

Vice Presidents of the United States William A. Wheeler (1877-1881)

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Introduction by Mark O. Hatfield.



Who is Wheeler?

—Rutherford B. Hayes

In the wake of the Grant-era scandals, both the Republican and Democratic parties searched for untarnished candidates as they approached the presidential election of 1876. Democrats chose one of their most prominent leaders, New York Governor Samuel J. Tilden, who had won national attention by taking on the Tweed Ring in New York City. Republicans passed over their party's bigger names, men who had been stained by various exposés in the press, and settled instead on a ticket of Ohio Governor Rutherford B. Hayes and New York Representative William A. Wheeler. Although neither man was very well known to the nation, both had reputations for scrupulous honesty and independence. If history remembers William Wheeler at all, it is for his character. In his introduction to John F. Kennedy's *Profiles in Courage*, the historian Allan Nevins reproduced a colloquy between Wheeler and Senator Roscoe Conkling, the Republican political boss of New York. "Wheeler, if you will act with us, there is nothing in the gift of the State of New York to which you may not reasonably aspire," Conkling tempted; to which Wheeler replied, "Mr. Conkling, there is nothing in the gift of the State of New York which will compensate me for the forfeiture of my self-respect."¹

A Cautious Politician

Among the stranger individuals to occupy the vice-presidency, William Almon Wheeler seems to have been scarred by his father's ill health, which left him neurotically obsessed with his own well-being. An excessively cautious politician—to the point of timidity—he straddled the various factions in his party, avoided all commitments, and advanced himself politically while covering himself with obscurity. William Wheeler was born on June 30, 1819, in

the upstate New York town of Malone, near the Canadian border. His father, Almon Wheeler, had attended the University of Vermont and was a promising young attorney and local postmaster who died at the age of thirty-seven, when William was just eight years old. Left in debt, his mother, Eliza, took in boarders from the nearby Franklin Academy to support her two children. William attended the academy, farmed, and did whatever he could to save money for college. At nineteen, with the help of a loan from a friend, he entered the University of Vermont in Burlington. There he studied for two years, at times living on bread and water, until "an affection of the eyes" caused him to drop out.²

He returned to Malone, taught school and studied law. In 1845, shortly after he was admitted to the bar, he married one of his former students, Mary King. A Whig, Wheeler was soon running for office. He became town clerk, school commissioner, and school inspector. In later years he recalled that the thirty dollars a year he earned as town clerk, recording deeds and laying out roads, "were of more value to me than the thousands I have since attained." He served as district attorney for Franklin County from 1846 to 1849 and, from 1850 to 1851, served in the state assembly, where he chaired the ways and means committee. Joining the new Republican party, he moved to the state senate in 1858 and was elected its president pro tempore. Wheeler also conducted a private law practice until "throat trouble" interfered with his courtroom advocacy and convinced him to abandon the law in favor of running a local bank and serving as a railroad trustee, positions that he held until "driven from business in 1865, by broken health."³

A Silent Member of the House

Wheeler was elected to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1861 to 1863. He then returned to New York, where he chaired the state constitutional convention, a prestigious body whose members included two future presidential candidates, Horace Greeley and Samuel J. Tilden. Although Wheeler spoke infrequently, his words carried weight, and he gained high marks for fairness as presiding officer. In 1868 he again won election to the House, where he chaired the Committee on Pacific Railroads. It was at this time that Iowa Representative Oakes Ames, acting as an agent for the *Crédit Mobilier*, the construction company for the Union Pacific Railroad, began spreading railroad stock among high-ranking members of Congress, "where it would do the most good." Wheeler not only refused all stocks offered to him, but resigned his chairmanship to avoid further temptation. In 1872, when the *Crédit Mobilier* scandal broke in the newspapers, Wheeler remained clean as some of the most prominent members of Congress were caught with the stock. His rectitude even inspired him to oppose an appropriation to construct a post office in his home town of Malone.

Wheeler stayed aloof from the New York state political machine run by Senator Roscoe Conkling. In 1872, Conkling maneuvered to make Wheeler Speaker of the House in place of his hated rival, James G. Blaine. Wheeler declined to have anything to do with the scheme and supported Blaine, who apparently had promised, but never delivered on the promise, to make Wheeler chairman of the House Appropriations Committee. Wheeler also cited his poor health as a reason for not putting himself forward, and only the persuasiveness of his wife and friends kept him from retiring from Congress.⁴

In the House, Wheeler generally kept silent unless he was managing a bill, but then he always proved to be well prepared and highly effective. He remained in the political shadows until 1874, when as a member of the House Committee on Southern Affairs he investigated a disputed election in Louisiana. The election of 1872 had torn apart the Republican party in the state, with half of the party machinery supporting William Pitt Kellogg for governor, and the other half joining the Democrats on a fusion ticket. The election board declared the Democratic candidates the victors, but Republicans refused to concede. They created their own election board, which gave the governorship to Kellogg and a number of disputed elections to their candidates for the state legislature. After President Grant recognized Kellogg as governor, a battle erupted on the streets of New Orleans that left fifty-six people dead. A mob ousted Kellogg, but federal troops restored him to office.⁵

The Wheeler Compromise

Traveling to Louisiana, Wheeler and other committee members heard highly emotional and contradictory testimony from both sides. It was Wheeler who forged the compromise that let Kellogg remain as governor and allowed the committee to arbitrate the disputed seats in the legislature, most of which went to the Democrats. In March 1875, the

House endorsed the "Wheeler compromise," a plan which essentially undid federal Reconstruction of the state and held out hope for peace between the North and South a decade after the Civil War had ended. When Louisiana Democrats violated the spirit of the compromise by unseating even more Republican state legislators, in order to elect a Democrat to the U.S. Senate, most northern politicians and newspapers ignored the violations. The North seemed relieved to escape the responsibilities of Reconstruction. Representative Wheeler observed that northerners had expected too much from the South and declared that it was time to admit the failure of efforts to promote peace with the sword. His compromise taught northern Republicans how to cut their losses. Thereafter the party concentrated on preserving its power in the North while scaling down its military efforts in the South, even if that meant abandoning the political rights of the freedman.⁶

Wheeler was content in his life as a member of the House of Representatives and dreamed of becoming Speaker. However, in early 1876 some Republicans began talking of him as a candidate for president or vice president. The politically astute manager of the Western Associated Press, William Henry Smith, predicted that the GOP ticket would be Hayes and Wheeler. Upon hearing this forecast, Ohio Governor Rutherford B. Hayes wrote to his wife, "I am ashamed to say, Who is Wheeler?" Because Wheeler had served in the House from 1861 to 1863 and again from 1869 to 1877, while Hayes had been a representative during the intervening years from 1865 to 1867, there had been no overlap in their service.⁷

A Quiet Candidate

At the Republican convention in Cincinnati, Wheeler received a handful of votes for president, but the major contest was between Senator Conkling, House Speaker Blaine, and Governor Hayes. When Conkling's nomination seemed impossible, his party machine, the "stalwarts," threw their support to Hayes as the best way of stopping Blaine, leader of the "half-breed" faction. Having helped Hayes win the presidential nomination, the stalwarts considered the vice-presidency theirs to name and they put forward New York Representative Stewart Woodford. The half-breeds, however, wanted the stalwarts off the ticket. Massachusetts half-breed Senator George F. Hoar promoted his friend Wheeler as a man of high moral character. Hoar approached the distinguished author James Russell Lowell, a member of the Massachusetts delegation, on Wheeler's behalf. When Lowell replied that he was unwilling to vote for anyone about whom he knew so little, Hoar responded, "Mr. Lowell, Mr. Wheeler is a very sensible man. He knows *The Bigelow Papers* by heart." Lowell, the author of *The Bigelow Papers*, said nothing but later was overheard telling other delegates, "I understand that Mr. Wheeler is a very sensible man."⁸

Former Vermont Senator and Representative Luke Poland placed Wheeler's name in nomination, while Conkling's lieutenant Tom Platt nominated Woodford. The publicity Wheeler had received for his compromise, coupled with his independence from the Conkling machine, appealed to the delegates, who voted for him overwhelmingly. When the roll call of the states reached New York, the stalwarts realized they were about to lose and withdrew Woodford's name. The New York delegation voted unanimously for Wheeler—a bitter pill for Conkling's supporters to swallow.⁹

During the campaign, Democrats vainly sought scandals in the pasts of the Republican candidates but could find nothing that would tar Wheeler's reputation. One campaign biography boasted that, at the time when it was fashionable for congressmen "to dabble in railroad stocks and bonds," Wheeler had neither bought nor sold a share of stock or a single bond in any Pacific railroad. He had served his country in Congress for ten years without adding to the personal wealth that he brought to Washington. "With simple tastes," his biographer extolled, "he has never been greedy of gain either for its own sake or for the luxury it would buy. As a legislator, the thought never occurred to him that his influence could bring riches, and not the shadow of a stain rests on his name." Wheeler had also voted against the "salary grab"—an unpopular attempt by members of Congress to raise their pay retroactively—and refused the increase in his own salary.¹⁰

Wheeler also appealed to the professional songwriters, who in 1876 were just taking over the business of writing campaign songs from the amateurs who had long prevailed. The Tin Pan Alley men leaned towards puns, alliteration and other word-plays in their songs. Thus the sheet music for "We'll Go for Hayes! We'll Wheel'er in on Time" showed Wheeler pushing Hayes in a wheelbarrow toward the White House.¹¹

While Wheeler did not detract from the ticket, he added little to it and even refused to campaign. The Democratic vice-presidential nominee Thomas Hendricks spoke in the swing state of Indiana, but Wheeler declined all invitations from the Republicans. In a remarkable reply to James G. Blaine's invitation to speak to a series of mass meetings in Maine, Wheeler cited his frailty and insomnia as excuses:

I greatly regret my physical inability to do little in the way of speaking in his canvass. But I have no reserve of strength to draw upon. I was driven from business in 1865, by broken health and have never been strong since. . . . My trouble for years has been wakefulness at night. No resident of the grave or a lunatic asylum has suffered more from this cause than I have. Speaking, and the presence of crowds, excite me and intensify my wakefulness. . . . Gov. Hayes wrote me, asking me to go to Indiana and Ohio, to which I answered as I write you. . . . I regret that I was nominated. You know I did not want the place. I should have gone back to the House, and into a Republican majority. I should have almost to a certainty, been its Speaker, which I would greatly prefer to being *laid away*.¹²

All that Wheeler would do was to issue the traditional letter of acceptance of his nomination. The conciliatory tone of that letter toward the South was seen as part of the Republicans' strategy of trying to detach the old southern Whigs from the southern Democrats. Candidate Hayes issued a similarly ambiguous endorsement of reconciliation with the South. At the Republican convention, the civil rights leader Frederick Douglass had challenged the delegates to decide whether they meant to uphold for blacks the rights they had written into the Constitution or whether they could "get along without the vote of the black man in the South." The Hayes and Wheeler ticket suggested that the party had chosen the latter course.¹³

The Contested Election

On election night, it looked as if Tilden and Hendricks had defeated Hayes and Wheeler, especially after Democrats captured Wheeler's home state of New York. Republican newspapers conceded the election, but Zachariah Chandler, chairman of the Republican National Committee, saw hope in the southern electors and dispatched telegrams to party leaders in those southern states still under Reconstruction rule, alerting them that the election was still undecided. Three southern states each sent two sets of electoral ballots, one set for Tilden and one set for Hayes. One of the disputed states was Louisiana, where only a year earlier Wheeler had found evidence that the state board of election had produced fraudulent returns. Now his election as vice president depended upon that same board.¹⁴ After a specially created electoral commission awarded all of the disputed ballots to Hayes, a joint session of Congress still had to count the ballots, and there was talk of angry Democrats marching on Washington by the thousands to prevent this "steal" of the election. To avoid bloodshed, friends of both candidates met at the Wormley Hotel in Washington in late February 1877. There they agreed to a compromise that settled the election and ended Reconstruction. In return for Hayes' election, Republicans offered federal funds to build railroads through the ravaged South and otherwise restore the southern economy, promised to appoint a southerner to the cabinet, and—most important—pledged to remove all federal troops from the southern states. When members of the Democratic majority in the House of Representatives still tried to block the counting of the electoral ballots, a Louisiana representative assured them that an acceptable arrangement had been negotiated at the Wormley Hotel. The revolt fizzled, and at 4 a.m. on March 2, senators marched to the House chamber to declare Hayes president. Hayes upheld the bargain and removed the federal troops, abandoning black voters to disfranchisement and segregation.¹⁵

Hymn Singing and Square Talk

Although they had not known each other before their nomination, Hayes and Wheeler developed an unusually friendly relationship while in office. The Hayes family—scorned by many Washington politicians for their old-fashioned manner and strict adherence to temperance—became a surrogate family to the lonely vice president, a sixty-year old widower with no children. The vice president was fond of hymn singing, and each Sunday evening the Hayes family invited Wheeler and a few other friends to the White House library, where Secretary of the Interior Carl Schurz played the piano and the vice president distributed copies of *The Presbyterian Hymn and Tune Book* for "a revelry of sweet sounds and mingling of souls."¹⁶

Wheeler also provided Hayes with advice about appointments, recommending that selections be made according to "personal character, recognized capacity and experience." He especially warned Hayes about the hostility that the

Conkling machine exhibited toward the new administration. At one point, Hayes noted in his diary that Wheeler was critical of cabinet members who, when approached by jobseekers, responded equivocally. "When there is no hope tell the man so," Wheeler asserted. "He will be disappointed at the time, but it is the best way." Hayes observed that Wheeler was right. "Prompt and square talk is in the long run safest and is just to the parties concerned. I must also bear this in mind."¹⁷

Despite their friendship, Hayes rarely consulted Wheeler and did not include him within his circle of advisers. Wheeler spent his vice-presidency presiding over Senate debates, a job he found dull and monotonous, comparing his role of repeating set phrases to that of a parrot. During his term, he cast six tie-breaking votes, including one that helped his old friend William Pitt Kellogg to be seated as senator from Louisiana. Wheeler grew particularly frustrated at being left out of both cabinet meetings and party caucuses and feeling that he was generally ignored. The greatest trial of being vice president, he once commented, was attending church. "I hear the minister praying for the President, his Cabinet, both Houses of Congress, the Supreme Court, the governors and legislatures of all the states and every individual heathen . . . and find myself wholly left out."¹⁸

A Forgotten Man

Wheeler made it easy for his nation to forget that he existed. A more assertive man might have risen to lead the opposition to the Conkling machine, but Wheeler contented himself with sneering at Conkling rather than challenging him. The vice president urged President Hayes not to appear weak and yielding to Conkling. But when Hayes took on Conkling by removing his lieutenants Chester A. Arthur and Alonzo Cornell from their lucrative posts at the New York customhouse, Wheeler disapproved the action because he feared it might split the party. Wheeler even endorsed Cornell's candidacy for governor of New York.¹⁹

In December 1879, the Republican National Committee met in Washington, as a first step toward nominating the presidential ticket for 1880. Hayes had let it be known that he would not stand for a second term, and sentiments within the party seemed to be roughly divided between Grant and Blaine. In his diary Hayes commented, "If New York could with a fair degree of unity, present a man like say the Vice President . . . he would probably be nominated." But there was no hope of the factions in New York uniting, especially over someone who opposed Roscoe Conkling.²⁰ At the convention, James A. Garfield defeated Grant, Blaine, and other candidates on the thirty-sixth ballot to become the Republican nominee. He and his running mate Chester A. Arthur went on to win the election.

In March 1881, Wheeler turned over the vice-presidency to his successor, Conkling's confederate Chet Arthur. Within months, Conkling launched his last great political battle against the new president. In May, both New York senators, Conkling and Tom Platt, dramatically resigned and returned to Albany, where they expected the state legislature to reelect them as a sign of solidarity in their patronage struggles with Garfield. Instead, the legislature rebelled. A number of candidates entered the Senate race, including former Vice President Wheeler. On several ballots, Wheeler ran ahead of Conkling. Although neither won the election, Conkling's biographer concluded that "the ambition of former Vice-President Wheeler was a major contributing cause" to Conkling's defeat. Crushed by his defeat and by Garfield's assassination, Conkling retired from politics to a lucrative Wall Street law practice. William A. Wheeler also retired from public life, turning down an appointment from President Chester Arthur to serve on a commission to study the tariff because, he said, his health was not up to it. He died on June 4, 1887, in Malone, a forgotten man.²¹

Notes:

1. John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage* (New York, 1956), p. xiv.
2. William Dean Howells, *Sketch of the Life and Character of Rutherford B. Hayes, Also a Biographical Sketch of William A. Wheeler* (New York, 1876), pp. 5-7; see also James T. Otten, "Grand Old Partyman: William A. Wheeler and the Republican Party, 1850-1880," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of South Carolina, 1976), pp. 1-11, 285-86.
3. Howells, p. 10; Keith Ian Polakoff, *The Politics of Inertia: The Election of 1876 and the End of Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1973), p. 123.
4. Otten, pp. 63-79, 288-89
5. Polakoff, p. 181.

6. Ibid; William Gillette, *Retreat from Reconstruction, 1869-1879* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1979), pp. 133, 294.
7. Howells, p. 12; Polakoff, p. 37.
8. Herbert Eaton, *Presidential Timber: A History of Nominating Conventions, 1868-1960* (New York, 1964), pp. 55-59; Richard E. Welch, Jr., *George Frisbie Hoar and the Half-Breed Republicans* (Cambridge, MA, 1971), p. 55.
9. Polakoff, pp. 67-68; David M. Jordan, *Roscoe Conkling of New York: Voice in the Senate* (Ithaca, NY, 1971), p. 241.
10. Howells, pp. 16-17, 20.
11. Irwin Silber, *Songs America Voted By* (Harrisburg, PA, 1971), p. 115.
12. Mark Wahlgren Summers, *The Era of Good Stealings* (New York, 1993), p. 281; Polakoff, p. 123.
13. Gillette, pp. 304, 419.
14. Ibid., p. 332; Otten, p. 218..
15. for details of the compromise, see C. Vann Woodward, *Reunion and Reaction; The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction* (New York, 1991; reprint of 1951 edition); Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York, 1988); and Polakoff. See also Chapter 21 of this volume, "Thomas Andrews Hendricks," pp. 5-6.
16. Kenneth E. Davison, *The Presidency of Rutherford B. Hayes* (Westport, CT, 1972), pp. 84-85.
17. Otten, p. 171; T. Harry Williams, ed., *Hayes: The Diary of a President, 1875-1881* (New York, 1964), pp. 69, 129.
18. Howells, p. 26; Otten, pp. 176, 181, 292; U.S., Congress, Senate, *The Senate, 1789-1989*, by Robert C. Byrd, S. Doc. 100-20, 100th Cong., 1st sess., vol. 4, *Historical Statistics, 1789-1992*, 1993, p. 644.
19. Williams, ed., p. 302; Otten, pp. 209, 256, 263.
20. Williams, ed., pp. 256-57.
21. Jordan, pp. 407-8; Otten, pp. 277-79.