

Thesis Summary

Public Health Politics and the San Francisco Plague Epidemic of 1900-1904

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This thesis addresses the topic of public health politics in San Francisco, California, during the 1900 bubonic plague outbreak. It examines the history of federal and state quarantine inspection politics leading up to the political crisis which accompanied the arrival of plague in San Francisco. In addition, it explores the inherent nature of the struggle, as well as the particular personal and political interests of the parties to the conflict.

Research reveals that during an epidemic, an inherent conflict exists between business interests, wishing to suppress news of the epidemic in order to protect trade, and health officials, who require transparent public action in order to control the disease. In addition, a conflict of long standing political interests, both in California and within the federal agency involved, aggravated the healthcare crisis, and prevented officials involved from seeking a compromise solution to a deadly public health issue.

Historical Overview

- **The Emergence of the Marine Hospital Service**

Federal health policy emerged as the Civil War reconstruction period closed and northern financial and transportation interests, now in control of much of the southern states economies, faced the annual specter of mosquito borne diseases. Yearly outbreaks of yellow fever, its cause then unknown, had institutionalized the practice of quarantines, and opened the door for the use of “commercial” quarantines by rival economic interests hoping to profit from the disruption of trade patterns associated with local quarantines. What was historically a local problem became a regional one of national interest, first financially then politically. In response to the 1879 yellow fever epidemic, the National Board of Health was created. By 1884, the Marine Hospital Service (MHS), under John Hamilton, emerged as the primary federal agency responsible for national public health policy.

- **The 1893 National Quarantine Act and push for federal control**

In 1892, a cholera epidemic was narrowly avoided in New York City. Much of the initial delay in controlling the disease was a direct result of the fight between the federal government and the State of New York. At first, New York denied the outbreak, and then claimed states’ rights under the United States Constitution, initially refusing to allow federal authorities management control of the crisis. The fight between the State of New York and the MHS highlighted the potentially disastrous situation. Facing an economy already weakened by recession and the possibility of a fiscal crisis if an epidemic was allowed to explode due to political infighting, the United States Congress passed the 1893 “National Quarantine Act”

which transferred ultimate control over to the MHS, and the author of the bill, Surgeon General Walter Wyman.

- **The Battle for San Francisco**

Continuing the plan to establish national quarantine stations at all major United States ports, the MHS set up a station on Angel Island in San Francisco Bay to serve the west coast's largest port. Wyman believed that the establishment of the federal quarantine stations was a de facto federal takeover, and acted to further his agency's interests. As in New York, California considered quarantine inspection to be a matter of states' rights and one of local concern. Of particular interests were the inspection fees charged by local port authorities. "Tammany Hall" style political corruption was at play in San Francisco, the local inspection fees supported the political machinery. The federal inspection service was free. Local political and commercial transportation interests were split over the inspection issue. In 1896, while the locals battled over who's interests would prevail, the MHS moved to strengthen its hand by beefing up operations and coordinating activities with federal customs authorities. The battle between the local inspection service and the MHS over who controlled quarantine inspection caused trouble and confusion along the San Francisco water front.

- **1897 Washington Intervenes**

In light of the spreading pandemic of bubonic plague that began in China in 1894, and to prepare for the inevitable appearance of plague in San Francisco, Wyman's MHS decided to act to put an end to the inspection controversy. Declaring San Francisco's quarantine inspection service out of compliance with the 1893 law, the MHS persuaded the President to sign an executive order placing the MHS in charge of the San Francisco quarantine inspection. By summer of 1897, quarantine inspection was in the hands of the MHS officers assigned to San Francisco. The political fallout from the takeover caused a furious rift between the local and federal authorities. The MHS officer in charge of the takeover, Dr. Milton Rosenau, was so disliked by the local San Francisco politicians that his career was in jeopardy. By the end of 1898, the political atmosphere in which the MHS operated became so poisoned that Wyman transferred Rosenau out of harm's way, leaving behind a hornets nest of local grudges.

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- **Kinyoun Faces the Plague Threat**

In the spring of 1899, the MHS was receiving more certain news that plague was heading towards the west coast. Plague had arrived in Hawaii and was now only a single ocean leg away from San Francisco. When news arrived that plague was reported on board a ship heading to San Francisco, Wyman dispatched Dr. Joseph Kinyoun, the director of the MHS's hygienic laboratory and the service's senior bacteriologist, to take over the quarantine inspection station in San Francisco. Wyman and Kinyoun had been in a professional feud ever since Kinyoun joined the MHS in 1887. By transferring Kinyoun to San Francisco, Wyman was able to accomplish three things. First, he removed Kinyoun, a professional and political rival, from the Washington stage. Second, Wyman was able to put Kinyoun into the firestorm and career

jeopardy from which he'd extricated Rosenau. And third, he was able to place Rosenau into the now open position of director of the MHS hygienic laboratory, vacated by Kinyoun.

- **Germ and Politics**

In March of 1900, plague was discovered in San Francisco's Chinatown. In the heart of San Francisco, Chinatown was a useful but disliked ghetto. Almost all of the property was owned by the local white population, and the ghetto's Chinese population formed the backbone of the city's servant class. From cooks and waiters to the city's famous sex industry, the Chinese population was used and abused. Indeed Chinatown served as a scapegoat for all of the city's ills. Indeed, all previous outbreaks of contagious disease has been blamed on the Chinese, and the fact that plague had been discovered in Chinatown reinforced the anti-Chinese sentiment that was politically fashionable in San Francisco of 1900. To make matters worse, science had not yet discovered the cause of plague, so the Chinatown outbreak was written up as a Asian disease by the city's white population. In particular, the business community, fearing the possibility of commercial quarantine, instituted a policy of denial that a public health crisis was at hand..

- **The Politics of Plague**

Business interests, lead by the transportation giant Southern Pacific Railroad Company, secured the cooperation of California's Governor, Henry Gage, and all of San Francisco's major newspapers in the campaign of denial. The chief target of the campaign was Dr. Kinyoun, the federal quarantine officer. Since the science of plague was as of yet undecided in 1900, "political doctors" were found to dispute Kinyoun's findings. The State's two major medical journals held a running battle, with one supporting Kinyoun and arguing for a transparent public health battle against the outbreak, while the other, seeking political gain, supported the business interests in the campaign of denial. The city's daily newspapers, including the San Francisco *Chronicle*, *Call* and *Bulletin*. waged a defamation campaign against the MHS officer. Indeed, as the San Francisco's city bacteriologist said, the "campaign of vilification" against Kinyoun, "for unexampled bitterness, unfair and dishonest methods, probably never had been and never again will be equaled." Only the *Sacramento Bee* stood by Kinyoun, arguing that California was denying the plague epidemic to its peril.

- **Governor Gage's Offensive**

Governor Henry T. Gage (1899-1903) was as corrupt a politician as Sacramento has ever seen. Largely forgotten by history and disowned by his party (R.), the governor was in the pocket of the Southern Pacific Railroad. What the railroad wanted, he tried to deliver. The railroad wanted the federal doctor and his plague out of California, and Gage made every effort to oblige his masters. In the summer of 1900, Gage quietly helped the Chinese community bring law suites against Kinyoun for violating their civil rights (due process and equal protection) when, following the Surgeon General's orders, Kinyoun placed quarantines, first on Chinatown and then later on the State, preventing all Asians from crossing the state boarder without a certificate of health inspection. While the suits were eventually thrown out for various reasons, Kinyoun was blasted by the courts, the governor, and the newspapers. In January of 1901, the Governor used his biennial address to deny the plague epidemic, accused Kinyoun of injecting live plague into Chinese corpses in order to create a plague scare, and then asked the state

legislature to make it illegal for doctors and newspapers to report cases of plague. The legislature refused to pass the press gag legislation, but did vote to gag the medical community, and authorized \$100,000 in un-audited funds (a huge sum in 1900) to be used by the governor in his campaign of denial and vilification. In February 1901, the governor dispatched a commission to Washington, consisting of newspaper owner representatives, the senior lawyer for the Southern Pacific, and a shipping magnet, to strike a deal with the MHS. An agreement was made whereby California would help fight the plague and stop attacking Kinyoun if, in exchange, the federal government would help block any further mention of the outbreak and remove Kinyoun. Surgeon General Wyman agreed to the whitewash deal, and Kinyoun was removed from San Francisco.

- **The Plague and Gage's Downfall**

Kinyoun was reassigned, his career destroyed, but the plague continued to claim lives. California, for its part, gave lip service to the agreement while obstructing the federal initiative against the plague. The *Sacramento Bee* and AP wire service continued to report on the plague and the scandal surrounding it. The states of Colorado, Texas, and Louisiana all quarantined against California, arguing that if it refused to admit to the public health crisis within its borders, states receiving rail cargo from California had the duty to protect their citizens from California's failure to act. The Southern Pacific Railroad, fearing commercial quarantine, and seeing Governor Gage becoming a political embarrassment, decided to withdraw its backing of Gage during the 1902 republican gubernatorial primary convention. Gage was replaced on the ballot by George Pardee, a practicing physician, who quietly agreed to support the federal plague battle.

When the state boards of health convened in early 1903 and called for a military quarantine of California unless action was taken to control the plague in San Francisco, the writing on the wall was clear. The Southern Pacific's senior corporate physician attended the convention and, as the head of California's delegation, returned with the news of the threatened action. Within days, California's business community was declaring that a public health crisis existed in San Francisco, and that Governor Pardee must act to protect the state from quarantine, a position supported fully by the governor. By 1904, the epidemic was suppressed and by early 1905 after no sign of plague for many months, declared officially ended.

- **CONCLUSION**

During an epidemic, there is an inherent conflict between business interests, wanting to protect their profits, and public health officials needing the transparent support of the community in order to fight and control the spread of disease. Where business interests go, politics and politicians are sure to follow. While history shows that a community may be naturally inclined to deny the existence of an epidemic in order to protect its commercial and financial interest, the policy of denial is fatally flawed. The effected community is distrusted by its neighbors, and those neighbors will act to protect themselves from the community in denial. Where the public's health is concerned, the only reliable means of dealing with issues is for the community to meet them head on, allocate the resources necessary to deal with the problems, and publicly address the concerns. Then, and only then will the community be able to defend its interests. It must be

remembered that a community's public health is its public wealth, and must by all means be protected.