A. K. McCLURE AND THE PEOPLE'S PARTY IN THE CAMPAIGN OF 1860

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POLITICAL campaigns usually are considered important mainly for the election results that follow. Yet the campaign itself can have lasting effects, both in the discussion of issues and in the relations developed among politicians under stress. This was notably true of the campaign of 1860 in Pennsylvania. This campaign was to have strong effects on the future of the Republican Party in Pennsylvania, and on the state's attitude toward the issues leading to the Civil War. It affected the career of nearly every prominent Republican politician, but none more than that of young Alexander K. McClure, state chairman of the party during this critical time.

A. K. McClure, by 1860, was already well known as one of the state's shrewdest and most ambitious young politicians. At the age of eighteen he had founded his own newspaper at Mifflintown, and become a spokesman for the anti-slavery Whigs. Six years later he took over the Whig newspaper at Chambersburg, where he achieved financial success and leadership in community affairs. By 1857 he had become a lawyer and won election to the legislature. There he would be a leader of the anti-Democratic forces for several years. With the decline of the Whig Party, he had dallied briefly with the new Know-Nothing movement, then joined in the effort to unite Whigs, Know Nothings, and anti-Nebraska Democrats under the Republican label. In 1860, still just thirty-two years of age, he was called to be state chairman of his party. This meant that he would be in charge of the campaign for the election of a governor in October, as well as for the presidential vote in November.

McClure faced many difficulties in his position as party chair-

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The anti-Democratic forces of Pennsylvania still did not officially bear the name "Republican." The effort to unite various factions had led, in 1858, to the adoption of the name "People's Party." Though successful in the state elections of 1858 and 1859, the People's Party was still a conglomeration of diverse elements. The name was seldom used in northern and western Pennsylvania, where the opponents of the Democrats called themselves Republicans. But in Philadelphia the pure Republicans were outnumbered by the Know-Nothing or "American" element and the Whig remnants, who were interested mainly in the tariff and would not support any radical anti-slavery policy. John Brown's raid had frightened the city's conservative businessmen, who depended heavily on southern trade.

Not only was the People's Party divided on issues, but its leadership was bitterly split between the followers of Senator Simon Cameron and the friends of Andrew Gregg Curtin. Since his days as a "boy editor," A. K. McClure had been Curtin's close friend and political ally. When the People's state convention met in February, every step in the proceedings brought a sharp contest between the Cameron and Curtin forces. Cameron secured the party endorsement as Pennsylvania's choice for the presidency, but Curtin won the nomination for governor. At the national Republican convention in Chicago, Curtin, McClure, and their friends ignored the claims of Cameron and devoted themselves mainly to blocking the nomination of William H. Seward of New York.

In the face of this split in the People's Party, the Pennsylvania Democrats appeared to be united for the campaign. One week after Curtin's nomination, they had put up Henry D. Foster, who was acceptable both to the anti-Lecompton Democrats and to the regulars. Furthermore, the new Constitutional Union Party, organized early in 1860, threatened to draw away some of the more conservative adherents of the People's Party.

In the midst of these difficulties, McClure was called to lead the campaign as Chairman of the People's State Committee. Curtin insisted that he take the place, and Cameron gave his consent. The appointment of the rest of the state committee led to a factional struggle which drove McClure to exasperation. "I have had but one purpose," he told Cameron, "to harmonize our elements on Curtin at home & on you at Chicago; & if we had you & Curtin..."
both in Kamchatka for a few weeks we could do it easily." Finally, after an embarrassing delay, the committee was announced. Though neither the Cameron nor the Curtin faction was satisfied, the committee represented a fair balance between the two. McClure had succeeded in including several of his closest political friends.  

A few days after returning from the Chicago convention, McClure began organizing for the campaign. He stayed at the Girard House in Philadelphia, while the state committee set up headquarters in Dr. David Jayne's Commonwealth Building. Philadelphia was hardly the center of population for Pennsylvania; but it was the center of wealth, which was more important to McClure. By the middle of June, he and a few helpers had assembled some second-hand desks and chairs and had begun work.  

From the start of the campaign, McClure recognized that he must not only win votes, but must make sure that his contribution was known and appreciated by those who would come into power. Beginning in June, he wrote to Lincoln about once a week until the November election, reporting the progress of the campaign. Usually he devoted more space to the difficulties of the Democrats than to the work of the People's Party. Lincoln always sent a brief reply, showing by his inquiries and suggestions that he appreciated the practical problems of the campaign.  

Besides an organization, the state committee needed a campaign slogan. Immediately after Curtin's nomination, McClure had proclaimed protection as the great issue of the campaign. The tariff plank in the Chicago platform was not as strong as Pennsylvania's [2]

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1 A. K. McClure to Simon Cameron, Philadelphia, April 7 [1860], Simon Cameron Papers, Library of Congress.  
2 Harrisburg Telegraph, April 20, 1860; Philadelphia Press, April 23, 1860. McClure later stated (Old Time Notes of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1905, I, 401) that a majority of the committee were Cameron men. But during the campaign his friend John M. Pomeroy said that "the Committee leans to the Curtin rather than the Cameron wing" (John M. Pomeroy to A. Lincoln, Philadelphia, August 27, 1860, Robert Todd Lincoln Collection, Library of Congress.)  
3 Philadelphia Press, June 9, 1860; Chambersburg Times, June 15, 1860; McClure, op. cit., I, 412, 414.  
4 McClure, Lincoln and Men of War Times (Philadelphia, 1892), 44; McClure, Our Presidents and How We Make Them (New York, 1905), 177-178. McClure's letters to Lincoln are in the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection. Lincoln's letters to McClure were destroyed by fire when a Confederate raiding party burned Chambersburg in 1864.  
5 Philadelphia Press, February 27, 1860; Chambersburg Times, March 2, 1860.
Republicans would have liked, but in June the defeat of the Morrill Bill for a higher tariff gave new strength to the demands for protection. The tariff would draw the votes of Philadelphia and the industrial areas. For the rest of the state, the People's Party could depend on the Republican stand against the extension of slavery. So the slogan inscribed on the campaign banners became "Freedom and Protection."

During the summer McClure extended his political contacts throughout the state. By the first of August he had organizations in every county, and by the end of the month the state committee was in direct contact with every election district—the first time such a thorough organization had ever been attempted. The local groups consisted entirely of unpaid volunteers. They performed the bulk of the labor of organizing meetings and clubs, including the "Wideawakes" who marched in costume with banners and lanterns. Beginning in August, the county organizations made careful canvasses and reported their probable vote to state headquarters.6

McClure's committee helped provide speakers for local meetings, and arranged tours for well-known political orators both from within and from outside Pennsylvania. McClure had to take great care in placing his speakers. As he explained to Lincoln, protection was the great issue in the eastern, southern, and central counties. But "in the West," he said, "the Tariff is regarded as of no greater importance than the Slave aggressions; and in the North the Tariff is but tolerated, and the great question of Freedom overshadows all others." After one popular orator had started on a tour of the center of the state, party workers protested so strongly against his radical anti-slavery speeches that McClure had to transfer him to David Wilmot's area in the north, where he could do no harm.7

The state committee used the local organizations to distribute masses of campaign literature. McClure assembled lists of speeches available from the national committee, and had others printed, so that party workers could make their choice. Political tracts, like

7 A. K. McClure to A. Lincoln, Chambersburg, June 16, 1860, Robert Todd Lincoln Collection; McClure, Old Time Notes, I, 443-444.
speakers, had to be suited to the locality. By the latter part of August, McClure was sending out five thousand documents a day.8

The committee carried on a great deal of correspondence, much of which McClure handled in his own dashing script. At the height of the campaign the committee sent out from one to two hundred letters a day. Usually a Republican Congressman was on hand to affix his frank, thus avoiding the payment of postage. But Philadelphia's Democratic postmaster caused the People's committee great trouble. Many letters were delayed, and at least eight sent out by McClure went to Europe, returning after the election. Important letters had to be disguised or mailed from outlying towns.

The unreliability of the Democratic postal service was a minor problem compared with McClure's difficulties in raising funds. "We are very poor," he reported dolefully to Lincoln. "Our merchants are against us, & our manufacturers are bankrupt." The committee's total receipts were only about $12,000, including $2,000 in free rent for their headquarters. About $3,000 went for stationery and printing, and the remainder for the expenses of organization and campaign meetings.9

In view of Pennsylvania's political importance, McClure expected help from the Republican National Committee. But when he called on its chairman, Governor Edwin D. Morgan of New York, he met a cold reception and an abrupt refusal to supply funds. McClure blamed this hostility on resentment over the defeat of Seward at the Chicago convention. But McClure's enemies attributed all his difficulties in raising funds to a general distrust of his integrity. Specifically, they charged that he had misused some money he received from New York for the Philadelphia municipal election in April. Simon Cameron, disliking outside interference in his domain, did not help matters by assuring Lincoln that "We need no help here, of any kind. . . . We will take care of Pennsylvania."10

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9 Chambersburg Repository and Transcript, December 12, 1860; A. K. McClure to A. Lincoln, Philadelphia, August 21, 1860, Robert Todd Lincoln Collection; McClure, Lincoln and Men of War Times, 42; McClure, Old Time Notes, I, 413-414, 417-418.
10 McClure, Old Time Notes, I, 418-419; McClure, Recollections, 219-220; McClure, Lincoln and Men of War Times, 42; Simon Cameron to A. Lincoln, Lochiel [Harrisburg], August 1, 1860, Robert Todd Lincoln Collection.
From the outset of the campaign, McClure had tried to forestall any conflict with Cameron and his friends. After the Chicago convention he wrote to Cameron, professing to sympathize with his disappointment and deploring the lack of unity among the Pennsylvania delegates. He suggested that Cameron make some campaign speeches in those parts of the state where his limited acquaintance had “allowed old prejudices to be kept alive against you.”

But the Cameron men soon began to fulfill McClure's worst fears. They claimed to find great dissatisfaction in Philadelphia. Russell Errett, editor of the Pittsburgh Gazette, warned Cameron that “unless McClure is forced out of his position . . . Curtin cannot be elected.” He feared that the Constitutional Union Party, supporting the Bell-Everett presidential ticket, might make a third nomination for governor if something were not done. Cameron accused two of McClure's prominent friends in Philadelphia, William B. Mann and Henry C. Carey, of spreading slanders against him.

On July 10 the state committee met at the mountain resort of Cresson. In spite of McClure's professions of good will, he and Curtin had laid careful plans to prevent Cameron's friends from gaining control. McClure believed that the latter would try to create an executive committee with its own treasurer, which would take charge of the campaign and leave him a mere figurehead. When the politicians arrived at Cresson, the evening before the meeting, they found a generous entertainment prepared. The card tables were busy until nearly daylight, and liquor flowed freely. When McClure called the meeting to order the next morning, the Curtin men, forewarned, were all present, while most of Cameron's friends still lay in bed. The committee passed a routine set of resolutions and then quickly adjourned. They could meet only at the call of the chairman; and for the remainder of the campaign,

11 A. K. McClure to Simon Cameron, Philadelphia, June 6 [1860], Simon Cameron Papers.
12 Russell Errett to Simon Cameron, Harrisburg, June 23, 1860, Simon Cameron Papers.
13 A. K. McClure to Simon Cameron, Chambersburg, June 28, July 2 [1860], Simon Cameron Papers; John M. Pomeroy to A. Lincoln, Philadelphia, August 27, 1860, Robert Todd Lincoln Collection.
in spite of the protests of Cameron men, McClure never found it necessary to call another meeting.  

Late in July Cameron's partisans devised another plan for undermining McClure. Their instrument was the Philadelphia Republican Club, which they planned to use to collect and disburse campaign funds throughout the state. Curtin agreed to the project, but McClure felt differently. He told Cameron, "I could not but regard such a course as a personal reflection upon myself," and pointed out that the new organization would only lead to a wasteful duplication of effort. McClure's vigorous protest led to the abandonment of the movement.

Lincoln and his advisers soon learned of the friction in Pennsylvania. Joseph Casey of Harrisburg sent the details to Leonard Swett, who forwarded them to Springfield. Russell Errett of Pittsburgh told a fellow-editor, Joseph Medill of the Chicago Tribune, that "confidence is lost in the State Committee, and the monied men of the party will not entrust it with money." Medill sent the letter to Lincoln, with further particulars. Friends in New York had told him that after receiving $10,000 there, McClure "put the money in his own pocket and hardly used a dollar of it for the purpose it was subscribed."

To investigate the Pennsylvania situation and the general state of the campaign in the East, Lincoln sent his portly lieutenant, Judge David Davis. At the Chicago convention Davis had established friendships in the Cameron camp. On his visit to Pennsylvania, he consulted the same men almost exclusively. At Harrisburg he had a long conference with Cameron himself. On August 7 he attended a meeting of Cameron and his friends in Philadelphia, where they made fresh plans for a second state committee. Among the leaders in the movement were John P. Sanderson of

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14 A. K. McClure to A. Lincoln, Chambersburg, July 7, and Philadelphia, July 18, 1860, Robert Todd Lincoln Collection; Chambersburg Repository and Transcript, July 18, 1860; McClure, Old Time Notes, I, 409-410.

15 A. G. Curtin to Simon Cameron, Bellefonte, July 22, 1860; A. K. McClure to Simon Cameron, Philadelphia, July 31, 1860; Simon Cameron to A. K. McClure, Lochiel [Harrisburg], August 1, 1860 (copy); and A. K. McClure to Simon Cameron, Philadelphia, August 2, 1860; all in the Simon Cameron Papers.

the Philadelphia Daily News, Russell Errett, Joseph Casey, David Wilmot, and several Philadelphia Republicans. Davis then went on to New York and left the Pennsylvania politicians to settle their own quarrels.17

Cameron's "Campaign Committee" had little success. After more than two weeks' delay, they issued a circular urging the importance of Curtin's election and the duty of every election district to organize—a work which McClure's State Committee already had virtually completed. A canvass revealed that local politicians wanted $10,000 for doubtful counties. But raising the money proved more difficult than the Cameron men had anticipated. Henry C. Carey, Cameron's bitter foe, claimed that "They cannot obtain a single dollar . . . for the reason that our people have no confidence in such politicians."18 The new committee, however, blamed their difficulties on McClure. In September Sanderson lamented, "The State Central Committee is doing nothing to help the canvass. Though the members are anxious & have demanded a meeting, with a view of trying to do something, McClure has so far resisted their wishes by refusing to convene them, preferring to stumble on himself without means. . . . Instead of cooperating with our Committee, he does all he can to prevent us from either collecting funds or doing anything else."19

Late in August McClure finally decided that he must mention the local troubles to Lincoln. "I was pained," he wrote, "to learn from an unquestionable source that some of our petty bickerings in this State have been obtruded upon you. Rest assured that there

17 D. Davis to A. Lincoln, Harrisburg, August 5, 1860; William D. Kelley to A. Lincoln, Philadelphia, August 7, 1860; William D. Kelley to N. B. Judd, Philadelphia, August 8, 1860; J. P. Sanderson [to Charles Leib], Philadelphia, August 13, 1860; and D. Davis to A. Lincoln, Scranton, August 12, 1860; all in the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection. In his Lincoln and Men of War Times, 46-47, and Old Time Notes, I, 410-411, McClure related that Davis called on him at his Philadelphia headquarters, made a thorough investigation of the state committee's work, and then told him that it was the best organization he had seen in any state. Certainly Davis must have made some effort to conciliate McClure; but McClure's story is weakened by his statement that Swett was along, which was not the case. Davis' letters to Lincoln told very little about his visit to Philadelphia, as he waited to report orally after returning to Springfield.


19 J. P. Sanderson [to David Davis], Philadelphia, September 8, 1860, Robert Todd Lincoln Collection.
will be no factious war in our ranks." The same day, his old friend John M. Pomeroy wrote a full explanation of the trouble, defending McClure. "The outside Committee," he assured Lincoln, "is a fizzle." Lincoln cautiously told Pomeroy that he had "not heard near so much upon that subject as you probably suppose; and I am slow to listen to criminations among friends, and never expose their quarrels on either side. My sincere wish is that both sides will allow by-gones to be by-gones, and look to the present and future only."\(^\text{20}\)

Both sides indeed were looking to the future, but not in the way that Lincoln intended. Whoever gained credit for winning the election would have a strong claim on the favor of the incoming administration. The battle among Pennsylvania Republicans attracted little public attention, and probably did not affect the party's showing at the polls. But it left bitter feelings which were to break out as soon as the votes were counted.

A month before the October election, campaign activity reached its peak. Noted speakers addressed the people at great mass meetings, accompanied by fireworks and parading Wideawakes. Joseph Casey reported, "Our Committees have not been able to do much, but the people have taken the work in their own hands, and intend to clean out this rotten free trade democracy." As the first detailed estimates of October's vote began to come in, McClure found good cause for optimism. His own state committee and Cameron's "Campaign Committee" agreed in placing Curtin's majority at 15,000 to 17,000.\(^\text{21}\)

In September, McClure abandoned his writing-desk long enough to gain new prominence as a political orator, with two major speeches in Philadelphia. On September 5 he delivered an address on the tariff. Sadly he depicted the fruits of Democratic rule—"our laborers beggared, our commerce crippled, the rude music of our forges and the hum of our spindles silenced." Pennsylvania's vote for governor, he asserted, would "tell for years to come for


\(^{21}\) Jos. Casey to D. Davis, Pottsville, September 16, 1860, and Harrisburg, September 24, 1860, Robert Todd Lincoln Collection.
the weal or woe of our greatest industrial interests." His speech received wide circulation as a campaign document.22

On September 17 Foster answered McClure's attack by defending his tariff record, and the next night, at the Philadelphia Wigwam, McClure replied. In mocking tones he pleaded guilty to "profound ignorance" of Foster's preference for president, or his views on slavery. But he proclaimed as a certainty that the anti-tariff Democrats all over the nation were hoping for Foster's triumph "in order to settle Free Trade as the fixed policy of this government." When McClure referred to Democratic threats of danger to the Union, his audience laughed. Pointing out that the South was the only section advocating disunion, he added, "There is not a disunionist in the South who does not demand the election of Foster, and the defeat of Lincoln."23

On October 5, McClure returned to the Wigwam for his last major speech before the state election. He appealed again for the election of the entire People's ticket as an expression for a protective tariff. With scorn and sarcasm he denounced the fusion attempts of his opponents, ignoring his own efforts, in 1855 and 1856, to unite the Republican and Know-Nothing tickets on a similar basis. In an eloquent conclusion, he reaffirmed his faith in the perpetuity of the Union.24

On Tuesday evening, October 9, McClure and his friends waited anxiously in their Philadelphia headquarters for the election returns. In the early hours they were apprehensive, for Philadelphia went to Foster by nearly 1,900 votes. But as returns came in from the rest of the state, their spirits brightened. From time to time McClure would step out on the balcony to yell out the latest totals to the crowd below. Before midnight he was able to telegraph Lincoln that the state was safe. The official returns gave Curtin 32,000 majority over Foster, exceeding McClure's most hopeful predictions. The Republicans secured eighteen out of twenty-five Con-

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22 Eight-page pamphlet, "Shall Free Trade Be the Settled Policy of the Government?" Also printed in the Chambersburg Repository and Transcript, September 12, 1860.
24 "Fusion in Pennsylvania," an eight-page leaflet giving McClure's speeches of October 5 and 13, 1860.
gressmen and heavy majorities in both houses of the legislature.  

Saturday evening after the election, McClure made his last major speech in Philadelphia. His closing prophecy was more eloquent than accurate. Lincoln’s election, he claimed, would be hailed as “the harbinger of domestic peace, of purity and frugality in every department of power, of a revived and regenerated industry, and as the inauguration, after years of painful discord, of an era of prosperity, of union, of tranquility.”

After the strain of the October contest, the November election was almost an anticlimax. Curtin’s victory, and the inability of Lincoln’s opponents to unite, virtually assured a Republican triumph in Pennsylvania. McClure returned to Chambersburg for several days and prepared to resume his law practice, neglected since June. Pennsylvania justified his confidence by returning 270,000 votes for Lincoln. The People’s Party had almost 95,000 majority over the Democratic fusion vote, which went to Breckinridge.

Lincoln felt grateful to McClure for victory in Pennsylvania, and dealt with him on close terms thereafter. This connection later became one of McClure’s chief claims to fame. But after the election the battle within the People’s Party was to rage more fiercely than ever, until Cameron’s final victory in 1867. Moreover, the campaign of 1860 had done little to prepare the leaders of the People’s Party for the problems of a disintegrating Union.

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