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New York  
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# The Impeachment

BY MATTHEW L. LIFFLANDER

**William Sulzer, the “People’s Governor,” was overwhelmingly elected in 1912 to clean up New York’s politics. Just ten months later, he was removed from office. Was his impeachment good government, or just payback for defection from the Tammany machine?**

**W**illiam Sulzer was elected governor of New York in November 1912, inaugurated on January 1, 1913—and by October he was impeached and removed from office. This forgotten incident is one of the most intriguing, dramatic, and colorful stories in the history of American politics. It embodies issues that continue until this day, including pervasive questions about money in politics.

With the support of the powerful Tammany political machine led by the infamous Richard Crocker, Sulzer had been elected to the State Assembly from New York’s Lower East Side in 1889 at age twenty-seven; three years later he became the youngest man in history to be elected Assembly speaker. In 1894 he went to Congress and served with considerable distinction for eighteen years as an inno-

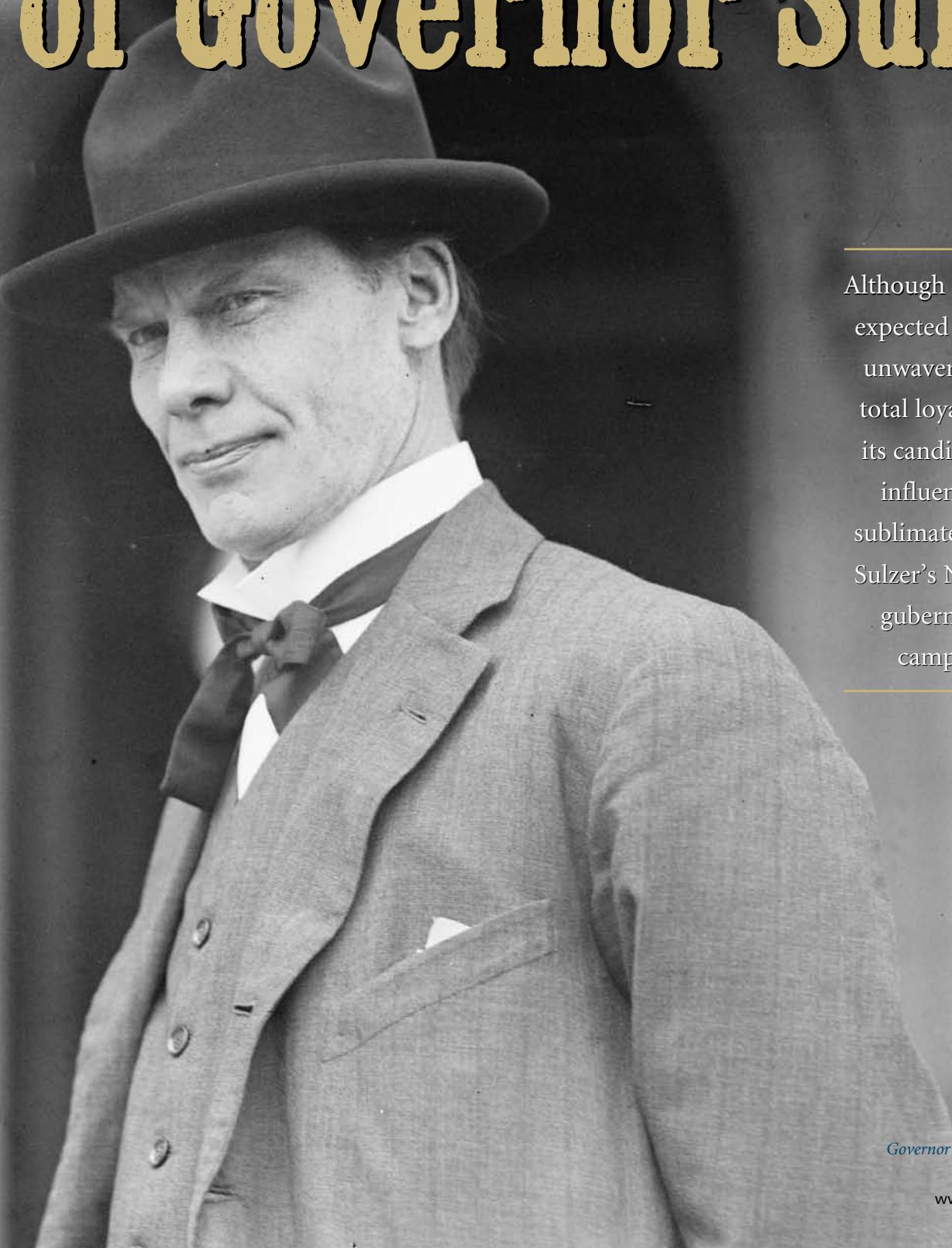
vative legislator, a Tammany stalwart, and a great orator, rising to become chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

Although Tammany expected absolute, unwavering, and total loyalty from its candidates, its influence was sublimated during Sulzer’s New York gubernatorial campaign. “Plain Bill” Sulzer was presented to the people as an independent who would stand up to “invisible government,” even though his nomination received a necessary nod from Tammany chieftain Charles F. Murphy and the theme of the campaign was Sulzer’s proud pronouncement that he was totally free of boss control. However, based on the long history of his relationship with Tammany (especially as a Richard Crocker man in the Assembly and his early years in Congress), the

state’s political leaders accepted this campaign rhetoric as good politics for a candidate from New York City seeking statewide support. Well aware of upstaters who considered the Tammany machine anathema, they nevertheless enthusiastically supported Sulzer because, despite years of Tammany endorsements, he had a superb record of standing for progressive legislation and of eloquently articulating his beliefs. Sulzer’s winning plurality of 205,000 votes was the largest in New York’s history.

In eight years as Tammany’s chief, Charles Murphy had grasped unprecedented power as the leader of the Democratic Party in both New York City and the state. Murphy, a saloon keeper, made a good living by running Tammany Hall, selecting winning candidates, and

# of Governor Sulzer



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*Governor William Sulzer.*

Right: Governor Sulzer, seated to the left of John Cardinal Murphy Farley in the front row, views the St. Patrick's Day Parade in New York City.

Below: Sulzer had a distinguished career in Congress before he became governor.



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On the second day of his term, Sulzer challenged Tammany's complete control of political patronage and began investigating corruption in state government—battles that would have far-reaching consequences.

influencing government in New York City and Albany. When Sulzer was elected governor in November 1912, Democrats also carried New York for Woodrow Wilson as president and won a solid Democratic majority in both houses of the state legislature—whose leaders were loyal Tammany men destined to ascend to the highest rungs of the Democratic ladder. Alfred E. Smith of Manhattan was the new Assembly speaker, and Robert F. Wagner of Manhattan was Senate majority leader. Both were very much beholden to Murphy.

#### Turmoil in Albany

On Inauguration Day, Sulzer initiated unprecedented turmoil. First, he began the process of ingratiating himself to political reporters at the Capitol by telling them he would always be available to them. This went hand in hand with the brand of populism he was trying to bring to his new administration. He also announced that he "belonged to no man," renamed the

Executive Mansion "The People's House," held a public reception for all who wanted to attend, and abolished the traditional inaugural military parade and twenty-one-gun salute. For the inaugural festivities, Sulzer wore his battered fedora instead of a top hat and rejected the traditional horse-drawn carriage, instead walking to the Capitol and up the steps to the second floor.

On the second day of his term, Sulzer challenged Tammany's complete control of political patronage and began investigating corruption in state government—battles that would have far-reaching consequences. He started by inviting reporters for official briefings twice a day. As they gathered around him, Sulzer endeared himself to them by having chairs brought into the chamber. It was not lost on the reporters that Theodore Roosevelt had been the last governor to offer them seats, thirteen years ago. They were delighted with the governor's availability and most were

justifiably flattered by his attention, especially when he started asking for their advice on issues.

During the late afternoon, when Sulzer, intending to alert the press to his plans for instilling honesty, efficiency, and economy in his administration, met again with the reporters, a newspaperman asked, half in jest, "Have you received the O.K. of Charles F. Murphy, Tammany leader, on your plans?" Until that moment, Sulzer had been seated among the reporters, talking on an off-the-record basis—a clear understanding in exchange for candor. But suddenly he stood up. "I knew that question would come up sooner or later, and it's just as well that we have an understanding on this subject right now, and then we will never refer to it again," he said. The governor then asked that his remarks go on the record: "I am the Democratic leader of the State of New York. The people decreed it at the polls, and I stand on their verdict. I

cannot succeed in doing what I want to do as Governor unless I am the leader. If any Democrat wants to challenge that, let him come out in the open and the people will decide."

Another reporter asked, "Does that mean that if Mr. Murphy wants to see you, he will have to come to the Executive Chamber?"

"This is the place," the governor answered with a determined nod.

One of the reporters who was stunned by the governor's challenge to Murphy's leadership said, "Those are the most comforting words I have heard in this room since Governor Hughes left" (referring to Charles Evan Hughes, whose administration ended in 1910). To which Sulzer replied, "Well, you are likely to hear plenty like it if occasion should arise. I am not afraid of Murphy, I am afraid of no man. No political boss can make me do anything I don't think I ought to do."

The governor had declared war on Tammany.

### The Battle Is Joined

While the press could not get any direct reaction from Murphy himself, several Tammany district leaders (who were guaranteed anonymity) predicted that the "Chief" would take up the governor's gauntlet and make the challenge to his leadership the fight of his life. The essence of what Sulzer was trying to accomplish was captured in the headline of the *New York Times's* lead story on January 3,



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1913: "Sulzer Invites Murphy To Fight for Leadership, Proclaims That He Is Democratic Chief in the State by Decree of the People."

Later in the year, when Sulzer rejected Murphy's most reliable allies for key positions regulating railroads and distributing highway construction contracts, Murphy finally realized he was being thwarted: a candidate whom he had supported was leaving the Tammany reservation. In a confrontation, Murphy called the governor an "ingrate" and let him know that his refusal to designate James E. Gaffney, a Murphy business partner, as state highway commissioner indeed meant "war."

Sulzer ultimately told his side of the story. According to his account, which I found in a draft of a never-published partial autobiography in the governor's personal files at Cornell University, "Just prior to taking office as Governor, I spent an afternoon with Mr. Murphy, at his request, at his private room in Delmonico's... He said he was my friend... and that he wished to help me out.

"To my astonishment he informed me that he knew I was heavily in debt. Then he offered me money to pay my debts, and have enough left to take things easy while Governor. ...

"He said that nobody

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The trial drew daily nationwide attention, and on October 17, 1913, the Court on Impeachment found Sulzer guilty on three of eight Articles of Impeachment and removed him from office.

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would know anything about it; that I could pay what I owed, and go to Albany feeling easy financially. ...

"I declined Mr. Murphy's offer, saying that I was paying off my debts gradually; that my creditors were friends and would not press me; that I was economical; and that I would try to get along on my salary as Governor."

#### **A Bridge Too Far**

The second battle of Sulzer's war also began on the second day of his term. In his inaugural address, Sulzer had signaled his intention to review state government for the purpose of eliminating useless expenditures, abolishing sinecures, and promoting honesty and efficiency for the taxpayers' benefit. On Day 2, he announced creation of a three-man Commission on Inquiry with the broad power to investigate all of the state's departments. The commission quickly initiated investigations of state officials involved with the awarding of lucrative prison, highway, and canal contracts—many of whom were Tammany's close friends from the previous administration of Governor John Dix, an upstate Tammany man who was not re-electable.

This would prove too much for Tammany. In August, an Assembly investigating committee appointed by Speaker Al Smith recommended Sulzer's impeachment for a variety of offenses, primarily challenging the accuracy of the governor's reports on the



*The New York State Assembly voting to impeach Governor William Sulzer, less than a year after he was inaugurated.*

money contributed and expended in his gubernatorial campaign—reports that had been filed before he took office. The committee alleged that Sulzer had pocketed large amounts of cash for his own use and invested it in Wall Street. After an all-night telephone session, orchestrated by Charles Murphy, between Murphy at his Long Island retreat and Smith in Albany, the Assembly shocked everyone—especially Sulzer—by voting to impeach Sulzer at a special legislative session that he had called to consider his direct primary bill, which challenged the power of political bosses to

select statewide candidates.

Sulzer's month-long impeachment trial before the State Senate involved the state's best lawyers and a parade of prominent real estate developers, industrialists, and financiers who described their campaign contributions as personal gifts to Sulzer, for whatever purpose he wanted to use them. Some of them involved very large sums of cash that proved embarrassing to the "People's Governor."

The trial drew daily nationwide attention, and on October 17, 1913, the Court on Impeachment found Sulzer guilty on three of eight



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Articles of Impeachment and removed him from office. However, the Court did not exercise its power to bar him from ever holding public office again.

### **A Political Survivor—Temporarily**

The next morning Sulzer took a train to New York City, where thousands of enthusiastic supporters greeted him and took him in a motorcade from Grand Central Station to his old Lower East Side Assembly district. A month later, after speaking at many receptions populated by huge crowds demanding Tammany's punishment, Sulzer was re-elected to his old Assembly seat by his biggest majority

ever. In the same November election, the Democratic Assembly majority was lost to the Republicans, and many of the Tammany senators who had voted to remove Sulzer lost their seats. Tammany also lost the New York City mayor's office, mainly due to Sulzer's campaigning.

Tammany's influence was severely set back for several years. Sulzer was re-elected to the Assembly in 1914, where he served without distinction. He mounted an ineffective independent campaign to regain the governorship in 1914 and an unsuccessful effort to gain the Prohibition Party nomination for president in 1916, and was never heard from again politically. ■

## THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

For several years after his impeachment, William Sulzer's loyal adherents continued an impressive public relations effort on his behalf. Charles C. Platt, who had been Sulzer's secretary, was also the editor of the *Batavia Times* (Genesee County) and co-editor of a book entitled *The Boss and the Governor*. Platt, a Cornell University graduate, suggested that Sulzer leave his personal papers to Cornell, and Sulzer, who had no alma mater of his own, took his friend's advice. There I found a treasure trove that included many years of personal correspondence, as well as a file box containing an unfinished draft of Sulzer's autobiography filled with details of his childhood, education, and early law practice—and his version of the battle with Boss Murphy. I found a copy of the official Public Papers of Governor Sulzer at the Siena College library in Albany.

Two Ph.D. theses proved basic to my research. At the library of the University Club

in Manhattan, I found *The Impeachment of Governor Sulzer* (1939) by Jacob Friedman of the Department of History, CUNY, which provided an objective history of the whole story based on excellent analyses of numerous newspapers of the day. A 1968 Smith College thesis by Nancy Joan Weiss, *Charles Francis Murphy 1858–1924, Respectability and Responsibility in Tammany Politics*, I found in an Ithaca, New York used bookstore; this provided a wealth of detailed information on Murphy's career.

Archivists will appreciate the fact that during his years in Congress, Sulzer assembled scrapbooks of newspaper clippings about himself and invitations received by his office. He sent these to the New York Public Library, where they remain. Sulzer was also an early master of public relations: he bound official printed copies of his Congressional addresses into hardcover volumes, which he sent to many universities across the country.