JOSEPH HENRY

Public Servant

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Two days after Joseph Henry was elected Secretary of the Smithsonian in December 1846, a close friend at the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) tried to dissuade him from accepting the position. Charles Hodge reminded Henry that his success so far was the result of his "personal excellence & success in science" and not of any executive or managerial talents. He warned that the "anxiety & responsibility" of the job might be harmful to Henry's mental and physical health.

Hodge also warned of congressional interference in the affairs of the Smithsonian: "Will it not be subject to party influences, & to the harassing questionings of coarse & incompetent men? Are you the man to have your motives & actions canvassed by such men as are to be found on the floor of our congress?"

Despite Hodge's warnings, Henry accepted the position "with the hope of saving the generous bequest of Smithson from utter waste" and the goal of improving science in the United States. Although Hodge obviously knew Henry well and correctly anticipated difficulties he would face, Henry was to prove equal to the unique challenges of the capital.

Although hesitant to exchange his "quiet and studious life" in Princeton for a position in the limelight of a bustling city dominated by politics, Henry initially approached Washington, D.C., with optimism. He wrote to his friend John Torrey early in 1848, "Little things do not annoy me as much in Washington as they did in Princeton and the motto I have adopted is 'hope on, hope ever.'"

Within a short time, however, his view of Washington had darkened considerably. By the spring of 1853, Henry had decided that "Washington is a pandamonium [sic] in which is congregated all the personifications of all the evil passions of the human character."

Henry realized early on that his position as Secretary of the Smithsonian would subject him to attacks, especially in newspapers, which he once referred to as "modern pests of society." He resigned himself to "the most disagreeable noteriety [sic] of newspaper praise and abuse," but resolved "to be ignorant of what is said of me and . . . to do so unless my honor is impeached."

Washington presented another less obvious but more insidious challenge: the loss of time a public servant experienced from interruptions by the public and from bureaucratic procedures. Henry complained privately that his workdays were "cut up and dissipated by visitors and correspondence of an unimportant kind." In the Smithsonian's annual report for 1852, he complained publicly: "The loss of time and effective life to which all are exposed who occupy a position of notoriety in the city of Washington, is truly lamentable."

Despite the loss of time, however, Henry deliberately made himself accessible, both in

person and in his correspondence. In his eulogy of Henry, astronomer Simon Newcomb found him "accessible to a fault," always ready to share his knowledge with others.

The greatest challenge Washington presented to Henry was that of maintaining his high ethical principles. As he wrote an admirer, "Few can imagine the difficulty of properly administering an important trust, connected with government. Honesty of purpose is not sufficient . . . ; prudence, firmness, and moral courage also are requisite, and the latter can not be expected in any case, where the proper course of action is not clearly marked out in the mind of the incumbent."

Daguerreotype of Henry, probably early 1840s. Division of Photographic History, National Museum of American History.

Henry strongly believed that public servants should not benefit from public service, and he refused increases in his own salary. He deplored attempts at private enrichment at government expense, showing, in the words of a eulogist, "measureless contempt for the mercenaries and jobbers who filled this city." He believed appointments should be made on the basis of merit rather than connections.

Possessed of unwavering ethical principles, he was sometimes disturbed by the conduct of others but clear about what his own conduct should be. A former student noted after his death that amid all the corruption in the capital, there was never a spot on his reputation.

Henry remained in Washington as Secretary of the Smithsonian until his death at age eighty in his bedroom in the Castle. In moving to Washington, he left behind his peaceful life in Princeton as a college professor and research scientist to assume a position of responsibility, or "notoriety" as he liked to say, in the nation's capital. Instead of being overwhelmed by Washington, however, he was oddly suited to it. As he wrote a friend, "I have a wide sphere of influence and the difficulties with which I am surrounded serve to stimulate exertion."

Botanist Asa Gray, Henry's close friend, wrote that Henry ultimately proved his Princeton friend wrong. His life in Washington showed "he could deal with men as well as with the forces of nature."

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