

**CHARLES SUMNER  
AND THE TREATY  
OF WASHINGTON**

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Charles Sumner and the treaty of Washington by Daniel Henry Chamberlain

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**DANIEL HENRY CHAMBERLAIN**

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## THE TREATY OF WASHINGTON

BY

DANIEL HENRY CHAMBERLAIN, LL. D.

*Resident Member of the Massachusetts Historical  
Society, etc., etc., etc.*

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A Review of parts of An Address  
by Mr. Charles Francis Adams  
before the New York  
Historical Society  
November 19  
1901

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*Sed veteris proverbii admonitu vivorum memini, nec tamen  
Epicuri licet oblitisci*

CICERO, *de Finibus*, V. 1. 3

*I cannot set my authority against their authority. But to  
exert reason is not to revolt against authority*

BURKE, *Letter I., on a Regicide Peace*

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BOSTON

1902





papers, public archives, or memoirs which have already seen the light,"<sup>1</sup> and styling the Treaty of Washington "a very memorable historical event," and President Grant, Secretary Fish, Senator Sumner, and Minister Motley "great historic figures," Mr. Adams deals at length with all the leading persons and topics covered by his theme. Nowhere else can now be found so full, vivid, and thorough treatment of this large and influential chapter of our history as Mr. Adams here gives.

The purpose of the present writer, however, is closely limited to an examination of Mr. Adams's views of Senator Sumner's relations to the Treaty of Washington, especially the matter of his removal from the chairmanship of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in March, 1871.

It would probably be safe to say that the public had, till Mr. Adams spoke, remained fully persuaded that the cause of Sumner's removal was his opposition, and what grew out of that opposition, to the San Domingo Treaty in 1870. This cause has, however, never looked well on the historical page, and the partisans and friends of Grant and Fish have not been willing to stand on it. The reason specially assigned, both in the senatorial caucus which decreed the removal and in the Senate where it was effected, was the personal relations of Sumner to Grant and Fish, which were then described as those of non-recognition and non-speaking in

<sup>1</sup> Adams, *Before and After*, etc., 1.



social or unofficial life. These relations, whatever of unpleasantness they involved, grew out of the disagreement between Grant and Fish on the one hand, and Sumner on the other, regarding a treaty for the annexation of San Domingo, negotiated by Grant by extraordinary methods and sent to the Senate in 1870. This treaty Sumner opposed, and it was defeated in the Senate, June 30, 1870. Motley, who was an old and special friend of Sumner, was the next day asked to resign his position as Minister to England, an act which has been almost universally regarded as a blow at Sumner, followed, as it was, by a despatch signed by Fish, which, in its style and in its references to Sumner, far overpassed the bounds of ordinary diplomatic propriety. Of the real motive of the removal of Motley, Mr. Adams thus speaks:—

“He (Grant) consequently regarded this action (opposition to the San Domingo Treaty) on the part of the Senator at the head of the Committee on Foreign Relations, as during the war he would have regarded the action of a department commander who refused to cooperate in the plan of general campaign laid down from headquarters and exerted himself to cause an operation to fail. Such a subordinate should be summarily relieved. He seems actually to have chafed under his inability to take this course with the chairman of a Senate Committee; and so he relieved his feelings at the expense of the friend of that chairman, the Minister to England, who was within his power. Him he incontinently dismissed.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Adams, *Before and After*, etc., 118.

This is a succinct as well as an accurate summary of the proceeding. It is not necessary in the present discussion to notice further the Motley affair.

Evidently ill at ease regarding the reason assigned at the time for Sumner's removal, Grant in 1877, six years after the removal and three years after Sumner's death, in two interviews, one in Scotland, and the other at Cairo; and Fish in the same year, in several newspaper letters and interviews, put forward, as the ground of the removal, dereliction of duty on Sumner's part in failing to report in due time several treaties sent to the Senate and there referred to Sumner's committee during the session following the removal of Motley. Into this phase of the controversy it is not necessary to go farther than to say that friends of Sumner procured the removal of secrecy from the Senate records covering the period named, the last year of Sumner's service as chairman, and the charge of neglect of duty as specified by Grant and Fish was shown to be wholly unfounded.

In January, 1878, J. C. Bancroft Davis, who had been one of Fish's assistant secretaries, appeared in an elaborate letter in the *New York Herald*,<sup>1</sup> in which, after again putting forward the disproved charge of neglect of duty on Sumner's part, he brought out, for the first time, so far as the present writer has discovered, a certain memorandum which he alleged was sent by Sumner to Fish, January 17, 1871, by which he claimed that

<sup>1</sup> *New York Herald*, Jan. 4, 1878.

Sumner put himself in entire opposition to any possible settlement of the pending controversy between England and the United States growing out of our Civil War. It does not appear that this memorandum, as exploited by Davis, was effective to change the general judgment upon the cause or merits of Sumner's removal, or indeed that it has ever hitherto attracted much attention in any quarter. Now, however, thirty years after the event, Mr. Adams takes up the theme, and while not asserting that the fact of this memorandum, or any other of the reasons given for Sumner's removal, was the real reason moving Grant and Fish and the Senators, does assert, in round terms, that this memorandum of January 17, 1871, made it justifiable, necessary, and right for the Administration, if it could do so, to secure the removal of Sumner from the head of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. Referring to Sumner's removal, Mr. Adams says: —

“Under these circumstances the course now pursued (the removal of Sumner) was more than justifiable. It was necessary as well as right.”<sup>1</sup>

What the circumstances were will fully appear hereafter.

The present question is: Must we revise our opinion of Sumner so far as to think that the removal was just and warranted on the grounds on which Mr. Adams puts it?

<sup>1</sup> Adams, *Before and After*, etc., 128.