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Interviews: Charles A. Dana's Recollections of the Civil War

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Mr. Seward was Secretary of State. He was a very interesting man -- a man of slight stature and of an optimistic temperament. He was all his life in controversies, especially when he was Governor of New York and he was very conspicuous in his attitude toward Slavery; yet, he had very few personal animosities -- he was singular in that -- a man who was forever in fights. He was a man of great ability as a writer and he had what is very rare in a lawyer, a politician or a statesman -- he had imagination. Very few lawyers, politicians and statesman have much imagination -- he had a great deal. A great illustration of his genius was the acquisition of Alaska. That was one of the last things that he did before he went out of office and it demonstrated more than anything else, his fixed and never changing idea that all North America should be united under one government.

He went up there and took that Northern Line which did not touch in any way; he bought it, he annexed it, and he always expected that all North America would be United States some day. He was an admirable writer and a very impressive speaker. There was no fault in his speaking -- he stood up and talked as though he were engaged in conversation and the effect was always great. He had rather the effect of a man deliberating with himself. I saw him all the time -- not every day, but very very often and often
went to see him on some errand of Mr. Stanton's, to see about something.

Mr. Chase was a large man and a portly man -- tall and of an impressive appearance -- a very handsome large head - fine aspect of a man. He was a very genial man, very decided, and he would occasionally criticize the President. I never heard Mr. Seward do that. That would never have had any real importance -- Mr. Lincoln was predestined to be the candidate and no effort against him seemed to avail anything at all, and I do not remember anybody except Chase. Fremont was somewhat spoken of, and then Mr. Lincoln made Mr. Chase Chief Justice and after that his ambition was pretty well satisfied. He had been a Governor two terms. He had been successful as a Governor, and in the Treasury Department his administration was satisfactory to the public. I do not remember any complaint ever made against it. He was the author of the National Banking Law. I remember going to dine with him one day. I did that pretty often, and I had known him well before when I was in the Tribune; I went to dine with him one day and he said to me: "I have completed today a very great thing. I have got the National Bankers -- the act for that completed, and that will be a blessing to the country long after I am dead." That is the system that they are now trying to abolish, and he said that was going to provide for the
taking of the bonds that the government had to issue to get money for the war, and that it was going to establish a system of banking that would be safe and satisfactory as long as the bonds were in existence. That was when he was Secretary of the Treasury. Some time before he was made Chief Justice, perhaps a year.

He came from Hartford — Gideon Wells was an able man, and I think a very wise man. There was a good deal of opposition to him — his duties were very arduous — his task was great — we had no navy, and the war began without any navy, and he had to create one and it had to be done without much deliberation — the best you could get right away — we got to have it — that sort of thing — but he was a very patient, laborious and intelligent man. He was a curious looking man — he was a man who wore a wig and the wig made his hair parted in the middle. It came down on each side. I remember that made him rise to some jokes — his appearance — and that is where the idea that he was an old fogey, originated. I remember Governor Andrews of Massachusetts, came into my office one day, where I was, and said he: "Can you tell me where I can be pretty sure to find that old Mormon Deacon, the Secretary of the Navy?" He was a very useful man.

Calibee Smith was in the Interior, but he went out during Mr. Lincoln's administration, and he was succeeded by another
Indiana man. Smith was not a bad man, not a bad officer, but he did not have the faculty of being friends with everybody. He was there some time after I was there. His department had a kind of supervision of the building of the Pacific Railroad -- I think that was carried on pretty actively, and I think the Indians were under the Interior Department then, but there was no great trouble. I do not remember anything of any great importance at all. Mr. Smith was a capable man of business, and a pleasant man to talk with -- deal with.

Francis P. Blair -- he was a man of great ability. He was an old school Democrat. His father had been confidential adviser of President Jefferson, and had been the editor of the Globe -- that was a paper that was published in Washington in the time of Jackson, and it was a paper of a good deal of importance and influence. They were regular old Jeffersonian Democrats, and they had taken the Republican side in the election for President. I think Mr. Blair had been acting with the Republicans for some time previous to Lincoln's election. He was a great friend of Fremont. Fremont married Colonel Benton's daughter, and old Mr. Blair had been a friend of Benton. He was a capable man, sharp, keen, perhaps a little cranky, and he was not friends with everybody, but I always found him good to deal with -- I saw a great deal of him. He and Mr. Stanton, I do not think were
very good friends, and when he wanted anything in the War Depart-
ment, he was more likely to come to an old friend like me than to
go to the Secretary. Stanton rather preferred that, too.

The nature of them was not changed, except you did not
send any more mail, but everything else was the same. Here in
the State of New York, everything was carried on and in all the
States where mail was sent -- the duties were the same.

Mr. Bates, of Missouri. He was a lawyer, and he must
have been, I should think, about sixty years old when he was ap-
pointed Attorney General. Bates was Mr. Greeley's favorite
candidate for the presidency before Mr. Lincoln's election, and
you remember that Mr. Lincoln took into his cabinet every prom-
inent man who had been mentioned before, and he took in Mr. Chase,
Mr. Seward, Mr. Bates. Cameron was not mentioned as a candidate
he was thought of some, but he was not positively a candidate at
all. He was like a hundred men you can find in the country any
time, who would be competent Presidents and would take it if it
were brought to them, but he made no effort to get it. Mr. Bates
was a very eloquent speaker. Give him a patriotic subject, where
his mind -- his own feelings could expand, and he would make a
beautiful speech. He was a man of very gentle nature, and cor-
dial, but not a man extraordinarily

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law in the regular road -- he was always a very pleasant man, and
he was put into the Cabinet, I suppose, because his reputation was as good as a lawyer, but principally because he had been advocated for President by such powerful influences. That was diminished, and not increased, by the absence of the seceding States.

I never attended the Cabinet meetings. The Secretary was always. When the Secretary was absent, one of the Assistant Secretaries would be appointed as a regular acting secretary, and if you were wanted in the Cabinet, why he would come for you. You did not go without being sent for.

One of the most interesting men was Simon Cameron. After he ceased to be Secretary of War, he was elected to the Senate, and he was a man of great energy and force, and very apt to have his way, and a man of great talent and this intensity of determination -- a man of very strong friendship -- the loving side of his character was very loving indeed, and his friends all stuck to him. He was a very successful politician from the time of Jackson down, and was still prominent in politics in Pennsylvania, and had plenty of enemies in Pennsylvania. When he ceased to be Minister of War, he went as Minister to Russia and he stayed there perhaps two years. After he came back he was elected Secretary.

He was a very interesting man, -- a highly educated man; a man of tastes in literature and art, and a delightful companion
and an energetic politician.

Garfield was with Rosecranz in the war. He was elected to Congress during Lincoln's time. Garfield was not a man of great power. At that time he was younger, and rather green.

I should not say they were very exciting. Now and then there was something -- the House would sit late at night, but those were rare occasions.

I do not think it interfered at all. I do not remember any case where it interfered. I should say on the whole it was not of much use, and yet where we recall the history of it, we might find some things in which it was useful. It did not hinder the War Department a bit. There may have been times when some General was rather disturbed, but I would not say. Nothing that I should think of while writing this. Our minds were not fixed upon it at that time. We were engaged in carrying on the War.

The Delaware Regiment was stationed there -- that was the last station -- the last fort -- and that had been left there when the army had marched down to the Rapidan; they were fighting there on the south side of the Rapidan, and this regiment was stationed there, and Colonel Grimshaw was in command of it and we got breakfast there, and then rode to the army, and it took us three or four hours. We got down to the army, I should think,
about three in the afternoon. He was preparing for the advance. At ten o'clock in the morning he knows where all the troops are -- where they were the night before -- where they camped. Then he has had during the morning, reports continually -- every General was sending -- every Corps Commander would send an aide-de-camp over to report to General Grant and tell him what was done, what took place -- what attack was made -- what part of the enemy appeared, and what he had done in return. He studies the map -- has got it all in his head. I never served with any Commanding General who did not have it so. You have got a general idea of the country, and you know where one corp's headquarters is, where another's is, and where another's is. That, you carry in your memory. Generally that information is gotten from maps, but it is gotten also from the reports of the officers. The General comes across a hill or a deep ravine that is not marked in his map, and he reports it at once. Grant moved around -- if he thought it necessary to go two miles to another place, he went; some situation that was not satisfactory. Every time the General moves, his headquarters goes with him.

One of the most interesting things at Spottsylvania, was Hancock's attack upon a certain place in Lee's line, and the attack must have been not more than at daybreak, and he took several thousand prisoners. He took General Edward Johnson as a
prisoner. He had been a high officer in the army before seces-
sion, and he was a large and important officer in the rebel line;
captured him -- he was brought in and I was by Grant -- he shook
hands with us. A man they had not seen since they had been boys
together. The formal conversation was very interesting -- noth-
ing was said about the subject -- they were all interesting --
the talk that was going on, the surprise that Hancock was af-
stract. This must have been about half past nine in the morning
that General Johnson was brought up and his troops had been cap-
tured, were instantly marched off under a strong guard, and sent
to Washington, and from there they were transferred to some mil-
itary prison. That was very interesting, and I recollect rid-
ing around to this angle, this projecting angle of the rebel
breastworks; perhaps two hours or so. I rode around there, and
inside of the breastworks -- the breastworks were so high -- there
was a fence with earth thrown up around it, and this earth had
been broken off, in a great many places the bank was greatly dam-
aged, and I got off my horse -- General Rawlins was with me --
we were pretty nearly always together, and I leaned over and
looked on the other side of the fence, where the struggle had
been, and it had rained that morning, and there the mud, I should
think, would go in a foot -- but not merely soft, but like very
thin hasty pudding -- all trampled by the fighting there of five
thousand men and it was a like a pool, you know, where everything had settled, and the surface was smooth, and all of a sudden I saw, lifted out of this mud, the leg of a man, and the mud dripped off, and soldiers went immediately and hauled him out -- he had been buried there in this mush. You can fancy how realistic it was. Cannon was rattling, musketry was in your ears half a mile away, perhaps, and then seeing this, where you thought everything was peace! But they got him out, I think he got well. He had been wounded somewhere.

Note: In speaking of Mr. Stanton, after interview was finished this evening, Mr. Dana said, apropos of the letter he had written Stanton about Sherman, Stanton never liked Sherman. They were antagonistic by nature. Sherman was an effervescent, mercurial, ready, enthusiastic man, springing abruptly to an idea and of enormous information on all subjects. Stanton could not accommodate himself to this temperament.

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Mr. Dana asks me if I think I am getting enough to pay me. He shows keen interest when I tell him that I can see a distinct and consecutive series of articles which one will read from beginning to end, without interest flagging. He says he has no faith in his own judgment, but more in mine than anybody else's. He confesses that he thinks the dispatches are interesting reading, possessing great vividness and