

# THE SORRY TALE OF WEBSTER DAVIS

BY

GEORGE CLARKE MUSGRAVE

FROM HIS BOOK

IN SOUTH AFRICA WITH BULLER

LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY  
BOSTON 1900



# THE SORRY TALE OF WEBSTER DAVIS

*IN 1882 WEBSTER DAVIS became a copyist in the law office of Shanklin, Low, & McDougal and, in 1884 started a two year course at Kansas University. He secured admittance to the bar and began to practice law in Garden City, Kansas. He later attended the Ann Arbor Law School, after which he located in Kansas City. He soon made a reputation for brilliance and ability, and became prominent in Republican politics. His splendid, but unsuccessful race for Congress in 1892 was followed by his election as Mayor in 1894. In 1897 he was appointed Assistant Secretary of the Interior, a post that he held until a trip to South Africa in 1899 made him a Boer sympathiser. He was accused of collusion with the Boers and was rumoured to have received payments of \$125,000 for arranging recruitment and shipment for other sympathisers to join the Boer army. After failing to convince the Republicans to adopt a resolution of sympathy with the Boers, he resigned his post in April 1900 and, securing some support in the Democratic party, he joined that party.*

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## **Webster Davis Resigns**

*Washington April 2nd, 1900*

Webster Davis, Assistant Secretary of the Interior, will tonight tender his resignation in order to go on the lecture platform in the interest of the Boers.

In an authorised statement given out today Mr. Davis says that as a result of his visit to the Transvaal he feels impelled to tender his resignation as Assistant Secretary of the Interior. He will, at an early date, deliver a lecture in this city in the interests of the South African republics.

Mr. Davis said today: "It is purely a matter of sympathy on my part. I went to South Africa unprejudiced, visited both armies, saw much of the British soldiers and people, and also much of the Boers. After seeing what I did, I made up my mind that the cause of the Boers was just, that the two smallest republics in the world were struggling against the greatest Empire for home, justice and independence."

"When I entered the train at Pretoria, on my return home, fully 2,000 men and women, mostly women, whose husbands were at the front, gathered at the station to bid me goodbye, and as the tears rolled down many of their faces, they made a last request of me that I do everything in my power on my return home to let the American people know of their exact condition: to let them know how they had been abused and outrageously misrepresented by the English."

"I am therefore determined to do everything in my humble way to assist them. Their cause is just and in God is their trust, and in the light of the past history of the American people who went through the same struggle, I believe the Boers will win."

## **Address by Webster Davis**

*Washington, April 8th, 1900*

An immense audience gathered at the Grand Opera House tonight to listen to an address on the war in South Africa from the Hon. Webster Davis, assistant Secretary of the Interior, who has just returned to the United States from that country. Every available bit of standing room in the opera house, the largest auditorium in Washington, was filled with an audience who paid close attention to every word, uttered by the speaker, and manifested their appreciation of his telling points with frequent and generous applause. Simple decorations of the United States flag, and the red, white and black bars with the field of green, the emblem of the Boers, were suspended over the stage. A score or more of public men, mainly senators and representatives in congress, occupied seats on the stage and in the audience.

Mr. Davis was introduced by Mr. P. T. Moran, the chairman of the executive committee, who made a few introductory remarks. Mr. Davis delivered his remarks in an off-hand, easy style, referring to his notes only occasionally, and mainly when it was necessary to read an extract from some document or speech. He spoke for about two hours, and at the close of his address was warmly congratulated.

*“The Boers of South Africa,” said Mr. Davis, “are among the pioneers of freedom - heroes of civil and religious liberty. They were the torch-bearers who blazed the pathway for civilization through the primeval forests of the southern part of that great dark continent which has been the marvel of the ages. No country in the world contains a nobler race of men and women. It was and is their unconquerable love for liberty that has caused all their troubles.”*

*Mr. Davis then entered upon an exhaustive review of the relations between the Boers and the British government and characterised England’s acquisition of the diamond fields at Kimberley as a transaction without a parallel “for cupidity, dishonour and injustice.”*

*“It was after the discovery of gold in the Transvaal,” Mr. Davis said, “that the British government determined to seek a pretext for obtaining control of the richest gold fields in the world, as it had before secured the richest diamond fields. That this is the real cause for the present war no one can doubt who will but listen to the frequent remark made by Englishmen in South Africa, as well in England, that the gold mines in the Transvaal are worth fighting for, and we are going to keep on fighting until we get them. No flimsier pretext for robbery and murder ever emanated from the wickedest cabinet in Europe in its palmiest days, than the British demand for a five-year franchise in the South African republic. If this demand were granted not an Englishman in the Transvaal would renounce allegiance to the queen and swear loyalty to the government of the South African republic, as against the British government. The idea was to obtain the power to control the government of the republic and at the same time remain British subjects. For the Boers to*

*comply with these demands of the British government would have meant the sacrifice of every vestige of essential sovereignty belonging to the Transvaal as an independent republic."*

*"The Boers have been greatly abused by the British because it is alleged they began the war. In other words, the Boers were too hasty: they would not wait until all the British troops had arrived in South Africa. Who ever heard of such nonsense? The great civilized nation of 40 million people are complaining because the people of the two little republics, who don't number all told more than 300,000 people, including men, women and children, insisted upon issuing their ultimatum and then proceeded to give battle before the British hosts should arrive. While on the Boer side, all told, there were not more than 30,000 fighting men, and these had but a few inferior cannon and no bayonets or swords at all. Practically the only arms they had were Mauser rifles."*

*"We have seen many charges made by British officers and British newspaper correspondents that the Boers have frequently outraged the white flag and the Red Cross flag. Upon investigation, not only among the Boers themselves, but among the 4,000 British prisoners, including the officers who were at Pretoria when we were there, we learned that these charges were absolutely unfounded. On the contrary, we did learn that this was a set-up job to deceive not only the people of Great Britain at home, but to deceive the people of other civilized countries. The truth is, I defy contradiction, that the British soldiers themselves are the parties who violated many of the rules of civilised warfare, and frequently ignored the white flag and also the Red Cross flag. It was my fortune to witness some of these scenes myself."*

*Mr. Davis then described the storming of Spion Kop by the Boers, after the British had occupied it, and his own visit to the battlefield several days later. "When the fight began," he said, "a giant Boer, in the prime of strength and manhood was seen carrying a small Boer flag: in a short time he fell to rise no more. Then an old white-haired veteran picked up the fallen banner and, waving it, urged his comrades on. With flowing hair and flashing eyes the old man rushed on, but suddenly a shell laid him low; ere the little flag touched the ground a barefooted lad, only 13 years of age, who had been fighting in his shirt sleeves, leaped like a panther to the old man's side and, snatching the flag from his grandfather's nerveless hand, raised it aloft and pushed on. A mighty shout arose from the Boers as they saw that gallant deed, and with renewed courage they made a fearful charge; following the flag they rushed like an avalanche over the British trenches, and Spion Kop was won."*

*"General Botha, the Boer commander, had made repeated attempts to secure cessation of artillery fire that the dead might be buried, but for several days without success. Finally General Buller accepted the Boer proposal to bury the British dead and offered to pay the bill. General Botha regarded this reply as an insult," Mr.*

*Davis asserted, "but nevertheless concluded to bury the British dead."*

*"Then I visited the top of Spion Kop and saw the most horrible sight that could be imagined. Upon every hand were helmets, belts, canteens, bayonets and wearing apparel scattered about and covered with clotted blood. We saw feet and hands protruding there together, all swollen and skin burst asunder, while the rest of the body was covered with a thin coating of earth. The explanation was that these poor British soldiers had been buried by their comrades under only a few inches of dirt. In other places we saw scores of dead British soldiers lying on the top of the ground, just where they had fallen, no attempt having been made to bury them. As we descended from the hill, we met the Boers going up to bury the British dead who had been so sadly neglected by their own comrades and commanders, who amuse themselves by calling the Boers savages. As citizens of the greatest republic in the world, with which side should we sympathise? I say our sympathies should go out to that brave little band of patriots who are struggling to keep alive forever the fires of liberty upon the altars of those two young republics."*

At the conclusion of Mr. Davis' address, P. Louter Wessels, special commissioner from the South African republics, made a brief address. Then Chairman Moran offered a series of resolutions, expressing: "Our deep and heartfelt sympathy for the heroic patriots of the South African republics in their immortal fight for their homes and liberty, and our admiration of their indomitable courage and unexampled heroism in their wonderful struggle against the British enemies of republican government." Commending the Washington Post for its work in behalf of the South African republics and thanking Mr. Davis for his eloquent and masterful presentation of the struggle between the Boers and the British, Mr. Morgan then tendered him applause for his "manly course in taking the lecture platform as a free American citizen to plead the cause of freedom and republican government in South Africa" and assured him that the great mass of the American people is in sympathy with the Boers, and that "we denounce the present British government and its secret allies in this country as wholly unworthy of the respect of any true American citizen."

The resolutions met with cordial reception by the audience, until the final declaration denouncing the British government and its secret allies in this country was read. This was received with a storm of hisses and cries of "No, no." Mr. Morgan then asked for a vote on the resolutions, as a whole. There were a great number of ayes, and it seemed almost an equal show of noes, but the chairman declined a count and declared the resolutions carried. In his closing address. Mr. Moran attacked the administration for their sympathy with the British, and was greeted with hisses and cries of "Traitor."

## **Letter to the Editor of the New York Times**

*New York, April 9th*

After hearing the speech of Webster Davis, one can but turn to the writings of Livingstone, Moffat, McKenzie or Dr. Nachtigal and Father Berthold, if you will. They knew their Africa better perhaps than the speaker, and from them we can learn whether the Boers truly were "the torch-bearers who blazed the pathway for civilisation through the Dark Continent."

I need not quote Stanley but let the text for our reflections be the ninth clause in the Transvaal Constitution; then read Kruger's speeches at Paaderkraal that stirred the revolt in 1881, and a more recent address by Steyn to Afrikaners, Surely, then, we shall see that if this be "the race that in history has made the greatest effort to secure liberty for future peoples," then the martyrdom of Lincoln was in vain and the halo of liberty can be stripped from the graves of those heroes of 1861 who fought for the principles that the whole Boer system diametrically opposes.

Mr Davis "defies contradiction" in his observation that it is the British who have violated the rules of civilised war. To this, I will mention, but not elaborate, four distinct instances that I have witnessed of flagrant treachery by the Boers: firing a Maxim from inside an ambulance, shooting repeatedly at a wounded trooper at close range as he lay on the ground waving a handkerchief, firing at an ambulance and stretcher bearers, and repeated misuse of the white flag. Mr. Davis would do well to realise that such incidents, though common, are more likely to be due to individuals' character, rather than to any direct orders.

Since Mr. Davis has a wide knowledge of Boer battlefields, may I ask him for some particulars of the British maxim, hidden in a hospital buggy with a white flag, which he alleges was used at the battle of Dundee. Does he recall Smith's Nek, which Lucas Meyer says the Boers held to the last, and in which they sheltered to cover their retreat? I would hold that, with the Boer thus located, a buggy could scarcely have come down in that direction. I am certain, too, that the incident could not have taken place during the battle of Dundee, which raged on the precipitous sides of Talana Hill. Strongly entrenched on the crest, nothing could prevail against the Boer but direct assault with cold steel. I can also tell Mr Davis that the 13th Battery did not fire at the retreating burghers, because a hospital flag waved over a tent in the direct line of fire; a tent that later proved to be the property of one Mart Marias, and not the Red Cross.

A wounded burgher (his name, I believe, is Dietricksen) dangerously injured Nurse Weir by kicking her in the breast and abdomen as she approached with a basin of gruel. Questioned why, this deluded farmer explained that the toadies of Kruger's executive had told the burghers that the British would poison all the wounded and captured. In similar vein, an officer approached an injured Boer who lay in the rain all night, and was shot dead as he fumbled for his water-flask to revive his murderer. Angry soldiers speedily revenged their officer, but the poor Boer was not treacherous. He supposed that his would-be deliverer was going to shoot him and managed to raise his gun first. Similarly, Lt. Ord died on San Juan Hill; and even if a true record, rather than an inflammatory tale, the British soldier at Spion Kop had no doubt heard extremists speaking against the

Boer, with the same bile that litters Mr Davis's rants against the British, and thus bayoneted the Boer Samaritan, who desired to give him water, out of self-preservation.

The reports of Mr. Davis's mission raised futile hopes in the Boer breast. Several Afrikanders, Transvaal and Colonial, told me of their belief that American intervention was assured because the Secretary of the Interior had come to arrange it. In their limitations they supposed that the United States representative sent to the Transvaal must be next to or very near the President. The advent of an official of Mr Davis's standing must have raised their expectations to a fever pitch, and one can only ponder the reasons why the object of such misaligned and inappropriate idolatry failed to clarify his actual status.

Because they assumed that war was inevitable, the Boers forced it and invaded British territory, looting and devastating in a particularly ruthless manner. If Mr Davis feels that he may now induce the United States to force England to halt, his present action is justified. If this is impossible, however, is it not like egging on a small boy to fight a bigger, with no intention of helping him sustain the unequal struggle?

GEORGE CLARKE MUSGRAVE

### **Mr. Webster Davis as a Boer Agent**

*New York, April 10th, 1900*

What wonderful people the Boers are we only just begin to find out; not only have they proved themselves strategists of a higher order, but as diplomats they, to my thinking, surpass anything ever achieved by the wily Catherine II of Russia.

However, they do not seem as fortunate in their selection of agents, if we judge by the examples we have had here, notably those having held official United States positions.

The abject failure of Mr. Macrum to create discord between this country and Great Britain has hardly passed from the minds of men when up bobs a greater gun in the form of Mr. Webster Davis, ex Assistant Secretary of the Interior. And will he have greater success than the inferior Macrum? Well, let us see:

In the speech delivered by him yesterday, and reported in the New York Times today, he says: "The federal army had but a few inferior cannon &c." Evidently he has not read American newspapers recently. And the story of the buggy at Dundee, of course, he knows only by hearsay, so I hope he will not be vouching for that. But when he tells us that a British soldier deliberately bayoneted a Samaritan-inclined Boer who gave him a drink from his own water bottle he dares not only to vouch for the story but impudently to challenge contradiction.

I have often wondered at the gullibility of American audiences (especially Western) in matters pertaining to "England" but I very much doubt if any considerable number will swallow this latest yarn. Then, perhaps, it was not even an Englishman who perpetrated the deed if, indeed, it was ever perpetrated at all.

As one who has spent many years as one of them and could have become one nationally, had he desired, in England, and one who has had foes as well as friends among the English, I repel with scorn as an impossibility such an aspersion on the character of any of the inhabitants of Great Britain. Men of the races who have produced so many heroes, in peace and war, among high and low, cannot possibly be guilty of such an atrocity. Englishmen have many faults and are not better, perhaps, than the rest of civilised humanity, but they are not treacherous.

But, stay: a thought strikes me. I have heard this story of stabbing a beneficent before, and have even seen an illustration of it as, no doubt, have many of your readers. Did not our own Lt. Ord die thus in Cuba; and was it not at Omdurman where an English officer lost his life while quenching the thirst of an Arab? Could it be that Mr. Davis has simply transposed the characters to suit his own purpose?

Then, when it comes to challenging contradictions, I defy Mr. Davis to prove it was not Transvaal gold that made him such an ardent advocate of the Boer. It is well known that Mr Kruger would consider £50,000,000 a cheap price for the support and intervention of the United States.

OSCAR EPSTEIN

### **Webster Davis and the Boers**

*New York, April 11th, 1900*

As an American by adoption, and a Briton by birth, I thank Mr. Oscar Epstein for his letter in today's issue of the New York Times for the manly stand that he has taken on the Boer question, and the statements made by their latest agent, Mr Webster Davis, lately of Washington DC.

If Mr. Davis is sincere in his challenge he now has a golden opportunity of taking up Mr. Epstein's, and to prove to all citizens of this glorious Republic of ours that he is not the paid advocate of "Oom Paul" and his associate members of the Transvaal Republic. One cannot help but think it most extraordinary that, on Mr. Davis's arrival in South Africa, Mr. Kruger placed his own special car at his disposal during his visit to Pretoria.

Of his subsequent meetings and interviews with Mr Kruger, Mr. Davis fails most signally to advise us of the conversations that occurred. Surely, as no longer even a minor official of our Government, it would not be improper for him to make known the same, and give the public his reasons for espousing the Boers' side. This will, in a measure, "clear his skirts" from the broad assertion of Mr Epstein that he was bought by Transvaal gold. Will Mr. Davis try and do this before he starts his lecture tour? If he does so, he will no doubt get a hearing from the American people. If he does not, then it will be obvious to the minds of fair-minded men that he has already had his price for his advocacy of the Boer cause.

Pray, is it not a fact that Mr. Webster Davis had a good fat berth in Washington? Is it not a fair and just inference that he would not give that up unless he had a better one and was paid better by the Boers? I am strongly of the opinion that, unless there was a "consideration" (and a good one), that he would not be such a philanthropist to give up his Washington

berth. Then, if he is paid by the Boers, his assertions must be taken with a pinch of salt.

I am afraid Mr. Davis has taken on a crusade like the Knight of La Mancha against windmills. He had better sheathe his sword while there is still time to do so; otherwise he will be held in the same contempt as poor Macrum, who also essayed to be a "Champion of the Boers."

GEORGE CLARKE MUSGRAVE  
ANGLO-AMERICAN

### **Boer Bribery – a Reply to Webster Davis**

*Daily Mail, London, April 13th, 1900*

Mr. Webster Davis has ventured upon a denial of my statement that he accepted a bribe of 125,000 dollars from the Transvaal Government to organise a pro-Boer agitation in the United States. The value of that denial may be gathered from the fact that his initial assertion is that I "was not in either Republic before the surrender of Pretoria." Millions of people in Great Britain, and in the United States read, day by day, my cables from Pretoria as printed in the "Daily Mail" months before the occupation of the capital by Lord Roberts. I am well and personally known to every member of the Transvaal Government and with many of them, notably State Secretary Reitz and State Attorney Smuts, I have discussed the standing of Mr. Webster Davis.

Passing from Mr. Davis's disbelief in my existence to the second clause of his refutation, he states that, at the time he was in South Africa, there was "only one inlet, only one outlet, to the two Republics - namely, Delagoa Bay." I am happy to confirm Mr. Davis in this remark. It was via Delagoa Bay that I entered the Transvaal. At the time of my sojourn in Lourenco Marques there were not "Twelve British warships constantly on guard." On the day of my arrival there was only one despatch boat, and H.M.S. Thetis passed us on her way to Beira. That "everything that went out was thoroughly inspected, even clothing and hat-boxes," is untrue.

Mr. Webster Davis was accommodated with a certificate from the Government that exempted him from search at Komati Poort. Similar documents were granted to Mr. Howard Hillegas, of the "New York World," to Mr. Thomas Millard, of the "New York Herald" and, I believe, to Mr. Richard Harding Davis, when they left the Transvaal. At no time were consular effects submitted to search at Komati Poort, and Mr. Davis travelled under the very particular aegis of Mr. Hollis, the Delagoa Bay Consul.

Mr. Webster Davis concludes his refutation by saying that "one hundred and twenty five thousand dollars in gold would weigh 400 lbs., and it would have been utterly impossible to have made away with the money under such circumstances." And yet I saw 8,985,000 dollars in solid gold made away with by the Transvaal Government in exactly such circumstances. As to the value of the Portuguese surveillance of Delagoa Bay, one need only consult the British intelligence officer stationed at Lourenco Marques, the British Consul, or the files of the British newspapers. Mr. Webster Davis could have made away with the whole Transvaal Treasury so far as British warships were effectual to prevent him.

But I have never suggested that Mr. Webster Davis carried his takings away in a hat-box.

At the beginning of the war the Transvaal Government had lying at its credit in a bank in Holland, £460,000. Every homeward steamer carried additional instalments, and, when other methods failed, the Netherlands railway, as has been proved before the concessions commission, was always ready to supply the wages of a suborned politician. The fact remains that Mr. Webster Davis did receive 125,000 dollars from the Boers to buy the American vote for Mr. Bryan; he was only one fortnight within the Transvaal, and had absolutely no means of arriving at a conviction as to the rights or wrongs of the Boer cause; and he had to sell his party, his political chief, and his country before he had sufficiently earned his dole.

To the aid of Mr. Webster Davis comes Mr. Van Boeschoten, the secretary of the Transvaal Legation in Brussels. Mr. Van Boeschoten is an honest man, one of the few trustworthy Hollanders in the service of the South African Republic. But, because of his honesty, he knows very little of the inner working of things either in Pretoria or in Brussels. However, he accuses me of having published an "absolute calumny" against Mr. Davis. Mr. Van Boeschoten was not in the Transvaal at the time of Mr. Webster Davis's visit, but he volunteers the information that "Mr. Kruger saw very little of Mr. Davis." This is quite true, and I have said nothing to the contrary.

Mr. Webster Davis arrived in Pretoria on January 24th. He left for the Natal front on January 29th, and he returned to Pretoria on February 5th. Two days later he was en route for Delagoa Bay. Had Mr. Kruger spent the whole time of his visit with him, the President might still truthfully be said to have seen very little of him. But I never introduced Mr. Kruger's name into the matter at all. What I said was "Daily he was received in secret audience in the Executive Chamber of the Government Buildings. At those councils were also always present Mr. Schalk Burger, Mr. Wolmarans the peace envoy, and State Attorney Smuts." Mr. Kruger very rarely intervened personally in the seances that shaped the international politics of the war. "The Transvaal Government has purchased the interference of no one in the world," says Mr. Van Boeschoten in conclusion.

And side by side with that unblushing assertion one reads that, "examined before the concessions commission regarding the payment of £1000 to Mr. Hargrove, £100 to Mr. Smit, a railway commissioner, an annuity to Mr. Reginald Statham, and a loan of £6000 to Messrs. Mendelssohn and Bruce, Mr. Van Boeschoten explained that most of these transactions were done at the request of Mr. Reitz."

Mr. Webster Davis denounces Senator Hanna's repetition of my statements as "an outrageous falsehood." If Senator Hanna, desires to reply to this lie with circumstances, he will find in the records of the State Department at Washington conclusive proof that Mr. Hollis, the American Consul at Lourenco Marques, bought contraband stores for the Boers during the war; that Mr. Macrum, the late American Consul at Pretoria, was in the pay of the Transvaal Government; that Consul General Stowe, at Cape Town, was insulted with the offer of a bribe; and that Mr. Webster Davis,

once second assistant secretary to the Secretary for the Interior, received 125,000 dollars as the price of his party.

Should Senator Hanna want further evidence he can apply to the late chief detective of Pretoria, who will give him, with full circumstance of detail, proof that Mr. Webster Davis received 125,000 dollars, Mr. Macrum 75,000 dollars, and Mr. Montagu White 1,000,000 dollars to raise a pro-Boer agitation in the United States.

When Mr. Webster Davis left Pretoria he gave expression to a pregnant remark "I am prepared to forfeit my place in the Government if Mr. McKinley does not consent to do justice to the Boers." Yet only a fortnight before, this needy and ambitious solicitor had never seen a Boer, was absolutely ignorant of Boer hopes, Boer aims, Boer policy, and did not know a jot about what constituted "justice to the Boer." His speeches in Washington and the recollection of his time in Pretoria bring a blush of shame to the cheek of every American there today.

DOUGLAS STORY

### **Webster Davis Accused**

*Washington Sept 14th*

A remarkable statement under the signature of Gustav Thielkul, a former employee of the Patent Office, was published here yesterday concerning Webster Davis and the causes of his sudden resignation as Assistant Secretary of the Interior. Early in the Boer War, Thielkul was compelled to resign because it was charged that he was advertising for recruits for the Boer Army and organising a filibustering expedition for the Transvaalers.

Thielkul's statement is a connected one, in which he tells of Mr. Davis inducing him to insert advertisements in the local papers, asking for men who wished to join the Boer Army to apply to him. He tells about them calling upon him in the Patent Office in such numbers that an investigation was started, but without result, because of a quietus put upon it by Mr. Davis, then Acting Secretary. The calls and letters to him continued to increase in such numbers that a second investigation was launched, ending in his resignation. Thielkul declares that Mr Davis went to South Africa to arrange for the payment and shipment of men with whom he had made arrangements to enter service with the Boer Army, and says "Mr. Davis expected to receive a large sum of money from President Kruger for our services, and I presume his expectations were realised."

Thielkul closes his statement with these words: "From the facts set forth herein it will be seen that while Webster Davis was Assistant Secretary of the Interior Department of the United States he was disloyal to his government, and I want the people of the United States to know it."

