Richard Olney Biography

Richard Olney

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Biography

Richard Olney (1835-1917) served as U.S. attorney general and secretary of state under President Grover Cleveland.

Richard Olney, Massachusetts-born, was from an upper-class family. He was educated at Brown University and the Harvard Law School and specialized in corporate law in Boston. Generally unsuccessful in politics and little known to the public, he was considered by many contemporaries to be haughty, temperamental, and stubborn. Grover Cleveland's choice of Olney in 1893 for attorney general was a surprise, but he fitted well into the group of economic conservatives in Cleveland's Cabinet.

As attorney general, Olney made only perfunctory efforts to enforce the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890 against big business, terming the law "no good." He used the full resources of the Justice Department, however, for a showdown with the American Railway Union. Contending that the Pullman strike of 1894 was a conspiracy in restraint of trade, Olney suggested that the Sherman Antitrust Act be used against labor unions for the first time. At his suggestion Cleveland sent troops to Chicago to deal with the strikers, an act which provoked bloody riots. Workingmen throughout the country turned against the Cleveland administration as well as the Democratic party.

Appointed secretary of state in 1895, Olney turned his talents toward the extension of American influence, particularly in the Western Hemisphere. Olney and Cleveland intervened uninvited in the 1895-1896 boundary dispute between Great Britain and Venezuela. Their actions were in response to jingoist domestic pressures and to demands for the protection of American economic interests in Latin America. The Olney-Cleveland Venezuela policy carried the nation to the brink of war with England, which was averted only when the British agreed to submit the matter to arbitration. Similar concerns with protecting economic interests and American citizens were important in Olney's policy toward a revolt in Cuba and disorders in Turkey and China.

At the end of the Cleveland administration, after his return to private practice, Olney became a vigorous opponent of American expansion by territorial annexation. Still active as a public figure in the first decade of the 20th century, he was associated with efforts by economic conservatives to regain control of the Democratic party from William Jennings Bryan, although he refused all opportunities to return to public service.