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**“THOSE WHO  
OPPOSE ... MUST  
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CONSEQUENCES”**

Delegates to the 1887 National Reform Association Convention stood



tall and determined. Aroused by the oratory of their spokesman, David McAllister, they agreed with him that “those who oppose this work now will discover, when the religious amendment is made to the Constitution, that if they do not see fit to fall in with the majority, they must abide the consequences, or seek some more congenial clime.”<sup>1</sup>

Just a century before, Ben Franklin had commented: “When a Religion is good, I conceive that it will support itself; and, when it cannot support itself, and God does not take care to support, so that its Professors are oblig'd to call for the help of the Civil Power, it is a sign, I apprehend, of its being a bad one.”<sup>2</sup>

But a lot could happen in 100 years. Men can forget.

Early In 1863, when the Civil War and the crisis of national survival were the overpowering issues of the day, representatives of eleven Protestant denominations met in Xenia, Ohio, to create a national Christian theocracy.

The National Reform Association made no effort to conceal its avowed intent to destroy Jefferson's wall of separation between church and state.

[70] The association's constitution warned of “subtle and persevering attempts . . . to overthrow our Sabbath laws” and pledged itself “to promote needed reforms in the action of the government touching the Sabbath” and “to secure such an amendment to the Constitution of the United States as will declare the nation's allegiance to Jesus Christ and its acceptance of the moral laws of the Christian religion, and so indicate that this is a Christian nation, and place all the Christian laws, institutions, and usages of our government on an undeniably legal basis in the fundamental laws of the land.”<sup>3</sup>

But Lincoln and his Congress appeared to be more concerned with finding a means to penetrate the Confederate defense in Virginia. Pressure from the “reformers” continued, however, and a Reconstruction Congress finally formulated a response to the petitions. The House Committee on the Judiciary reported it “Inexpedient to legislate upon the subject,” since the fathers of the republic had considered the matter and laid the foundation of a government which “was to be the home of the oppressed of all nations of the earth, whether Christian or pagan.”

The committee pointed out that the founders of our nation had reasoned “with great unanimity that it was inexpedient to put anything into the Constitution or frame of government which might be construed to be a reference to any religious creed or doctrine.”<sup>4</sup>

When, in 1892, Congress heard demands to attach a Sundayclosing rider to the bill appropriating funds to the Columbian Exposition, New York Senator Hiscock counseled, “If I had charge of this amendment in the interest of the Columbian Exposition, I would write the provision for the closure in any form that the religious sentiment of the country demands.”<sup>5</sup>

Connecticut Senator Hawley dared his associates to put in writing a denial that the United States was a Christian nation. “Word it, if you dare; advocate it, if you dare. How many who voted for it would ever come back here again? None, I hope.”<sup>6</sup>

A Chicago newspaper reported the reaction of a House committee member on the World's Fair to the clamor for the Sunday-closing rider. [71] He allegedly admitted, “The reason we shall vote for it is, I will confess to you, a fear that, unless we do so, the church folks will get together and knife us at the polls next; and – well, you know we all want to come back, and we can't afford to take any risks.”<sup>7</sup>

New Hampshire's Senator Blair sponsored a “Lord's Day” measure “To Promote Its Observance as a Day of Religious Worship,” a measure vigorously promoted by the National Reform Association, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the American Sabbath Union, and other organizations.

In addition to proposing a ban on “secular work, labor, or business” the bill sought to restrain interstate commerce, transportation of the mails, military musters and drills, as well as “transportation . . . by land or water in such way as to interfere with or disturb the people in the enjoyment of the first day of the week. . . . or its observance as a day of religious worship.”<sup>8</sup> It also condemned “any play, game, or amusement, or recreation” that could disturb others.

The hearings on the proposal before the Senate Committee on Education and Labor produced a long line of clergy testimonials urging passage. On the afternoon of December 13, 1888, a spirited exchange between Senator Blair and Alonzo T. Jones took place. Jones, a professor of history at the Seventh-day Adventist Battle Creek College in Michigan, took the offensive against the bill:

It is the religious observance of the day that its promoters, from one end of the land to the other, have in view. In the convention, now in session in this city, working in behalf of this bill, only yesterday Dr. Crafts said: “Taking religion out of the day takes the rest out.”

In the “Boston Monday Lectures,” 1887, Joseph Cook, lecturing on the subject of Sunday laws, said: “The experience of centuries shows, however, that you will in vain endeavor to preserve Sunday as a day of rest, unless you preserve it as a day of worship. [72] Unless Sabbath observance be founded upon religious reasons, you will not long maintain it at a high standard on the basis of economic and physiological and political considerations only.”

And in the Illinois State Sunday convention held in Elgin, November 8, 1887, Dr. W. W. Everts declared Sunday to be “the test of all religion.”<sup>9</sup>

The Elgin convention had pronounced:

That we look with shame and sorrow on the non-observance of the Sabbath by many Christian people, in that custom prevails with them of purchasing Sabbath newspapers, engaging in and patronizing Sabbath business and travel, and in many instances giving themselves to pleasure and self-indulgence, setting aside by neglect and indifference the great duties and privileges which God's day brings them.

*Resolved*, that we give our votes and support to those candidates or political officers who will pledge themselves to vote for the enactment and enforcing of statutes in favor of the civil Sabbath.<sup>10</sup>

The Blair bill died in committee. Later, the Senator stripped the bill of the more obvious religious implications and on December 9, 1889, introduced another Federal Sunday-closing measure. Again it failed to gain adequate support and expired.

Sunday-law proponents learned from these skirmishes. They earned that the stronger the religious rationale advanced for creating the establishment, the stronger were the constitutional arguments available to opponents. Consequently the reformers made an effort to cultivate the support of labor on the basis that a Federal blue law would serve a public-welfare purpose and promote the interests of the laboring man.

The industrial revolution, they argued, had worked hardships on the dignity and economic independence of the individual. Exorbitant profits were reaped at the expense of adequate working conditions and wages. The workingman deserved better. Sunday-law proponents sought to exploit this need by linking their cause to public welfare and the individual.

[73] When W. C. P. Breckinridge of Kentucky offered a “Bill to Prevent Persons From Being Forced to Labor on Sunday,” it was channeled to a subcommittee of the House Committee on the District of Columbia for study. Sharp contrasts of opinion were aired in open hearings on February 18, 1890. The cast of characters mirrored the earlier hearings on the Blair bill. Ministerial proponents W. F. Crafts, J. H. Elliott, and George Elliott were joined by representatives of the W.C.T.U. Alonzo T. Jones, J. O. Corliss, and W. H. McKee, representing the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and a representative of the District Knights of Labor opposed the bill.

“No one is being forced to labor on Sunday in the District of Columbia,” Jones reported. “Sunday legislation is, in reality, not in behalf of the laboring man at all. It is only a pretense to cover the real purpose – to enforce by law the religious observance of the day.”<sup>11</sup>

In view of efforts to enlist labor support for the Sunday-law movement, the testimony of Millard F. Hobbs, chief officer of the District Knights of Labor, was significant. Although he acknowledged the diversity of opinion relative to the Breckinridge bill within his organization, he stated that “the Knights of Labor, as a whole, have refused to have anything to do with it.” Every Knight, he said, was in favor of a day of rest, some of two days, but because of the “religious side of the question,” they opposed the bill. “What benefits the Knights of Labor wish to obtain, we think, can be better secured by our own efforts through our own organization than by the efforts of others, through the church.”<sup>12</sup>

The subcommittee listened, and the bill was never brought to a vote. But Congress was not to escape easily the pressure for Federal action for enforced Sunday closing. When a rider was attached to the bill appropriating funds to the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, a flurry of

Congressional debate ensued. In order to obtain Federal funds, the bill stipulated, the fair had to close each Sunday.

[74] The American Sabbath Union maintained that this measure will honor God and preserve the faith of the nation. . . . The nation's faith in God and His laws will be put to the test by the action of its Congress on this subject." The Wisconsin Sunday Rest Association urged that Sunday opening "would tend to break down the Christianity of our country." In October, 1891, a convention of Massachusetts Protestants went on record favoring the Sunday closing of the fair out of "respect to the religious convictions of the millions of Christian people in this great nation who believe that the Sabbath is one of the chief bulwarks of Christianity."<sup>13</sup>

Congressmen felt severe pressure to support the rider. Comments in the *Congressional Record* as well as off-the-cuff remarks revealed concern for voter reaction. Remarked Senator Hawley, "Everybody knows what the foundation is. It is founded in religious belief."<sup>14</sup> Senator Peffer observed, "We are engaged in a theological discussion concerning the observance of the first day of the week."<sup>15</sup>

After days of spirited debate and revision, Sunday-closing advocates scored a victory as President Harrison, on August 5, 1892, signed the measure into law.

Citizens who earlier had not bothered to join in a petition protesting "against the Congress of the United States committing the United States Government to a union of religion and state, in the passage of any bill or resolution to close the World's Columbian Exposition on Sunday," suddenly reacted. Moves to open the fair on Sunday were initiated in Chicago, backed by the city council, the mayor, the press, and the management of the fair. Ironically, they gave religious reasons in support of Sunday opening. The *Tribune* talked loftily of religious services at the fair which would make "Sunday at the World's Fair . . . one of the grandest recognitions of the Sabbath known to modern history."<sup>16</sup>

[75] Religious leaders threatened boycott if the fair opened on Sunday. One excited group telegraphed the President, urging him to "suppress Chicago nullification with Jacksonian firmness and to guard the gates next Sabbath with troops if necessary."<sup>17</sup> Another church organization demanded, in a wire to the attorney general, to know why Federal troops could not be "used, if necessary, to maintain inviolate the national authority, and keep the fair closed on the Lord's day."<sup>18</sup>

A Western newspaper editor found it contradictory to "appeal to the President to enforce closing, if need be, by military force" in order to show the world "that we are a Christian nation."<sup>19</sup>

Sentiment for Sunday opening was given another opportunity for Congressional exposure following the introduction of a joint resolution in

December, 1892, which would have left “the matter of Sunday observance entirely within the power of the regularly constituted authorities of the World's Columbian Exposition.”

Samuel Gompers was the voice of the American Federation of Labor at Congressional hearings that followed. He deplored the Sunday closing of the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition in 1876, which prevented him and thousands of others from attending: “I deny the right of any man or number of men to speak in the name of the wage earners of America, and to say that they favor the closing of the World's Fair on Sunday.”<sup>20</sup>

Another labor representative blamed the Protestant evangelical churches for the Sunday closing and accused them of assuming to be guardians of the economic and moral affairs of the working people. He branded this conduct as willfully and ignorantly fraudulent and repudiated the right “of these churches or their representatives to speak or act for us in this matter.”<sup>21</sup>

Susan B. Anthony spoke for an open fair. She recalled when Sunday streetcars were banned in Philadelphia, the struggle to open the Philadelphia Art Gallery and New York's Central Park on Sunday, and the “big, long fight before there was any music allowed in the park on Sunday.” [76] She classed the Sunday closing of the fair as a “tyranny that should not be practiced by the Congress of the United States.”<sup>22</sup>

Predicting that the resolution would die a natural death, the *Chicago Herald* of January 13, 1893, disclosed that the publicity given the issue “brought down upon Congress an avalanche of protests and appeals, from religious people and church organizations all over the country.” The newspaper observed that organized opposition from churches and their ministers made some committee members timid to express their convictions by vote, since those demanding Sunday closing could lose their tempers, and at the next election, make trouble for those who vote against them.”

Senator Quay of Pennsylvania had, the previous July, laid before the Senate suggested wording for “the closing of the exposition on the Sabbath day.” “Congress will not reverse its action,” because if it did, he reasoned, “it could have no other meaning than that the United States, the greatest and most prosperous nation on this earth, had declared officially through its chosen representatives in favor of desecrating the Sabbath and thus breaking one of the commandments.”<sup>23</sup> Two weeks later, after the hearings, Quay insisted the Senate would kill the reversal even if it got through the House. “The people of Chicago may as well give up this fight. They can't win it.”<sup>24</sup>

Quay was right. Congress did not reverse itself. However, through a series of intricate legal maneuvers the fair found a way to open its gates in a limited way on Sunday, and then repented almost immediately when Sunday attendance declined. Still, Congress had capitulated to religious pressure in

1892 and had given its authority to religious establishment. Although Senator Quay's "Sabbath day" nomenclature was amended out in the final form of the measure, the original intent and spirit could not be masked.

[77] While Congress had acted to close the gates of a world's fair on Sunday, it had simultaneously opened doors to a flood of demands for future sessions of the Federal legislature to give legal recognition to religious practices. During the next half century Congress considered almost a hundred measures designed to honor Sunday.

Thanks to the clerical lobbyists of the American Sabbath Union, the \$5,000,000 appropriation to the Louisiana Purchase Exposition (Saint Louis, 1904) carried the condition that fair directors "close the gates to visitors on Sunday."<sup>25</sup> In 1906, the American Sabbath Union chalked up "another grand victory for the Sabbath cause" by persuading Congress to condition its appropriation to the 1907 Jamestown Exposition on the assurance that "the grounds of the exposition shall be closed on Sundays."<sup>26</sup>

When Alabama Congressman Heflin sent to the Sixtieth Congress in 1907 a bill to prohibit certain types of work in the District of Columbia "on the Sabbath day," a host of religiously oriented proposals followed in its wake. The flurry of pressure was so intense that the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists through its president, A. G. Daniells, and its secretary, W. A. Spicer, sent "A Memorial to Congress" on January 29, 1908, reminding the legislators of the "wise builders of state" who had created a separation of church and state, and urging them "not to enact any religious legislation of any kind."<sup>27</sup>

In 1912, the Federal Government did agree to eliminate Sunday delivery of all but special-delivery mail in "post offices of the first and second classes"; but it has yet to capitulate to demands for a national Sunday law.

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