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Inauguration Day

NEW YEAR'S DAY in 1913 was Inauguration Day in Albany. For people who lived in the state capital or those from elsewhere across the state whose involvement with the government justified their presence, it was a particularly festive occasion they looked forward to every two years. A new governor would take the oath of office in the Assembly Chamber in the state Capitol at noon and he was already especially popular with many people.

Fifty year old Democrat William Sulzer, more affectionately referred to by some of his constituents as "Bill," "Old Bill," or "Plain Bill," had been elected by what he called the largest plurality in the state's history—over 200,000 more votes than his nearest opponent in a three-way race. He defeated Job E. Hedges, the Republican candidate, a prominent attorney, and Oscar S. Strauss, the candidate of Teddy Roosevelt's Progressive Party, who was a well-known Jewish philanthropist and former diplomat who had served in Roosevelt's presidential administration. Woodrow Wilson was elected president in the same election and had carried the state with 41 percent of the votes.¹

Sulzer came to Albany with superb credentials, a great deal of popular support, and a reputation as one of his party's best orators. During eighteen years in Congress he had distinguished himself as a very active, persuasive, and knowledgeable chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee. He had achieved national stature by supporting a lot of progressive legislation, and was already well known to the state's voters. He enjoyed national stature as a result of some of the causes he identified himself with in Congress. He was a friend and supporter of William Jennings Bryan, and twice during his years in Congress his name had

been mentioned as a possible candidate for vice president. He had also served five terms in the state assembly. Nineteen years earlier, at age thirty after only three years in the legislature, he was elected Speaker, the youngest in the state's history. He had sought the Democratic Party's gubernatorial nomination on at least seven different occasions before achieving it in 1912.

Inauguration Day was his day and Sulzer made the most of it. Capitalizing on the populist politics that had just elected Woodrow Wilson president of the United States, the new governor had already signaled significant changes from his predecessor, who was also a Democrat. To exemplify the simplicity and openness of the kind of administration that he promised to give New York, Sulzer had announced that he was changing the name of the Executive Mansion to the "People's House," a place where everyone would be welcome. He went out of his way to assure the press of his accessibility to reporters, day or night. On Inauguration Day he appointed a new head of the state's National Guard, a position of far greater interest in those days than today. He also announced that he was replacing the three-man state highway commission with a single commissioner.

During the period of preparation, between Election Day and Inauguration Day, the governor-elect had announced that, to save money, he would do away with the pomp and circumstance, including the customary military parade that had always been part of the traditional inaugural ceremony. He also eliminated the twenty-one-gun salute of Civil War cannons customarily fired on the Capitol lawn at the moment of his taking the oath. Both of these announcements had made people take notice. Sophisticates considered it to be ostentatious simplicity.

The governor-elect's official day began at about 10 a.m. Although cold, it was a bright and clear winter morning in Albany. A large crowd of enthusiasts and well-wishers had gathered outside of the Executive Mansion on Eagle Street. The mansion, a singularly unimpressive three-story wooden residence with a circular driveway surrounded by an equally unimpressive wrought-iron fence, was located in a rather ordinary neighborhood seven long blocks from the Capitol building.

At 10:15 the waiting crowd stirred at the sight of a handful of the state's National Guard officers approaching the mansion, attired in brilliant dress blue uniforms with much gold braid in evidence. A general, a major, and some junior officers had walked over from the Capitol.

They were the governor-elect's handpicked military staff. By tradition, they would escort their new commander-in-chief to the Capitol.

As soon as the guardsmen entered the governor's home, a string of carriages appeared on Eagle Street. In the first, wearing an elegantly cut dark blue suit, white shirt with a gold collar pin, black frock coat, and silk top hat, was New York's very fashionable, but not very popular Governor John A. Dix who was about to end his first two-year term. As a result of a dismal record, the party found him not to be reelectable. Dix had been picked to head the Democratic ticket in 1910 when he was the chairman of the state Democratic Party. The upstate Democrats had assumed he would not succumb to the dictates of Tammany Hall, the powerful Democratic Party machine in New York City. Except for a handful of political leaders who had made personal alliances, the Democrats from outside of New York City generally despised Tammany and resisted its efforts to control the state party organization. Dix had let his upstate supporters down and became quite unpopular with significant portions of his own party when his relationship with New York City Democrats led to the appointment of various party hacks and corrupt incompetents. He had also been plagued by poor judgment on some significant issues. In his carriage, Governor Dix was accompanied by another general and a naval officer who wore the stripes of a lieutenant commander and the gold shoulder braid of an aide to someone very important. They were from the military staff of the outgoing governor. Other military men followed in subsequent carriages and their full dress uniforms alone guaranteed a glamorous air to a festive occasion.

The crowd watched as the governor's resplendent entourage entered the mansion where their hero was waiting. Within minutes the people were rewarded by the appearance of two men at the front door—the stylishly dressed Governor Dix accompanying a somewhat taller man in rather frumpy attire. Governor Dix led the lanky six-footer down the porch steps to an open carriage waiting in the mansion's driveway where an attendant held open the door. At that point the taller man turned his back on the carriage and started walking down the circular drive from the mansion to the street where the new governor's fans were amassed behind the iron gate. A man in the front of the crowd shouted: "Three cheers for Bill," and the audience roared its approval. There he was—smiling at them and dressed in the same somewhat rumpled gray suit he had worn frequently during the last

campaign—and in several others previously. Plain Bill was not stylish. He wore a dark gray overcoat for protection against the brisk air of an Albany winter. His familiar soft slouch hat, barely concealing slightly graying sandy colored hair, was black, and a fat black cigar pointed upward from the corner of his mouth.

Someone in the crowd yelled out: “No high hat for Sulzer—He is just plain Bill,” and his supporters shrieked “Hurrah” after “Hurrah.” Just plain Bill smiled at his friends. Then, his face puckered in apparent meditation, he walked a little bit bent forward but with long strides and hands clasped behind his back leading the strange procession up on Eagle Street toward State Street and the imposing gray granite Capitol building—a half mile away. Governor Dix, carrying more weight than his successor, and a smaller frame, had difficulty keeping up. Some of the guard officers were out of breath by the time they got to State Street, but the governor’s fans brought up the rear continuing their happy shouts and cheers.

At the intersection of State and Eagle they encountered five hundred members of the German Democratic Club of New York, including a traditional “oompah-pah” band, led by thirteen of their officers all wearing silk top hats and pink sashes astride white horses, waiting to salute their man.

To enter the Capitol from that point, most people would turn left and walk a few hundred feet up State Street to the main ground floor entrance on the south side of the big gray, ugly building. But Just Plain Bill Sulzer chose the much more dramatic path through the jubilant crowd of onlookers in Capitol Park at the bottom of the stairway over the Capitol’s eastern portico, walking up the seventy-seven steps that led directly to the second floor at the top of the steps. Reporters noted that Teddy Roosevelt had used that long staircase entrance when he was governor twelve years earlier whenever anyone was looking.²

The extravagantly decorated assembly chamber was packed with people, plants, palms, and flags set between its glorious marble columns and rich mahogany podium. The assemblymen had been joined by the state senators, the black robed judges of the court of appeals, Mrs. Sulzer and other relatives, high-level National Guard officers in their formal uniforms, state officials, legislative staff members, press, and those important citizens fortunate enough to wangle a coveted invitation. It was notable that the most powerful leaders of Tam-

many were not there. Twenty thousand invitations had been sent for a chamber that could hold 1,500, including those crowded into the visitors' galleries and elegant foyers and crammed into standing room along the walls of the chamber. The overflow even stood inside the grand fireplaces.

Outgoing Governor Dix graciously introduced his successor, pointing out that "in this chamber a generation ago you were a familiar and important figure. The intervening years have afforded you a splendid opportunity to understand the needs of the human race."

While Dix spoke, Sulzer sat in a big stuffed chair in the front row and studiously maintained the look of a man in deep thought. After the oath of office was administered at 12:10 p.m., the military band struck up the "Star-Spangled Banner" and Governor Sulzer ascended the podium to give his inaugural address, which would be one of the shortest on record. On this occasion, he was uncharacteristically humble. Addressing the assembled leaders of New York, the new governor presented a picture of self-restraint that was unfamiliar to those who had followed his career, in which had distinguished himself as a forceful and colorful orator, always full of bombast and self-confidence. Capturing a theme of his gubernatorial campaign when he had said repeatedly, wherever he went across the state, that he had no boss except his own conscience, and he intended to have none, Sulzer told his inaugural audience: "Grateful to the people who have honored me with their suffrages, I enter upon the performance of the duties of the office without a promise, except my pledge to all the people to serve them faithfully and honestly and to the best of my ability. I am free, without entanglements, and shall remain free. No influence controls me but the dictates of my conscience and my determination to do my duty, day in and day out, as I see the right, regardless of consequences. In the future, as in the past, I will walk the street called straight, and without fear and without favor, I shall execute the laws justly and impartially—with malice toward none." Sulzer's Lincoln-esque phrases had long been part of his oratorical stock and trade. His piercing blue eyes flashed as he dedicated himself to the maintenance of representative and Democratic institutions, promised an economical and business-like administration and "progressive reforms along constructive and constitutional lines." He "resolved to shirk no responsibility; to work for the welfare of the people; to correct every existing abuse; to abolish useless offices and wherever possible consolidate bureaus and commissions to

secure greater economy and more efficiency; to uproot official corruption and to raise higher the standard of official integrity; to simplify the methods of orderly administration.”³

When he finished, the governor left the third-floor Assembly Chamber, quickly descended the ornate “million dollar” staircase to the second floor, swiftly leading his entourage through several long halls, back to the top of the Capitol steps where he was cheered again by the large crowd that was still assembled in Capitol Park. He repeated his entire inaugural address for them, posed for some photographs, and then went inside to the elegant deep red-carpeted and mahogany-walled Executive Chamber, as the governor’s ceremonial office on the second floor is called. There he held a reception and greeted hundreds of well-wishers who came to shake his hand, wish him well, and offer their suggestions about running the government and jobs for their friends. Hundreds more came to the official reception that afternoon at the Executive Mansion where Governor and Mrs. Sulzer greeted friends and members of the public to whom a general invitation had been extended, along with legislators and state officials gathered to celebrate the achievement of his lifelong ambition.⁴

Later in the day, the newly elected legislature convened and reorganized by electing new leaders as both houses were overwhelmingly Democratic for the first time in years. Resolutions were promptly introduced by the new Democratic leadership to ratify constitutional amendments providing for the direct election of United States senators and for women’s suffrage. As required by the state constitution, the new governor delivered his first State of the State message, outlining in print the beginnings of the gubernatorial program, but promising more later on.⁵

Governor Sulzer proposed very progressive legislation. He asked the legislature to approve the proposed amendment that would require the election of U.S. senators by a direct vote of the people. (United States senators were then selected in New York by the state legislature, as was the case in many other states.) His position was rooted in his faith in the people. Sulzer’s message said, “the people can and ought to be trusted. They have demonstrated their ability for self-government.” Sulzer also asked that the amendment to provide for women’s suffrage be submitted to the state’s voters for approval as soon as possible, “in accordance with the pledge made to the people in the recent campaign.” Actually, Sulzer had been a genuine longtime leader of this

cause, and somewhat of a hero to the suffragette movement in New York as far back as the time he served as a leader in the assembly and then Speaker nearly two decades before.

His message also called attention to the importance of his party's pledge to reform electoral laws by enacting a direct primary bill to provide for the direct nomination of candidates for public office through a primary election system. Direct primaries had been a major platform for Progressive politicians across the country, and many states had already adopted such laws.

He called for legislative enactment of an extension of the civil service merit system in place of political appointments to many state jobs and for a litany of social programs, including laws dealing with minimum wages, worker's compensation, safety in the workplace, and restrictions on child labor.

All of these issues were in keeping with the program of his party, which was now in firm control of both houses of the legislature. Alfred E. Smith, the newly elected Speaker, and Robert F. Wagner, the newly elected president pro tem and senate majority leader, seemed to be similarly committed, so on the first day of his administration the new governor had good reason to be optimistic about a Progressive program that would assure his place in the history of New York, and perhaps the nation.