Stephen Johnson Field Biography

Stephen Johnson Field

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Biography

The American jurist Stephen Johnson Field (1816-1899) was an associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court and a powerful partisan of unimpeded business expansion.

Stephen Field was born on Nov. 4, 1816, in Haddam, Conn., the son of a Congregationalist minister. He spent 2 years in Europe and the Middle East before entering Williams College, from which he graduated in 1837. He read law in the firm of his brother David in New York City, then moved to California in 1849.

The contradiction in Field's life between outrageous personal boldness and determination for law and order was a reflection of the frontier. At Yurbaville (later Marysville), Calif., as justice of the peace, Field was noted for his arbitrary but firm enforcement of the law. Despite an undignified controversy with another judge, he was elected in 1857 to the state's supreme court.

Field was a Unionist in the Civil War, and in 1863 President Abraham Lincoln appointed him to the U.S. Supreme Court. Notable among his early court writings were dissents in the *Slaughter-House Cases* (1873) and *Munn v. Illinois* (1873). In the latter Field presaged his philosophy of protecting business from the competition of governmentally created monopolies and from governmental regulation. This legal philosophy, referred to as "substantive due process," expressed the idea of putting limits on government in order to preserve liberty, along with the notion that government interference in the jungle of economic competition was unnatural.

Substantive due process came into full force in Field's circuit court opinion, later upheld by the Supreme Court, *San Mateo v. Southern Pacific R.R. Co.* (1882). Here, a corporation was defined as a "person" and was thus protected by the 14th Amendment from any deprivation of its rights by government intervention "without due process of law." This clause was a firm barrier against regulation, and with its protection, business enjoyed a legal immunity that lasted until the 1930s.

Field was a powerful voice in the Democratic party. He greatly resented being bypassed for the chief justiceship in 1888 by President Grover Cleveland. A gregarious man, he was not above sharing the hospitality of men whose corporations were engaged in litigation before the Supreme Court.

After serving on the Supreme Court longer than any other justice in its history, Field resigned in 1897. He died on April 9, 1899, in Washington, D.C.