

Senate Statistics

Sergeants at Arms

David S. Barry (1919-1933)



It was every Senate staffer's worst nightmare: to be called to the Senate chamber to explain a personal action considered disrespectful of the institution. On a cold winter's afternoon in 1933, that is what happened to Sergeant at Arms David Barry. The Senate's chief law enforcement officer, responsible for carrying out orders to compel attendance of members and to arrest others sought by the Senate was himself commanded to appear before the Senate. The widely respected Barry had held his office for nearly fourteen years, making him—even today—the third longest-serving Sergeant at Arms in Senate history. In February 1933, however, Barry faced immediate dismissal and possible trial in federal court on charges punishable by a prison term of up to five years.

David Barry knew a great deal about the Senate and its members when he became Sergeant at Arms just after World War I. Born in Michigan in 1859, he moved to Washington at age sixteen to take an appointment as a Senate page. Later, he explained how he obtained that post. In 1875, Senate Sergeant at Arms John French, facing a stiff challenge for reelection, sought votes among newly elected Republican senators, including Barry's patron, Isaac Christiancy. "So Colonel French could not gracefully refuse when [Christiancy] asked him to appoint his protege who had opportunely written promptly after the election for the Senator's recommendation." Despite the requirement that pages be no younger than twelve and no older than sixteen, Barry served as a page until he was twenty—attending school at night and during Senate recesses.

Over the next few years, Barry developed close relations with other senators, including Rhode Island's [Nelson Aldrich](#). At a time when Senate staff consisted primarily of male secretaries, Barry learned shorthand and went to work for Aldrich, who arrived in the Senate in 1881. Over the next three decades, Aldrich became, in Barry's admiring words, "the suave and steel-spined boss of the United States Senate."

While pursuing his duties as a Senate stenographer, Barry also worked as Washington correspondent for a succession of large-city midwestern Republican newspapers. A comparison of Senate staff lists and Senate Press Gallery rosters for that era reveals many

of the same names on both documents. Less obvious at that time were the number of members of Congress who maintained large financial interests in the newspapers that covered their activities back home. Rhode Island's Nelson Aldrich had significant stock holdings in the New York Sun and secretly owned the Providence Journal. From 1889 to 1904, Barry successfully ran the New York Sun's Washington bureau and, in 1904, he transferred to the Providence Journal. After several years as the Journal's editor, Barry returned to Washington as that paper's capital correspondent. His close ties to Aldrich allowed him access to closed-door Senate conferences, but limited his freedom to report on all he observed. At a time when journalists were closely identified with their respective political parties, Barry also served as the Republican National Committee's publicity director for that party's 1912 and 1916 presidential campaigns.

When the Republicans took control of the Senate in 1919, David Barry was a natural choice as Sergeant at Arms. His Senate experience extended back more than forty years, while the body's most senior senator, Massachusetts' [Henry Cabot Lodge](#), had arrived only twenty-four years earlier. More important, Barry enjoyed the support of senior Republicans including Lodge, who had just become majority leader. Barry quickly settled into his ornate office, just off the Senate Reception Room. One journalist noted that the office's location, adjacent to the Senate chamber in what today is known as S-212, made it a perfect place for "those hasty Senatorial conferences, which, as a rule, achieve more action than most of the speeches on the floor. It is," the reporter continued, "sort of a combination sanctuary and bill hatchery."

As new generations of senators arrived, many turned to the Sergeant at Arms as a guide to Senate practices and traditions. Following his journalistic instincts, Barry found time away from his official duties to prepare a memoir, drawn from his earlier reporting, entitled *Forty Years in Washington* (1924).

Although Majority Leader Lodge died in 1924, Barry remained popular among the party's senior members and easily won reelection every two years until 1933. The November 1932 election, however, gave to the Democrats control of the Senate that would convene on March 4, 1933. Barry's days were numbered.

For more than a quarter century, David Barry had used his journalistic talents to oppose those who, in the name of reform, called for fundamental changes in the Senate's operations. Back in 1905, when a fiction writer published a sensationalized series of magazine articles entitled "The Treason of the Senate," Barry fired back with a piece entitled "The Loyalty of the Senate." In late 1932, as his Senate career neared its end, Barry wrote an article in which he resumed his attack on a later generation of reformers. Under the heading "Over the Hill to Demagoguery," Barry's opening line read "Contrary, perhaps, to the popular belief, there are not many crooks in Congress, that is, out and out grafters; there are not many Senators or Representatives who sell their vote for money, and it is pretty well known who those few are; but there are many demagogues of the kind that will vote for legislation solely because they think that it will help their political and social fortunes."

On February 3, hours after accounts of the article appeared in the morning papers, the Senate resolved itself into a "court of inquiry" and administered a special oath to its Sergeant at Arms. Barry told the assembled senators that he did not wish to retain a lawyer and had nothing to say by way of explanation. "The article stands for what it says. My idea in writing that was to defend the Senate from the [mistaken] popular belief that there are crooks and grafters here." "I do not know of any such men and did not mean to imply that I did." Facing a chamber filled with unhappy and disbelieving senators, the seventy-three-year-old Senate officer nervously explained that he had written the article, "carelessly and thoughtlessly," some time earlier and had not had the opportunity to review it before publication.

After a few minutes, no one could have doubted Barry's fate. Yet, the debate dragged on because irritated members disagreed not only on the timing and extent of his punishment, but also on whether this superheated proceeding was making the Senate look foolish at a time of grave national economic crisis. Should his punishment go beyond simple dismissal to include referral to a U.S. attorney with a possible five-year prison sentence if convicted of libel? While senators shouted "Vote! Vote!," others convinced the majority to wait several days to avoid giving the impression of a hasty judgment. On February 7, following a brief hearing by the Judiciary Committee, the Senate resumed proceedings and agreed to Barry's removal by a vote of 53 to 17. Thus ended an otherwise distinguished career.

David Barry died three years later at his home in Washington.