The Politician and the Statesman by Iris Baird

Speaker of the House Joseph Cannon, and the lumbermen, were both targets of attack by those who were trying to get national forests established in the eastern United States. In both cases, the attacks were probably not entirely justified. For the lumbermen, thanks to the work of such organizations as the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests and the New Hampshire Timberland Owners Association, the record has been amended. For Cannon, known as "Uncle Joe" or "Vinegar Joe" depending on the politics of the speaker, the record still casts him as a determined obstructionist.

John Wingate Weeks, whose masterful orchestration of the drive to pass the Act which bears his name, and Joe Cannon had much in common. Both were conservative Republicans, "standpatters" as they were called, as opposed to the "progressive" wing of the party.

And yet, Cannon paved the way for Weeks' successful effort to enact the Weeks Law. He did this in two ways. One has been fairly well noted in recent history, since he was the one who appointed Weeks to the Agriculture Committee and assured him that if he could "prepare a bill which you as a business man are willing to support, I will do the best I can to get consideration for it in the House."

Cannon did one other thing which is not often noticed. He it was who asked the House Judiciary Committee to determine whether or not the purchase of land for national forests was constitutional. The Committee ruled that it was not, but noted an exception. If the lands were purchased in order to protect the headwaters of navigable rivers, it was constitutional under the Constitution's commerce clause.

So, how to explain the difference between the two men? Perhaps their own words, and those of men who knew them best, can shed some light.

L. White Busbey, Cannon's private secretary for 20 years, writing his biography, with the active participation of Cannon himself, noted that Cannon saw it as "his duty to his party to resort to any legitimate tactic to obstruct the majority." (Or indeed, to "work together against the opposing party, even though on a personal basis they were able to be friends and associates.")

Week' perspective, also as expressed by his biographer Charles G. Washburn, a long time friend, was that "he was noted for his disregard of form and precedent. Once convinced that an object was desirable and the means of securing it proper, he was little concerned over any objection that it was novel and untried or that it was of doubtful constitutionality." Weeks was instrumental in drafting legislation on many subjects, including tariffs, currency regulation, banking, and military affairs. Cannon in his entire career introduced only one bill in the House.

Cannon was a politician, and an effective one at that. Weeks may justly be called a statesman.