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JOSEPH DORSETT BEDLE (January 5, 1831–October 21, 1894), as a contemporary account put it, was "an instance of a man who, at a comparatively early age, achieves the highest honors of his state, apparently without having passed through any of the highways and byways of the politician."

Certainly, having an established, influential family on both sides did not harm his career. Bedle's paternal grandparents were natives of New Jersey. His parents were Thomas and Hannah (Dorsett) Bedle. His father was a merchant, a justice of the peace for more than twenty-five years, and a judge of the Court of Common Pleas for Monmouth County. Through his mother's family, which had immigrated from Bermuda more than a century and a half earlier, the future governor was related to Garret Dorsett Wall, a Democratic party leader in New Jersey in the Jacksonian era, who had declined to serve as governor after the legislature elected him in 1829.

Born in Middletown Point (now Matawan) on January 5, 1831, Bedle was educated at the academy there. His apparently delicate health and his father's

desire to have a son engaged in commerce made him forgo the college course to work two years in a general country store. But a strong desire to study law led him to become a student for about three and one-half years in the Trenton law office of William L. Dayton, who had been a United States senator and would be the vice-presidential candidate of the newly formed Republican party in 1856 and minister to France in 1861. Bedle spent one winter at the law school in Ballston Spa, New York, and after another winter in the Poughkeepsie office of Thompson and Weeks—on his twenty-first birthday—he was admitted in New York State as an attorney and counselor. He did additional study with Matawan lawyer Henry S. Little, who was to become a member of the "State House Ring," and was admitted to the New Jersey bar the following year, 1853. For the next two years he practiced law in Middletown Point, moving to Freehold in 1855 and advancing to counselor in 1856. There, in 1861, he married Althea F. Randolph, the eldest daughter of Bennington F. Randolph, a local lawyer with an extensive practice. She was the niece of Democratic Governor Theodore F. Randolph (1869-72).

In 1865, when he was thirty-four, Bedle became the second youngest justice in the state supreme court's history. Democratic Governor Joel Parker, also a Freehold lawyer, appointed him to the largest circuit, Hudson-Passaic-Bergen. Soon afterward Bedle moved his residence to Jersey City, next door to Leon Abbett, who was to serve two terms as governor. In 1871, just before the close of Bedle's term as justice, the Democratic "State House Ring" planned to nominate Bedle for governor. The judge "himself took no steps to secure the nomination, rather discouraging the movement in his favor," reported a Newark daily newspaper; and his new neighbor and rival, Abbett, persuaded Parker to run—successfully—for a second nonconsecutive term. Bedle was reappointed to the bench in 1872.

Unanimously, the 1874 Democratic convention selected Bedle as its nominee

for governor. The Republicans had chosen a former congressman from Newark, George A. Halsey, who opposed the system of state legislative commissions under which Jersey City was being misgoverned. In the Hudson County Court of Oyer and Terminer, Bedle's fervent charges to the grand jury had led to the indictment for fraud and conspiracy of the Republican ring that had seized control of Jersey City; he had later tried and sentenced the ring members. Refusing to resign his judgeship or to campaign for office, Bedle nevertheless was elected by 13,233 votes, the second greatest majority in the state until then. "The country was then very much depressed, and the times were hard, and there was a tendency in the minds of the people to select an Executive who had been out of the arena of politics," according to one explanation. By his own admission, Bedle's information on the actual condition of state affairs was "only cursory."

Pleas for economy, home rule, and general legislation marked Bedle's inaugural address in 1875. He would try "to check all tendency to extravagance," but "the great cause of complaint is not in the State appropriations," the legislature was told, but "in the taxes of municipal bodies including assessment for local improvements." The most effective remedy would be to give direct responsibility to elected officials: "To my mind the best municipal government for our people, and the only one consistent with the spirit of our institutions is that in which they govern themselves. . . . The simpler the machinery of a local government the better." Bedle hoped to see the day "when every city in this State, of a certain population, will be governed by one general law," but he acknowledged that making this practicable would probably require a constitutional change. In an attack on special legislation, he held, "corporate privileges in many matters of legitimate trade and enterprise should be open alike to all, and readily obtainable on compliance with general laws wherever the demands of business require it." Conse-

quently, his first veto killed a bill to incorporate a Newark manufacturing and trading company on the ground that the measure was special. During his first year he vetoed at least five similar bills for manufacturing companies and two measures for incorporating fraternal lodges.

A state constitutional amendment ratified in November 1875 restricted special legislation. Bedle's next two years in office therefore differed significantly from the experience of earlier governors. In 1873 his immediate predecessor, Joel Parker, had complained, "the general public laws passed at the last session are contained in about one hundred pages of the printed volume, while the special and private laws occupy over twelve hundred and fifty pages of the same book." During Parker's administration the legislature had passed 603 laws the first year, 724 the second, and 537 the third, only one-sixth of which were general. During Bedle's first year the number had descended to 454; it declined to 213 in the second year and 156 in the third with 85 percent in the general legislation category. Not until 1961 would fewer statutes—145—be enacted during a single session.

The exact interpretation of the amendment was in doubt. Bedle saw that the prohibition of special legislation did not necessarily apply to laws affecting the state's municipalities. In 1876 he declared in his first annual message that "as to cities and all other municipalities, except towns and counties, the Legislature may yet pass local and special laws, save only for 'appointing local officers or commissions' and wherever on particular subjects enumerated in the amendments it is prevented." Because it concerned local elections, that spring Bedle vetoed a bill that applied to any city "*now wholly or partly governed by local boards or commissions, whose members are chosen by the Legislature in joint meeting*" (italics added). Jersey City alone answered that description; and, besides, the public notice now required for passage of local and special bills had not been given. But only because proper notice had not been given

did the governor veto two other local bills that would apply only to Newark.

Much publicity followed Bedle's 1876 veto of "An act to provide for the maintenance and education of the deaf and dumb, feeble-minded and blind persons in this State," which proposed to establish three institutions to care for these unfortunate persons without any charge, whether or not they or their parents could afford to bear any part of the expense. This bill was "intended to adopt a new policy," and this was "not the time for such a change," Bedle argued. He objected further that the bill was "not in fair compliance with that provision of the Constitution limiting bills to one object." The senate overrode the veto but the assembly failed to override in a close vote in which eight Republicans crossed party lines to support Bedle.

But in 1876 a strict party vote in both houses repassed "An act for the government and regulation of the State Prison" over gubernatorial disapproval. Bedle had argued that that measure would give a board of inspectors—statutory officers whom the legislature chose in joint meeting—powers paramount to those of the keeper, whom the governor appointed with the senate's advice and consent as required by an 1875 amendment to the state constitution. Endorsing the reasoning of its own party, the Republican *Newark Daily Advertiser* insisted that it was "partisanship which led his Excellency to veto the bill." It made no mention that the legislative joint meeting of 81 members included only 33 Democrats.

At the close of the 1877 legislative session Bedle refused to be directed by his own party's caucus. He had just approved a reform bill to establish one district court judge in each of six cities and two judges each in Newark and Jersey City to assume the civil jurisdiction of justices of the peace. The senate confirmed the nomination of Bedle's father-in-law, Bennington F. Randolph, for one of the Jersey City judgeships but rejected the governor's nomination of a Republican—an effort at bipartisanship—for the other

judgeship, creating "no end of commotion." The submission of another Republican name received like treatment. In response, Bedle sent a lengthy gubernatorial message announcing "no further reason for the detention of the Senate" and made the original GOP appointment *ad interim*. (The message received not even the courtesy of being printed in the senate's journal).

Attention to the railroads marked Bedle's administration. In January 1876 he declared, "The revenue received by the State from Railroad Companies is not near as large as it should be." Although pertinent changes in legislation were proposed then, he made no similar plea in the next two annual messages. But during the great railroad strike of 1877, Bedle called up all companies of the state's National Guard to protect the trains and the new crews of two railroads. "Failure in the use of military to suppress riots only aggravates, and futile effort is reprehensible, if possible to guard against it," he declared. For such action he "earned no end of commendation from all parts of the country," according to a leading New Jersey journalist.

At the expiration of his term, Bedle resumed his law practice, serving as legal counsel for the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railroad, and becoming a director of many prominent corporations. Three times he refused judgeships, and he declined presidential nominations as minister to Russia and to Austria. During the last year of his life, he served on the state's Constitutional Commission of 1894. His death followed an operation for the removal of bladder stones.

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