeats."

Until the spring of 1864 Butler's military career was successful but had not involved major field operations. He had demonstrated remarkable abilities as a military administrator and in the seizure of Annapolis, Baltimore, and Hatteras he had shown initiative and a sound sense of strategy. The James River Campaign of 1864 not only obscured much of this creditable record but saddled him with the designation of "Bottled Up" Butler. This vivid and euphonious phrase which originated in General Grant's report not only provided material for hostile speeches and cartoons but became a symbol of Butler's alleged military incompetence and buffoonery. Along with the Southern inspired designation of "Beast," Butler was to be pursued by this bottle image throughout his political career and on through the pages of endless historical works.

\textsuperscript{14} Holtzman, 51; Marshall, I, 227-35, 238, 258-259, 335.
\textsuperscript{15} Committee on Conduct of War, 37th Cong., Part III, 282-4.
\textsuperscript{16} Marshall, II, 155, 172-173; O. R., Series I, XV, 595.
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The twenty-two thousand men who made up the Army of the James were Butler's first major command in the field. Their task was to push a diversionary attack toward Richmond while Grant launched the major offensive against Lee in northern Virginia. Grant instructed Butler to land some twelve miles below the Confederate capital "fortify or rather intrench at once" and then to push up the south bank of the James "looking upon Richmond as your objective point." If possible the Richmond Petersburg railway was to be cut. The lieutenant general also indicated that the Army of the Potomac would under certain conditions move to the James and operate against Richmond from the positions established by Butler's troops.

Demonstrating his usual skill in organization Butler shipped his army up the James on schedule and landed only eight miles northwest of the vital rail junction of Petersburg and twelve miles south of the Confederate capital. On May 7, 1864, he seemed close to the military fame which he so ardently sought. At this point, however, everything went wrong and "Bottled up Butler" instead of a conquering hero emerged from two weeks of confused maneuvering and indecisive fighting. The Army of the James moved all too slowly, first toward Petersburg, then toward Richmond, and finally ground to a halt in hard fighting before the Confederate entrenchments at Drury's Bluff. A fierce counterattack by Beauregard's forces was checked, but then Butler withdrew his troops into the famous "bottle" at Bermuda Hundred. Here an entrenched camp was established and, according to Grant's report, the Army of the James "though in a position of great security was as completely shut off from further operations directed against Richmond as if it had been in a bottle strongly corked."

What, if anything, can be said for a general who let such an opportunity slip from his grasp? Historians have usually regarded this campaign as conclusive proof of the charge that General Butler was hopelessly incompetent in the field. His critics have treated it as a major Union disaster lightened only by the ludicrous role played by the commanding officer. Clearly

18 Grant to Butler, April 2, 16, 19, 1864, in Marshall, IV, 7-9, 82-3, 94-5.
Butler was guilty of indecision, over-caution, and, what is more surprising, a lack of imagination. None of this constitutes grounds for singling him out from the vast number of Union generals who repeatedly showed the same failings. One need only study the campaigns of Buell, Meade or Fremont to regain a sense of proportion.

It has often been assumed that Butler could simply have walked into Petersburg or fought his way to Richmond. The best evidence is that Petersburg could have been taken in the first days of the campaign, and that it was the key to Richmond's supply lines. This, however, became clear only after the whole spring offensive had failed. Grant's orders to Butler said nothing about Petersburg and directed him to advance on Richmond, keeping close to the river. Inaccurate reports from Washington informed Butler that Lee's defeated army was falling back toward Richmond and that Federal troops had already interrupted the railways into the city. In the light of these circumstances, Butler's hesitant shift of his attack from Petersburg to the Richmond defense was logical and in accord with his instructions. This attack was also stopped, and it can be argued that a more ruthless and daring commander could have pushed it a bit further. There is ample evidence that a head-on assault against fortified lines was unlikely to produce a real breakthrough. Grant himself was to demonstrate this a few weeks later in the futile slaughter at Cold Harbor. Butler's critics have somewhat inconsistently charged him with needless sacrifice of life and failure to risk his troops at all. Casualty figures and regimental histories both indicate a hard fought battle under difficult conditions and a withdrawal before the Army of the James had been dangerously hurt. The retreat to Bermuda Hundred was perhaps unwise and unnecessary but it was in accord with the sections of Grant's orders which called for the establishment of a secure and fortified base.

The campaign was severely hampered by quarrels and misunderstanding between Butler and his two corps commanders,

21 Werlich, 100; W. E. Woodward, Meet General Grant (New York, 1928). 348.
Generals W. F. Smith and Quincy Gilmore. The corps commanders were West Pointers with creditable service records but few less suitable men could have been chosen for this assignment. Both were engineers who, when in doubt, were always inclined to dig in and wait. Both were sensitive, contentious, and old hands at the ruinous game of army politics. With two such subordinates and a commander who had a liberal share of the same qualities, the results were predictable. Smith and Gilmore claimed that Butler confused them with a stream of contradictory orders and Butler repeatedly charged them with failure to execute his commands. It is impossible to apportion the share of blame in these disputes but Smith and Gilmore were eventually relieved because of the indecisive and quarrelsome tendencies of which Butler had complained.

After the war, Grant wrote that Butler had "lacked the technical experience of a military education" but that "as a general (he) was full of enterprises and resources, and a brave man. If I had given him corps commanders like Adelbert Ames, Mackenzie, Weitzel, or Terry, or a dozen others I could mention, he would have made a fine campaign on the James and helped materially in my plans." Whatever the extenuating circumstances, the campaign failed. It was, however, in no sense a disaster. A splendid opportunity may have been lost but the Army of the James did largely carry out its assignment. Butler did for a time threaten Richmond, and a secure base for future operations was established. Grant believed Butler's campaign had pinned down only 10,000 of the enemy, but Confederate reports indicate that Beauregard's forces numbered close to 21,000. The campaign of 1864 brought little credit to any of the Northern commanders but there is no reason to single out Major General Butler as the villain of that tragic spring.

The final episode of General Butler's military career was his failure to attack Fort Fisher. This not only resulted in his enforced retirement from active service but subjected him to

23 Marshall, IV, 184-188, 221-222, 224. 256.
24 Ibid., 245-246, 522.
25 Young, II, 304.
26 O. R., Series I, XLVII. Part II. 1025; Marshall, IV. 251. 255.
what he described as a “delightful stream of obloquy.”

Butler commanded the troops in an amphibious attack on the fort which guarded one of the last ports open to Confederate blockade runners. Always enthusiastic for new weapons, the General had persuaded the navy to try blowing up “the Confederate Gibraltar” with a powder ship. This device proved ineffective as the ship exploded so far from the fort that it failed even to alarm the garrison. After a naval bombardment, the General landed his troops near the fort but soon hastily reembarked them and departed. This action appeared in an even worse light when a second expedition under General Terry successfully stormed Fort Fisher at the very time time Butler was telling a Congressional Committee it was impregnable.

Characteristically, General Butler defended his role at Fort Fisher as “the best and bravest act of my life.” While this claim seems somewhat startling, one need not accept all the sweeping charges and denunciations connected with the episode. The naval bombardment of Fort Fisher which preceded Butler’s landing was far less effective than the one which aided Terry’s assault a few weeks later. On the former occasion the landward defenses, including a mine field, were unharmed. General Bragg with 6,000 of the Confederacy’s best troops was within a few miles of the exposed beachhead, where only 3,000 of Butler’s men had landed. The decision to abandon the assault was taken only after Butler had conferred with his officers, who fully concurred. In the second expedition Terry’s attack not only had better fire support but was aided by a landing party of 2,000 marines and sailors. In spite of this the struggle was a desperate one and cost the Union forces 800 casualties. Most Confederate observers, including the commander of Fort Fisher, were convinced that either of the Federal expeditions could have been smashed if Bragg had attacked them. After visiting the captured fort, Butler’s bitter enemy, Admiral Porter, wrote that it was far stronger than he had imagined and wondered how it had been captured at all.

27 Butler’s Book, 822.
28 Ibid., 821.
Terry’s attack was a bold gamble and in war this is often the mark of a victorious and skillful leader. That General Butler did not undertake such a gamble when the odds were more heavily against success may indicate he was not such a leader. It does not, however, brand him as either a fool or a coward.

In the field Butler missed several notable opportunities and never achieved a notable success. On the other hand his claims that “In all military movements I never met disaster, nor uselessly sacrificed the lives of my men” is essentially correct. This is perhaps to damn him with his own faint praise but when compared with assertions of his critics and the record of other Union generals it is a restoration of historical perspective.

Whatever his deficiencies as a combat commander Benjamin Butler showed considerable ability as a military planner and administrator. His enormous variety of interests, originality, and keen grasp of political and business affairs gave him unusual insight into the complexities of waging a major war. Although some of his ideas bordered on the bizarre and he frequently embodied his proposals in a bombastic and aggressive style, his basic understanding of administrative and strategic problems was realistic and shrewd. As Commander of the Departments of Virginia he won the praise of General Grant, who wrote, “as an administrative officer General Butler has no superior.”30 Quartermaster General Meigs reported Butler showed “rare and great ability in the management of his department.”31 As an unashamed advocate of the age of iron and steam Butler once shocked an academic audience by proclaiming he would rather have built the Brooklyn Bridge than have been the greatest poet of any age.32 He constantly endeavored to apply the new technology and its inventions to warfare. Every new weapon received his enthusiastic support, and at various times he experimented with a steam propelled battery, wire entanglements, Gatling guns, flame throwers, and plans for a submarine.33 He was probably the first American general

30 Marshall, IV, 457.
31 Ibid., 258.
32 Holtzman, 220.
33 Robert Bruce, Lincoln and the Tools of War (New York, 1956), 73.
456 Colby Library Quarterly

to use a balloon for reconnaissance and surely the first to at­
tempt to spread propaganda behind the enemy lines with kites.\textsuperscript{44} He successfully built a railroad across the beach at Fortress Monroe and proposed the construction of another line to sup­ply the front at Bermuda Hundred.\textsuperscript{45} His canal at Dutch Gap failed as a war measure but eventually became the main channel of the James River.\textsuperscript{36}

Butler was always ready to supply the Lincoln administra­tion or his fellow radicals with strategic evaluations and plans for victory. These proposals were largely ignored, but in many respects they anticipated the way in which the war was ultimately fought and won. From the first he was convinced that the contest must be fought until the South was crushed. To accomplish this he advocated firm measures directed against the slaves, property, and civil rights of all who supported rebellion. For some time this hard policy had limited support in the North and strikes a somber note even today. Yet this was the policy finally adopted with reluctance by men like Lincoln and carried out with grim satisfaction by men like Sherman. In 1863 Butler pointed out to Secretary of the Treasury Chase that the North with vastly superior resources could risk the loss of major battles and replace everything but the reputation of its generals, while one such defeat would be fatal to the Confederacy. He deplored the waste of manpower involved in minor expeditions and the protection of Washington. As an alternative he proposed the concentration of all available troops in an amphibious force large enough to land and con­duct operations deep within the Confederacy.\textsuperscript{37}

In the spring of the same year he sent a plan to the Com­mittee on the Conduct of the War which proposed a campaign quite similar to Sherman's famous march through Georgia and the Carolinas.\textsuperscript{38} General Butler's enthusiasm for reconnaissance raids, spies, and cloak-and-dagger intrigues has often been a subject for ridicule but he seems to have been one of the few

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.; Marshall, I, 132, 189, 206, 210-211.
\textsuperscript{35} Butler's Book, 250; Marshall, IV, 498-499.
\textsuperscript{36} Trefousse, 170.
\textsuperscript{37} Marshall, IV, 59-64.
\textsuperscript{38} Butler's Book, 580-83.
Northern generals who was able to make fairly realistic evaluations of the forces opposed to him. In 1861, when McClellan was sure there were 150,000 to 200,000 Confederates in Virginia, Butler insisted the number was no more than 70,000. Lee’s army actually had about 60,000 men at this time. Butler’s estimate of the enemy forces on the Bermuda Hundred front was likewise very close to the number listed by Beauregard.\(^39\)

The repeated but futile efforts of Butler’s radical allies to win him a place in Lincoln’s cabinet raise intriguing possibilities in the shadowy realms of history as it might have been. What sort of Secretary of War would Benjamin Butler have been? His creative talents as an administrator and his understanding of the larger problems of the war would have provided him with qualifications that few could match. Perhaps at the War Department he would have found his real place in history. It is equally possible that his bitter feud with West Point and his weakness for political intrigue and dubious friends would have soon led him to another spectacular row and an early resignation. In any case both his abilities and his failings would have provided a severe test for the well-known skill and patience of Abraham Lincoln.

The claim that General Butler waged war ineffectively has received far less attention than the charge that he conducted it barbarously. That the South, angered and humiliated by the occupation of New Orleans, should invent and believe in the term “Beast Butler” is not surprising. Wartime psychology creates and propaganda encourages the image of a personal devil in enemy uniform. Butler’s vigorous administration of the Crescent City in 1862 came at the right moment to cast him in such a role. It is, however, surprising to find books a century later which depict him in almost the same terms as those employed by Jefferson Davis.\(^40\) Few war-inspired myths have been so persistent. In popular legend, the Massachusetts general has become at worst a sort of American Richard

\(^{39}\)Ibid., 1075; Marshall, IV, 251, 255; Committee on Conduct of War, 37th Cong., Part Iff, 285-286.

\(^{40}\)The best but by no means the only example of this attitude is found in Werlich’s “Beast” Butler.
III or at best what Gamaliel Bradford has classified as "damaged" if not damned souls. 41

On April 27, 1862, General Butler and an occupation force of 13,700 men disembarked at New Orleans. The city had a polyglot population of 168,000 and before the war its streets and wharves had swarmed with a colorful throng of planters, sailors, slaves, and Irish immigrants. It had a reputation for refinement and culture combined with political corruption and violence. War had changed much of this. The blue-coated invaders found the city commercially paralyzed, threatened with starvation, and very close to a state of anarchy. An hysterical mob had attacked Union sympathizers, torn down the United States flag from the Customs House, and nearly lynched the federal officers sent to arrange a surrender. The municipal authorities refused any cooperation and the mob was determined to allow no relations with the Yankees except gestures of contempt and hatred. 42

Since 1862 American armies have occupied conquered territory from Manila to Berlin but few of their commanders have faced a more formidable task than the one assigned to General Butler. His rule was arbitrary and unpopular, but military occupation can scarcely be otherwise. This truth has been grimly brought home to our century but was far less evident in 1862 when Americans had scant experience with the grim realities of either conquest or occupation. Butler's assignment was to restore the full authority of the federal government; this he proceeded to do at the price of one execution and the banishment of a few dozen Confederate enthusiasts.

The execution of William Mumford, a gambler who had participated in tearing down a Union flag after the surrender of the city, was the test case of Butler's authority as well as the source of profound shock and anger throughout the South. At the time of Mumford's trial Butler held six Confederate soldiers who were under sentence of death for breaking parole. In New Orleans many were convinced the Yankees would not dare to execute anyone, while Butler believed an example was

41 Damaged Souls (Boston, 1922), 222-258.
necessary. The result was that Mumford was hanged and the sentences of the six soldiers were commuted. Mumford's fate was a hard one but in no sense a violation of the laws of war. Butler's early biographer is probably correct in his claim that "Mumford hanged, the mob was subdued; Mumford spared, the mob remained to be quelled by final grape and canister." Mumford was the sole Confederate ever executed by General Butler. The only other death sentences carried out during his rule in New Orleans were those of four Union soldiers found guilty of armed robbery.

If the execution of Mumford provided the Confederacy with a martyr, Butler's famous "women order" gave it a splendid propaganda weapon. The women of New Orleans had directed a systematic campaign of insults against Union officers which ranged from merely dramatically turning away to spitting upon them. The General was aware that attempts to arrest such ladies might provoke serious disorder while to allow such incidents to continue would undermine the authority and morale of his command. His solution was a general order stipulating that "when any female shall by word, gesture, or movement, insult or show contempt for any officer or soldier of the United States she shall be regarded and held liable to be treated as a woman of the town plying her avocation." Denunciations of this "infamous proclamation" were made not only in the South but in the British Parliament. Garbled legend has even converted Butler's order into an invitation to his licentious troops to seize the beauty as well as the booty of New Orleans. In reality the order solved the problem with no harm to anyone. The ladies of the Crescent City abruptly ceased their unladylike conduct and there were no more incidents. The Confederate commander in Louisiana later wrote that there was not "one single instance of a lady being insulted" by Butler's troops.

The Butler regime in New Orleans was successful not merely in restoring the authority of the United States but in providing

43 Marshall, I, 573-575.
44 Parton, 351.
45 Marshall, I, 502-3; Butler's Book, 446-449.
46 Marshall, I, 490.
47 Ibid., III, 130.
the city with an effective administration under very difficult circumstances. His military commissions and provost marshals were harsh, arbitrary, and not entirely free from corruption, but they accomplished a great deal. The streets of this traditionally violent community were probably better policed and safer than at any other time in the nineteenth century. Confederate sympathizers had expected the summer climate and yellow fever to strike a deadly blow at the Yankee invaders. Butler's troops were disturbed by these predictions which seemed to be supported by the appalling mortality rates of previous years. Applications for leave piled up on the commanding general's desk and friends advised him to transfer his headquarters to Ship Island in the Gulf. Butler stayed and forced his officers to do likewise. He then set about an energetic sanitary campaign which imposed a rigorous quarantine, and put 2,000 men to work scouring the streets and removing the accumulation of filth from the city's numerous canals and ditches. Owners of shops and houses were forced to clean them up under penalty of arrest and confiscation. The result was that there were only two cases of yellow fever and New Orleans was a healthier place than ever before.

In this type of situation where he could exercise his talent for engineering, sanitation, and civic planning Butler was at his best. He repeated his experiments in municipal government and sanitation while in command at Norfolk, Virginia, in 1864. When on a yachting cruise to Havana in 1881 the aging general looked longingly at that city and carefully noted how it could be captured, drained, and thoroughly scrubbed.

When the Union forces arrived they found a large part of the population of New Orleans unemployed and faced with an acute shortage of food. The poverty of the people astonished the New England soldiers, whose camps were soon haunted by poor Irish, Germans, and Negroes who sought the refuse from their kitchens. General Butler immediately or-

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48 Butler's Book, 394-395.
49 Ibid., 395-410; Committee on Conduct of War, 37th Cong., Part III, 355-356.
50 Ibid., 410-413; Blanche Butler Ames, Chronicles of the Nineteenth Century, 2 vols., (Boston, 1907), II, 521-522.
ordered the distribution of army rations and eventually organized a relief system which fed and maintained over 34,000 people. The reluctant city officials were dragooned into employing 1500 men on public works. The major part of this relief program was financed by a special tax levied against business firms and cotton brokers who were known to have contributed to the Confederate cause. Southern diarists and historians were almost unanimous in their condemnation of these measures. What the Negroes, poor whites, and German immigrants thought of Butler’s rule remains unrecorded as they were not the type of people who leave diaries or write histories. That all New Orleans was united against “the Beast” is, however, clearly disproved by the fact that nearly 5,000 white Louisianians enlisted in his regiments.

In the occupation of New Orleans and his later campaigns, General Butler and his troops acted in the same manner as other Civil War armies. In Louisiana property was often confiscated and the soldiers engaged in considerable foraging and looting. These practices were almost universal and appear to have been far more extensive under Butler’s successor, General Banks. The Civil War had its full share of systematic devastation, massacres, and extermination tactics against irregulars. Generals Sherman, Sheridan, and Forrest are only a few of the commanders involved in such incidents. While Butler often spoke of his readiness to do terrible things to all rebels, there is no record that he was ever guilty of such violations of the law of war.

Every account of Butler’s career describes the execution of Mumford, the “women order,” and the imprisonment of Confederate sympathizers at Fort Jackson. Few have noted his acts of generosity and kindness. He arranged for the wife of a wounded Confederate officer to join her husband and offered General Beauregard a pass to visit his sick wife in New Or-

52 Ibid., 21-22; Marshall, II, 30; Committee on Conduct of War, 37th Cong., Part III, 355.
54 Committee on Conduct of War, 37th Cong., Part III, 357.
56 Ibid., II, 293-297.
He was quite ready to recommend a parole for his old enemy, Pierre Soulé, and sent financial aid to alleviate the imprisonment of his former opponent in Louisiana, General Thompson. These examples are cited not to prove that Butler was a saint or to disprove that at times he could be vindictive, but merely to indicate that like most men he was capable of altruistic actions. This would seem obvious except for the legend of “Beast Butler.” There is little in Butler’s record at New Orleans or in the field to justify the label.

II The Politician

While he seldom was directly implicated in the major scandals of an age when political life was often crude and self-seeking Butler, the politician, was no less controversial than Butler, the major general. The conduct of dishonest or incompetent friends and associates cast a shadow over his political as well as his military career. Some reformers regarded him as a sinister influence behind all sorts of shady deals, and political opponents used “Butlerism” as a symbol for the corruption of “The Gilded Age.” Some historians have accepted this picture without question and quoted denunciations by Butler’s enemies as if they were conclusive evaluations of his character. Like many of his contemporaries Butler sought patronage and political favors; unlike most of them he boldly upheld this system. He opposed civil service reform and openly supported the “salary grab.” When the House censured representatives Ames and Whittemore for conduct common to a large portion of its membership it was Congressman Butler who defended them. His speeches were marked by an element of cynicism but showed defiance of the hypocrisy demonstrated by many of his frightened colleagues. It was

58 George F. Hoar, Autobiography of Twenty Years, 2 vols., (New York, 1903), I, 329-64; Moorfield Storey, The Record of Benjamin F. Butler (Boston, 1883), 65-76.
this defiance of respectability rather than specific evidence of corruption that made Butler instead of Blaine, Colfax or Conklin the primary target of reformers.

Apart from his rather matter-of-fact approach to the techniques of his trade Butler was by no means a typical party politician. He was as incapable of being a regular party hack as he was of being an army regulation general. It has often been assumed that he was the boss of a powerful though somewhat mysterious political machine with which he dominated Massachusetts politics and exerted considerable influence in Washington. There seems to be little factual basis for this assumption. Butler was one of the few prominent American politicians who achieved success without a solid base of support founded on party loyalty, local power, or a dramatically popular issue. On four occasions he performed the dangerous feat of switching party labels and spent most of his career in a minority faction of the party to which he nominally belonged. Except for a short period during Grant's terms as president he was unable to command significant support from the national administration. Throughout most of his political life the Governor and Senators from his own state were his enemies. The tightly knit group of proper Bostonians and businessmen who constituted the power elite of Massachusetts Republicanism opposed him at every election. He was likewise often without the politician's most basic comfort, a permanent local following. From 1866 to 1874 Congressman Butler represented an Essex district where he had no previous ties and maintained residence with "a tent on the beach." He won his final election to Congress from a different district and became a Democratic Governor of Massachusetts largely through the ballots of urban voters in Boston.\textsuperscript{61} As a friend of Southern Democrats in the 1850s and an advocate of Greenbacks in the 1870s he could hardly expect to ride a wave of public approval in the Bay State. Benjamin Butler did wield influence and achieve considerable power both in his own state and in Congress, but his success was a product of his own audacity, ability, and persuasiveness rather than the operations of a well-entrenched political machine.

\textsuperscript{61}American Almanac for 1884 (New York, 1884), 227.
Because of his indifference to any fixed ideology or permanent party allegiance Butler is often regarded as a man without principle or consistency who would abandon any cause for personal gain. A careful examination of the numerous issues on which he invariably took a radical and vehement stand goes far to refute this belief. In many respects he emerges much more consistent in his views than the men who faithfully voted the straight ticket and followed the orthodox Republican or Democratic party line. Benjamin Butler's political beliefs can best be described as those of a Jacksonian democrat. Family tradition and early associations directed him toward the Jacksonian principles of radical democracy and social reform. In later years he merely modified or extended these principles to fit the new conditions of the postwar era.

His support for the rights of the underprivileged, extension of the suffrage, and devotion to the Union were all in harmony with this tradition. It was also expressed in his lifelong conflict with the respectable, established, and aristocratic elements represented by West Point, Harvard College, and the Whig-Republican oligarchs of Massachusetts. By 1861 he was interpreting the Civil War as a conflict between aristocratic slave power and democracy. His final message to the people of New Orleans proclaimed: "I saw this Rebellion was a war of aristocrats against the middling man, of the rich against the poor, a war of the landowner against the laborer . . . I found no conclusion to it, save in the subjection of the few and the disfranchalment of the many."62 His postwar record as an all-out supporter of radical reconstruction and civil rights was in full accord with this declaration. Even the more dubious side of General Butler's politics such as his defense of the spoils system, appeals to class prejudice, and spread eagle nationalism were partial reflections of the Jacksonian tradition.

Young Ben Butler first entered politics as a champion of the mill workers of Lowell. Forty-five years later he rounded out his career as the Greenback Labor candidate for president. He was an active campaigner for shorter hours and helped to win the ten-hour day for mill and railway workers and the

eight-hour day for federal employees. At various times he proposed the regulation of monopolies, public ownership of railroads, and a national relief program to settle the unemployed on western lands. In 1884 he ran for president on a platform advocating woman suffrage, an income tax, and elimination of the "veto" power of Congressional committees. If conservatives found these views somewhat disturbing, the financial community regarded Butler's persistent support of Greenbacks, free coinage of silver, and taxation of government bonds with a horror tempered only by derision. While the details of Butler's "American System of Finance" may have been impractical, the nation has since adopted a monetary system far closer to his "heresies" than it is to the financial orthodoxy of the nineteenth century. In Massachusetts Ben Butler was a constant ally of the Irish minority and as governor he appointed the first Catholic judge in the history of the Commonwealth. He was also prominent in the long but successful struggle to repeal the poll tax and establish a secret ballot.

As a radical reformer Butler may well have been a man ahead of his times but it is his support for the cause of the Negro that is most relevant to twentieth-century America. Like many Northerners his views were reshaped by the outbreak of civil war. As a Democrat he had almost instinctively sided with the mill workers and Irish immigrants but the same party affiliation made him indifferent to the wrongs of the slave. With the outbreak of what he regarded as a slaveholder's rebellion his conversion was rapid and decisive. By August 1861 he was writing that the war seemed like judgment upon the nation for its efforts to avoid the slavery question, and asked, "Shall we now end the war and not eradicate the cause? . . . Will not God demand this of us now He has taken away all excuse for not pursuing the right?" Two months previously

63 Trefousse, 38, 219, 246; Marlon Cahill, Shorter Hours (New York, 1932), 107; Butler's Book, 91-109.
64 Cong. Record, 45th Cong., 2nd Session, 3223, 3631-3635, 4380.
66 Butler's Book, 975.
67 Trefousse, 246-247; Butler's Book, 114-115.
68 Marshall, I, 216.
he had pushed the government into the first hesitant step toward emancipation by declaring slaves who escaped to his lines at Fortress Monroe "contraband."

In New Orleans the Massachusetts general made another important decision when he used the city's regiments of free Negroes in the federal service. In practice few questions were asked about the previous status of recruits, and the number of free Negroes had been vastly increased by Butler's emancipation of the slaves of all who claimed foreign citizenship. The formation of Negro regiments in Louisiana was one of the first steps toward the enlistment of troops who totaled over 178,000 men by the end of the war. While at one time he had been skeptical of the Negro's reliability as a combat soldier, Butler soon became their staunchest advocate. At a time when most Union officers were ready to accept former slaves only as teamsters or laborers, General Butler was vigorously defending their good discipline and fighting qualities. By November 1863, when he assumed command in Virginia, Butler had so fully established a reputation as a friend of the Negro soldier that some of his white troops complained that he had "nigger on the brain" and "would punish a man for looking crosswise at one of the sable brethren." In Virginia Butler was not only concerned with his colored regiments for whom he established a savings bank, but also provided food, shelter, and medical attention for the large Negro population in his department. The school he established for Negro children may well have been the first federal project for their education. The General felt that his faith in the Negro soldier was fully justified by the heroic assault of Parrish's division at Newmarket Heights.

69 Ibid., 192, 209-11, 328, 400; Committee on Conduct of War, 37th Cong., Part III, 358.
70 David Donald, Why the North Won the Civil War (Baton Rouge, 1960), 82.
71 Marshall, I, 519; II, 436-8; III, 182; IV 852; V, 215.
72 Barrett, 177.
74 O. R., Series I, III, 65; Butler's Book, 730-743.
attacking column, Butler wrote his wife: “The man who says the Negro will not fight is a coward . . . His soul is blacker than the face of those dead Negroes upturned toward heaven in solemn protest against him and his prejudices. I have not been so moved during this war as I was by this sight.”

Upon his return to active politics Butler was one of the most powerful advocates of radical reconstruction. After a triumphal reception by the Negroes of Richmond in 1868 he wrote: “It is worth the war to have liberated a race so kindly and so grateful. Infamous, most infamous will the Republican party collectively and individually be if for one moment or in one jot or tittle we abate the protection thrown around that people . . .” In Congress he was an ardent supporter of Negro suffrage and civil rights, and achieved considerable notoriety because of his vehement attacks on the Ku Klux Klan and other attempts to restore the traditional Southern system. In 1877 he denounced the Hayes administration for its abandonment of the Negro, which he felt came very close to the infamy he had feared nine years previously.

History has generally treated Butler and the other radical Republicans as selfish and vindictive demagogues. A revision of this caricature has begun only in the last two decades. For a nation again debating this question of civil rights and social justice for the Negro the words of Congressman Ben Butler, spoken some ninety years ago, are still controversial and still highly relevant.

We were told yesterday that we must respect in this regard the prejudices of the South . . . We cannot respect them: we lament them, and we pity them. With deep sorrow, and not offensively I say this: prejudice can never be the grounds of legislation in regard to the rights of the citizen—never. We must legislate to give every man who is a citizen of the United States all the rights that every other man has. We demand that prejudice shall square itself with the law.

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75 Marshall, V. 192.
76 Marshall, V. 720.
78 Trefousse, 235-236.
While like all political realists Butler was at times willing to compromise and maneuver on civil rights as well as other legislation, he essentially remained faithful to the cause of the Negro. He was personally friendly and helpful to the first Negro congressmen who had been ignored by most of their colleagues. He endeavored to appoint a Negro cadet to West Point and, when his own son graduated from the Academy, Butler insisted that he be assigned to a Negro regiment. One of Butler’s last significant contributions to public life was the appointment of the first Negro judge in Massachusetts.

As a champion of minority groups and a proponent of new and radical doctrines Butler has been vindicated by the passage of time. Labor legislation and universal suffrage have long been on the statute books, and the federal government has once again moved to protect the rights of its Negro citizens. The General’s critics can still raise the question of his sincerity and claim that his interest in the underdog was largely directed to promoting the fight. He was of course a working politician who sought power and place, and a man who thrived on noisy controversy. But in addition to this he was an unflinching defender of unpopular causes, and in their defense his political career attained both consistency and significance.

III The Citizen

Butler’s reputation as a soldier and a statesman has been overshadowed by charges that his administration was corrupt and that he used his positions as a major general and public official for personal gain. It is impossible to reach final and clear-cut answers to these accusations which would either triumphantly acquit or fully condemn him. What can be demonstrated is that General Butler’s case is by no means unique and that many of the actions for which he has been criticized were done openly and with the full approval of his superiors. It can also be shown that thorough and repeated

80 Frederick Douglass, Life and Times of Frederick Douglass (Boston, 1881), 398; Trefousse, 311, note 70; Russell H. Conwell, Hon. Benjamin F. Butler (Boston, 1874), 8.
81 Butler’s Book, 80, 969.
examination of his affairs has failed to produce decisive evidence of wrongdoing.

The story of contraband trade and commodity speculation is a complex and far from edifying chapter in the history of the Civil War. Secession and war had cut asunder the countless economic ties between two parts of a nation which had been mutually dependent. As soon as Union troops penetrated into the Confederacy a rapid and almost spontaneous effort to restore these relations took place. In the wake of every Yankee army there came a swarm of speculators eager to find Southern cotton and sugar. Just beyond the picket lines was a host of planters, farmers, and traders anxious to obtain food, salt, and manufactured goods. In theory both Washington and Richmond were opposed to any dealing with the enemy. In practice neither government could maintain such a position. Economic necessity, the impossibility of enforcement, and the hope that they would gain the advantage drove both sides to accepting and even promoting trade across the lines. This trade was of course to be carefully regulated. Unscrupulous and profit-hungry men on both sides soon made a farce of the regulations.82

Those who insist upon General Butler's guilt base their case to a large extent upon the claim that wherever he appeared illegal trade and speculation flourished. Butler's assignments, first to New Orleans and then to the coastal region of Virginia and North Carolina, placed him in areas where the problem of trade was sure to arise. Contrary to the implications of his critics, he did not originate this trade and it was in no sense a phenomenon unique to his departments. Memphis and Natchez, for example, sent millions of dollars worth of goods into the Confederacy, and General Sherman declared that "Cincinnati furnished more contraband goods than Charleston and had done more to prolong the war than South Carolina."83 Many areas besides Butler's command were equally involved in trading with the Confederates, and speculation and traffic in contraband goods continued to boom long after

he had left the scene. After General Banks had assumed command at New Orleans, Collector Denison reported that a host of speculators had come down with his entourage and believed that “there is a great deal more corruption here now than even under Butler.” A little later he wrote of the “outrageous speculation in all directions.”84 In Virginia an active exchange of cotton for coffee and bacon went on after Butler had been removed from command.85 Many of Butler’s critics give the impression that illegal trade was confined to his department and also imply that he was the only general whose name can be connected with such activities.86 In view of the fact that trading and speculation appeared wherever Union and Confederates lives converged, it is not surprising to find that a large number of officers, including at least five generals, were reported to be promoting such activity or sharing in its profits.87 These reports do not of course prove the guilt of the officers involved nor would such proof demonstrate Butler’s innocence. They do indicate that accusations and rumors of corruption were not confined to one major general from Massachusetts.

There can be little doubt that Butler looked favorably upon many of the commercial activities in his department and in some cases actively encouraged exchange of goods with the Confederates. What is equally beyond doubt is that this policy reflected the views of the administration in Washington and frequently had its specific approval. President Lincoln once stated that cotton must be obtained and if necessary it was better to give the Confederates guns for it than to let them exchange it abroad for guns and ammunition.88 General Halleck ordered Grant to provide every facility for getting cotton even if it had to be exchanged for gold, and spoke of “the ab-

84 Marshall, III, 47-48, 72.
85 Ludwell H. Johnson, “Contraband Trade During the Last Year of the Civil War,” Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XLIX, (June 1962), 642.
86 Rhodes, V, 303 ; Werlich, 60-81, 90-94.
solute necessity of encouraging that trade..." The Treasury Department informed its agents that it was essential to get cotton and other commodities out of the Confederacy and even suggested that there was no necessity to inquire into the origin of these goods or the morals of their possessors. In New Orleans Butler was merely following the same policy when he told Lincoln's special commissioner, Reverdy Johnson: "I will assure safe conduct, open market, and prompt shipment of all such property sent to New Orleans, and the owner, were he Slidell himself, should have the pay for his cotton if sent here under this assurance." This declaration, emphatically endorsed by Johnson, was also discussed and approved by Secretary Chase and Secretary of State Seward.

The two instances in which the commander at New Orleans was most directly involved in commercial transactions were fully reported to the government and received its approval. Shortly after arriving in the Crescent City Butler purchased several shiploads of cotton and sugar and dispatched them to Boston. He reported the matter to Washington and explained that he had saved unnecessary expense in providing ballast for the ships. He also suggested the government could purchase the cotton and sugar at cost. The War Department took a dim view of the General's personal participation in trade but the Assistant Secretary wrote that Butler's action had been "wise and patriotic and ought to be protected by the government." The second case involved shipments of salt from New Orleans to Mobile, where it was exchanged for cotton. This transaction as reported by a Confederate diarist and Collector Denison has often been presented as the conclusive proof of Butler's dishonesty and treachery. Again, however, the record shows that Reverdy Johnson approved But-

89 O. R., Series I, XVII; II, 150, 186.
90 Committee on Conduct of War, 37th Cong., Part III, 611-13.
91 Marshall, II, 94.
93 Marshall, I, 579, 612, 628; II, 78; III, 5; Committee on Conduct of War, 37th Cong., III, 360-362.
ler's permits for this trade, and assured him that such ship­ments were fully in accord with the government's policy and constituted one of the advantages it expected to gain from the occupation of New Orleans.\(^\text{95}\)

Butler's assignment to the Department of Virginia and North Carolina in November 1863 again involved him in an area where he was accused of granting passes and otherwise pro­moting illegal trade. The administration in Washington was partly responsible for this situation. In 1862 Congress had endeavored to tighten the controls on contraband trade by making it a carefully supervised government monopoly. The administration was so intent on retaining the supposed advan­tages of this traffic that Treasury Department regulations, an executive order, and numerous special permits actually made it easier than ever to ship goods into the Confederacy.\(^\text{96}\) The speculators and traders who infested the Department of Vir­ginia often carried permits from General Butler. Many of them also carried Treasury Department contracts, recommenda­tions from prominent officials, and occasionally passes signed by the President. Most permits were issued by special agent Risely of the Treasury Department, and the sponsors of various trading operations included Butler's political rival Gov­ernor Andrew of Massachusetts and President Lincoln's friends, Ward Lannon and George Ashum.\(^\text{97}\)

The most prominent case involved George Lane, who had formulated a plan to exchange several shipments of goods for $500,000 worth of cotton. Butler aided this enterprise by recommending Lane to the President, issuing passes, and se­curing the release of Lane and one of his partners when they were intercepted. The seizure of Lane's ship, the Philadelphia, brought about investigations of the department by a congres­sional committee and a military commission. The investiga­tors soon discovered that Lane had discussed his project with Secretary Chase and held government contracts to obtain cot­ton. In addition to Butler's permit, he held passes signed by

\(^{95}\text{Marshall, II, 120-122.}\)
\(^{96}\text{Johnson, 637-639.}\)
\(^{97}\text{House Report #24, 38th Congress, 2nd Session, 107, 177.}\)
the Treasury agent, the commander at New Bern, and Abraham Lincoln. 98

One may well doubt the policy of the Lincoln's administration in securing cotton at the price of an extensive, demoralizing trade in contraband goods. The cause of the Union might have been better served by Grant's proposals to suppress all relations with Confederate territory. The fact remains that an active encouragement of trade was the government's policy throughout most of the war. Butler seems to have had little doubt that his policies would meet with approval in Washington. He reported his cotton shipments and salt transaction to the War Department and Reverdy Johnson, later recounting them to the Committee on the Conduct of the War. 99 The investigation of contraband trade in Virginia appears to have been in part due to a conversation between Butler and Assistant Secretary of War Dana in which the General described how the existing regulations fostered such practices. 100 Butler's removal from command, first in New Orleans and then in Virginia, were due to doubts concerning his military capacity and his stormy relations with foreign consuls rather than dissatisfaction with the commercial side of his departments. 101

In connection with a suit arising from the confiscation of gold in New Orleans, Butler wrote: "I am as willing that every act of my life shall be investigated as this may be." 102 This claim was to be fully and endlessly put to the test. Benjamin Butler was in all probability the most thoroughly investigated man of his generation. While he was in command, special representatives of the President and the War Department investigated his conduct. After his removal, two military commissions and a congressional committee inquired into his administration in Virginia and New Orleans. During and after the war, a host of political opponents continued to hunt

100 Marshall, V, 502.
101 Ibid., II, 309, 564, 571; IV, 258, 457-459; V, 468.
102 Ibid., V, 420.
for evidence against him. Nearly all of these investigations were conducted by men hostile to Butler and in several instances they resorted to any means to formulate a case against him. In 1874 Congressman Butler defiantly told the House that he had lived under a microscope for fourteen years and had thus been compelled to lead an upright life "or some man would in all those years have got a rap at old cock-eye." It would probably be a matter of little surprise to the Congressman if he could know that some historians and biographers are still seeking to get in a rap or two ninety years later.

The fact that General Butler's career was scrutinized by men unfriendly to him is of far less importance than what was actually discovered by the investigators. A military commission sent to New Orleans in 1865 submitted a report of 400 pages but President Andrew Johnson, one of Butler's most bitter enemies, refused to make it public. The only portion of the report ever released was contained in a speech by Senator James Fowler denouncing Butler's efforts to impeach the President. Fowler recounted the familiar story of Butler's cotton and salt shipments, and criticized the activities of the General's brother, Andrew Jackson Butler. The only new charge contained in the speech was based upon the statement by Jacob Barker, a New Orleans banker, who claimed that Butler had borrowed $100,000 for the purpose of financing his brother's speculations. General Butler did have numerous financial transactions with the bank but was for some time using loans and his own funds to pay his troops. He had also borrowed money for the cotton shipments which were reported to and approved by the War Department.

The military commission and congressional committee which examined the commercial side of the Department of Virginia had no difficulty in showing the existence of an extensive trade with the enemy, but they also discovered that much of this

104 Congressional Record, 43rd Congress, 1st Session, II, 5220-28.
105 Executive Document #96, 39th Congress, 1st Session, May 3, 1866.
106 Congressional Globe, 40th Congress, 2nd Session, 4511-4512.
107 Marshall, I, 483; II, 31-33; Committee on Conduct of War, 37th Cong., 3rd Session, Part III, 961.
trade was authorized by the Treasury Department and the President. The commission made every effort to get testimony against Butler and at times seems to have sought the aid of disappointed speculators and encouraged witnesses to save themselves by incriminating the General or his relatives. The most that came out of this was the statement by an enemy of the former department commander that Butler "was interested in permits." It was established that Butler's friends and military associates had used their influence to secure permits or share in the business of the trading stores set up under Treasury regulations. Attempts to prove that Butler's brother-in-law, Fisher Hildreth, was a partner in these stores or was engaged in cotton speculation produced only hearsay evidence which was in conflict with other testimony.

James Ford Rhodes's severely unfavorable judgment of Butler's character has done much toward establishing the hostile treatment which the General has received from later historians. An examination of Rhodes's sources reveals that in many cases he uncritically accepted the statements of Butler's enemies. He cites, for example, Governor Andrew's report that Butler's recruiting of troops "seems to have been designed and adopted simply to afford means to persons of bad character to make money." In actuality the Governor's objections were based upon the fact that Butler wished to recruit troops directly under federal auspices rather than those of the state. While willing to consider the Governor's objections to any specific persons Butler was also determined to commission a number of Democrats. For Rhodes, "the suspicion (of Butler's dishonesty) becomes a strong presumption from the words of General George H. Gordon who was in a position to acquire accurate information and judge fairly." Gordon may well have acquired information but the fairness of his

109 Johnson, 643.
110 Ibid., 643-6; Marshall, IV, 474-475.
111 House Reports, 38th Congress, 2nd Session, #24, 124.
112 Rhodes, V, 312.
113 Marshall, I, 239, 246-292.
114 Rhodes, V, 308-11.
judgment is open to question. He was at one time a protégé of Butler’s but had broken with him and headed the military commission which did its best to find evidence against his former Department Commander. Gordon’s attacks on Butler were made in the course of a stumping tour on behalf of Butler’s congressional opponent, and by innuendoes in his war diary.\footnote{George H. Gordon, A War Diary of the Events in the War of the Great Rebellion, 1861-1865 (Boston, 1882); Marshall, IV, 64, 71; V, 306, 503, 550-51, 587; Rhodes, V, 311.}

Somewhat more substantial evidence is provided by the reports of G. S. Denison, the Collector at New Orleans, to Secretary Chase.\footnote{Denison reports were used by Rhodes and later published in the Report of the American Historical Association, 1902, II, and in Marshall’s Correspondence of General Butler.} Denison’s letters reveal him to be an inconclusive witness for or against Butler. He was obviously impressed by the General’s ability but was at the same time constantly encountering cases of illegal trade and rumors that Butler was involved. He never seems to have made up his mind whether to believe the rumors or the General’s explanations. On September 9, 1862, he wrote: “I have never been able to discover any good proof that General Butler has improperly done or permitted anything for his own pecuniary advantage. He is such a smart man that it would, in any case, be difficult to discover what he wished concealed.”\footnote{Ibid., 270-271.} By October he was much disturbed by the trade in salt and cotton, and Butler’s explanation that it “was the policy of the government” did not satisfy him. The correspondence between Reverdy Johnson and Butler shows that this explanation was in reality quite accurate.\footnote{Ibid., 357.} By November Denison had swung around to the view that “the affairs of the Dept. of the Gulf are managed with entire honesty” and there was no longer any trade with the enemy.”\footnote{Ibid., 516.} His final verdict, after Butler had left New Orleans, was that the General had served his government and country well, and had done “no bad thing except permitting his brother to make money dishonestly.”\footnote{Ibid., 566.}
The least plausible argument in the case against Butler is the one that, as he left a fortune estimated at $7,000,000, he must have acquired it by dishonest means during the war. There is no positive evidence to support this charge which appears to have originated in the campaign speeches of General Gordon. Rhodes not only picked up Gordon's claim that Butler's fortune increased from $150,000 to $7,000,000 between 1861 and 1868 but also attributed it to the General's friends rather than to a bitter political enemy.\textsuperscript{121} General Butler had a lucrative law practice, shares in the profitable Middlesex Mills, and numerous successful ventures in real estate and business. His wealth can easily be explained in a more plausible way than assuming it originated in stolen spoons or contraband trade.

While there is almost no real proof that General Butler shared in or profited from the numerous speculations and shady enterprises which flourished in his department, it cannot be denied that he surrounded himself with friends and associates of questionable character. These friends appear to have frequently secured favors and reaped substantial gains. In New Orleans his brother Andrew was active in cotton speculation, importation of Texas cattle, sugar plantations, and numerous other transactions. James Parton's defense of Andrew's activities as the legal and useful services of a clever businessman is not convincing and at best leaves a good deal to be explained. To Mrs. Butler, Andrew represented a constant source of trouble and a threat to her husband's career.\textsuperscript{122} Later, in the Department of Virginia, Butler's friends, military subordinates and relations were again involved in commercial transactions on the uncertain borderline created by the Treasury regulations.\textsuperscript{123}

The question naturally arises how one of the shrewdest men of his generation repeatedly became involved in compromising

\textsuperscript{121} Rhodes, V, 308.
\textsuperscript{122} Parton, 303, 411; Marshall, I, 634-5; II, 242, 320, 422-426, 503, 530, 560.
\textsuperscript{123} Marshall, IV, 474-5, 493, 515, 523; Johnson, 643-5; House Reports, 38th Congress, 2nd Session, #24, 124.
situations in spite of the warnings of friends and the entreaties of a devoted wife. Part of the answer lies in the fact that few men cared less about proprieties, conventions, and appearances than Benjamin Butler. He believed with the Administration that reestablishment of trade and procurement of cotton were of vital importance to the North. In 1865 he drew up a memorandum which described the advantages he believed would arise from partial suspension of the blockade. It was also Butler's versatility and wide range of interest which got him into trouble. Ideally, of course, he should have put aside all concern for law, politics, and business as soon as he put on a uniform. Such an act of renunciation would have been completely out of character. It has often been stated that Butler was the most noted of the "political generals." Many of his numerous conflicts with foreign consuls, civil authorities, chaplains, and fellow officers originated in his tendency to deal with them in the manner of a political leader or prosecuting attorney instead of that of a major general. It is equally true that Butler the businessman and enthusiast for industrial progress could never simply ignore the commercial aspects of his military command. This might have caused little harm except for the misplaced loyalty and excessive toleration which allowed his friends to profit from his position.

Nearly every evaluation of Benjamin Butler has stressed the unusual and colorful aspects of his career. It is indeed possible that Charles Dana's description of him as "the most original, the most American, and the most picturesque character of our public life" was a valid one. This emphasis on the colorful has, however, sometimes obscured the fact that in many respects he was typical of the soldiers and politicians of his time. His fondness for controversy and resounding pronouncements frequently made him appear more extreme in his views than was actually the case. He appears to have taken considerable delight in shocking his audience. To the South he spoke of hanging rebels, to Lincoln he advocated wholesale shooting of deserters, and to a rival lawyer he supposedly re-

marked it was better to confiscate a fortune than to marry it. Actually he did none of these, but all have become part of the Butler legend. This legend helped to win him enemies and to magnify his faults.

When stripped of their more dramatic overtones Butler's weaknesses were those of the typical Northern politician, businessman, and amateur soldier. In the field he was by no means a blundering incompetent; his record was average in the far from spectacular list of Union generals. On the purely tactical level his political career was carried forward by the same methods as those of other Congressmen and lawyers. His willingness to accept contraband trade and the spoils system as necessary and even desirable facts of life was common to political and business circles throughout the North. Although he had his full share of the failings of "The Gilded Age," Butler did possess a robust enthusiasm for new and unpopular causes which often put him well ahead of his contemporaries. His originality and grasp of the higher strategies of war and legislation contributed to his success as an administrator and politician. These successes made substantial contribution to the preservation of the Union and the advancement of social justice.


BEN BUTLER AT COLBY COLLEGE

By Ernest C. Marriner

Benjamin Franklin Butler was born in Deerfield, New Hampshire, in 1818, the son of a captain in the War of 1812, who became a merchant trader, voyaging to the West Indies and South America, and dying of yellow fever at St. Kitts, before any of his three children had reached their teens. The impoverished mother moved her family to Lowell, where she kept a boardinghouse and received help from the parish of the Reverend Enoch Freeman's Baptist church. Both Freeman and Mrs. Butler hoped that Ben would become a minister.