



## **The Little Napoleon: The Short and Turbulent Career of Isaac I. Stevens**

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**By Sherburne F. Cook Jr.**

The role of Isaac Ingalls Stevens in the establishment of territorial policy in Washington is well- documented, and most references to him are critical of his judgment. Best remembered as Washington's first territorial governor, his influence, especially with regard to Indian policy, and his political tactics remain the subject of controversy to this day.

The first biography of Isaac Stevens was written by his son Hazard in 1900. A lengthy two-volume, 1,010-page account, *The Life of General Isaac Ingalls Stevens*, despite an expected bias, provides some interesting insight into this complex man's life, especially when one reads between the lines.

In general, history has not been very kind to this little man with a big ego. Although his stern dealings with the Indian uprisings in the 1850s were supported by many settlers at the time, his tactics and arrogance were strongly opposed by others. Being a West Point graduate and a veteran of the Mexican War, he handled his territorial affairs as a commanding military officer and expected immediate and obedient execution of orders by the native people and civilian residents. Neither group accepted these tactics willingly, if at all. As a civilian, Stevens had no standing or influence over the United States military, which opposed his intervention in what the army considered its domain. Isaac Stevens was born in Andover, Massachusetts, in 1818, a seventh generation New Englander. As a young man he entered West Point, where he graduated first in his class in 1839 as a second lieutenant, engineer. After various assignments on the East Coast and his marriage to Margaret Lyman Hazard, he was called to duty in December 1846 as a company lieutenant of engineers in the war with Mexico.

Although Hazard Stevens speaks highly and in detail of his father's role in the Mexican War, it was during this time that his inflated self-esteem began to influence his military judgment. Even though Lieutenant Stevens's judgment in military tactics may have in some cases been sound, the questioning and criticism of orders or tactics did not endear him to some of his superiors and fellow warriors.

After the war Stevens, now a brevet major, forced his way into high military and political circles, advocating brevet officer pay increases for the military and the "reorganization of the army." Failing in this, he accepted a position with the United States Coastal Survey only after he became convinced that the "Coast Survey needs me to overhaul it." Also during this time, spent primarily in Washington, D.C., he even managed to embarrass and alienate himself with his old commander-in-chief of the army, General Winfield Scott. He was a brash young junior officer, brimming with self-importance and an unyielding confidence in his own opinion.

Early in 1853 Stevens resigned his commission to accept an appointment as governor of the new territory of Washington, a position under the State Department and answerable only to Congress and the president.

This appointment also included the ex-officio superintendency for Territorial Indian Affairs under Interior Secretary Robert McClelland. And since he was headed in that direction, he assumed the role of chief in the exploration of a northern route for the newly authorized Pacific Railroad Survey. The railroad surveys were headed by Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, who protested the use of military personnel to assist in the project. To make the inducement juicier, not only was Stevens given his own commands, he was also given carte blanche to carry them out. In view of his political activism in Washington, D.C., his departure for the remotest part of the country was probably welcomed in higher political and military circles. Isaac Stevens was a determined man with boundless energy. Given the authority he now enjoyed, nothing could come between his ego and an impatient obsession to excel. During his initial phase as a "pathfinder," he far exceeded budgetary allotments and what was expected of him in the exploration for a northern railroad route between the Mississippi River and Puget Sound. During this western reconnaissance he also met with the Indians, starting with the Blackfeet in Montana, and arranged for future treaty conferences. When budgetary allotments for exploration ran out, he proceeded largely on borrowed or transferred funds.

Upon his arrival in Olympia, Governor Stevens immediately arranged for treaty councils to be set up with the Indians of western Washington. He impatiently and naively sought to resolve all the many problems inherent in the Euro-American usurpation of Indian lands with the wave of a pen or, as it turned out, a hangman's noose. His primary objective was to consolidate all the Indians on one or a few reservations in exchange for their land and the assurance of protection and guidance of the "Great White Father" in Washington, D.C. At first the Indians did not realize or could not understand the significance of "signing" a white man's treaty. Upon reflection, they wanted no part of Stevens's treaties and they eventually rebelled.

One of the governor's aides in treaty negotiations was the highly respected pioneer from Shoalwater Bay, James G. Swan. Although he generally supported Stevens, in his book, *The Northwest Coast, 1857*, Swan states: "The Governor certainly erred in judgment in attempting to place these five different tribes on the same reservation...they well knew that they never could agree to live together. They were willing to concentrate at a given place on their own lands, and it is a pity the governor did not see the benefit that would arise to them by so doing."

Meanwhile, Stevens was arranging treaty councils with those Indian tribes east of the Cascades that he had approached the previous year on his way west. By the time he got there, clouds of war and dissatisfaction with the treaty plans were very evident. When he returned to the Columbia Basin from his council with the Blackfoot east of the Rockies, he ran into full-scale war being waged by several of the major tribes, primarily as a result of white intrusions on promised Indian lands and dissatisfaction with treaty specifications. Also, since treaty ratification was on hold in Washington, D.C., the Indians had received none of their promised benefits and suspected subterfuge. It was with difficulty and no little risk that Stevens returned to Olympia.

Although he had been forewarned, Stevens found Indian problems west of the Cascades even worse than those he had just experienced east of the mountains. In the Puget Sound region the major problem, aside from treaty dissatisfaction, was white settlers laying claim to their homestead acres promised them by the Donation Land Act of 1850. In view of the number of settlers in this region, friction between them and the Indians became a serious matter, resulting in many conflicts and deaths.

With reluctant and confused military participation, Governor Stevens was forced to form his own militia or army of volunteers, a move strongly opposed by the United States army and its regional commander, Major General John Wool, who ordered his officers "not to recognize the volunteer forces in any way." With or without the help of the military, 11 companies of volunteers were raised, "taking to the field within three weeks." With this army of volunteers, "General" Stevens waged war on the hostile Indians in an effort to protect the settlers and bring the Indians into line. Stevens's problems with Wool, aside from serious and irreconcilable personal differences, involved policy in dealing with the Indians. Stevens strongly advocated

allout war on both sides of the Cascades. Wool and others considered Stevens's tactics "premature and ill-advised" and blamed Indian troubles on the intrusion of whites, including Stevens.

Perhaps most controversial of Stevens's acts during this time were his dealings with Leschi, the Nisqually chief, and others associated with him. At issue was the killing of settlers in the Puget Sound region by Chief Leschi and other "hostiles." The Indians at this time had rejected treaty conditions and were increasingly concerned over the continued influx of white settlers on what the Indians still considered their land; hence, they considered themselves at war with the whites. This was the army's position. Stevens, on the other hand, considered Leschi and his group murderers who were bound by treaty. He was unrelenting in his demands for "justice."

With the military's assurance of safe conduct, Leschi and his group of "outlaws" soon gave themselves up. Although they had been assured by the military that their crimes were pardonable as acts of war, they were promptly arrested by Stevens's order and indicted for murder over the protests of the army and many concerned citizens. "Leschi was tried in due time, but the jury disagreed. He was convicted at a subsequent trial, and expiated his crimes on the gallows," wrote Hazaard.

During this time the governor declared martial law in order to circumvent a legal challenge to his authority to evict some settlers from claims legally given to them in by Congress in the Donation Land Act. These settlers were suspected of giving aid to the "enemy." His son opined that the governor "was not the man to suffer a few political tricksters to frustrate his necessary military measures." When called upon to account for his actions by the United States Circuit Court, he arrested presiding Judge Edward Lander, who was also territorial chief justice and a captain in the militia. As soon as martial law was rescinded, Judge Lander convicted Governor Stevens of contempt of court and fined him a token \$50. Whereupon Stevens gave himself an executive pardon and "friends paid the fine." Ultimately he was censured for this and various of his actions by the territorial legislature, Congress and both Presidents Pierce and Buchanan. Although Hazard Stevens makes light of these rebukes, Congress did not, as nearly 100 pages of the Congressional Record for 1856 and 1857 will attest.

Stevens's judgment in dealings with the Indians was seriously questioned during his time as territorial governor. He was, in fact, accused by some as contributing more to the problem than to its solution. This view was held by George Gibbs, a learned and highly respected scientist and ethnologist who had served with Stevens during treaty negotiations. In a letter published by James Swan, dated January 7, 1857, Gibbs observed:

"That the governor's treaties had a great deal to do in fomenting this war there is no doubt. Those on the Sound were too much hurried, and the reservations allowed them were insufficient; but his grand blunder was in bringing together the Nez Perces, Walla Walla, Yakima, and others into one council, and cramming a treaty down their throats in a hurry."

Otherwise, Gibbs, who was "manifestly not friendly to Stevens," laid the blame for the war on a combination of "the Indians' unwillingness to have their lands intruded on," the United States military, missionaries, the Donation Land Act, and the lack of treaty ratification.

Despite his growing unpopularity among many of the state's leading citizens, Stevens was nominated and subsequently elected as territorial representative to Congress, whereupon he resigned as governor in August 1857. When he arrived back in Washington, D.C., for the 1858 session, he found his reception cool; his every move had been conveyed and publicized back east by a fairly strong contingent of personal and political opponents. It did not take him long, however, to once again establish himself as a political force to be reckoned with. During his first session he "introduced 19 bills and resolutions and offered 4

amendments"; and throughout his brief congressional career was successful in many of his appropriation demands relative to Washington Territory. Immediately following the inauguration of Lincoln in 1860, Stevens returned to Washington Territory, where he was acclaimed by some as the "leading man in the Northwest." Others did not think so and, under severe opposition, he withdrew his name as a Democratic candidate for renomination as territorial representative.

With the news of the firing on Fort Sumter, Stevens returned to the nation's capital resolved to "tender his services" to the Union Army. His reception on his return was still "cold and discouraging." But still he cast about in high political and military circles seeking a generalship. Finally he had to settle for a colonelcy with the 79th New York Highlanders. Convinced, however, of his strength as a military leader, he prophetically expressed his disappointment by exclaiming, "I will show those men in Washington that I am worthy of something better than a regiment, or I will lay my bones on the battlefield." Stevens's experiences in the Civil War followed a course reminiscent of his entire career. The "Little Napoleon," as he had become known, as usual did not endear himself to the higher brass and many of his men. He was ignored and passed over for promotion to general until his son, Hazard, personally delivered a letter of disappointment to President Lincoln, whereupon Colonel Stevens was promoted to brigadier general. Even so, during his short tenure in the war he complained of being "surrounded by incompetents."

The fiery career of Isaac Ingalls Stevens ended with a bullet through his brain in the Battle of Chantilly on September 1, 1862. With the respect one would expect from the son of the fallen man, Hazard Stevens concludes his biography: "The closest study of the situation strengthens the conviction that General Stevens that day saved the army and the country from an appalling disaster." Be that as it may, the little man with the big ego "fell while rallying his command with the flag of the Republic in his dying grasp."

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