

Hendrick B. Wright and the “Nocturnal Committee”

MARTIN VAN BUREN had been soundly beaten for the presidency in the electoral college of 1840 by a 234-60 vote. Nevertheless, he set out in 1844 to secure the Democratic nomination again. Before the convention, few doubted he would succeed. Instructions from more than three-fourths of the states compelled their delegations to support the former president.¹ His nomination seemed assured. However, secretive political forces worked against Van Buren in this moment of apparent triumph and contrived an audacious political coup.

Maneuvering for control of conventions is not a new concept for the present day observer of political activities. The manner in which Robert Taft lost the nomination in 1952, John Kennedy succeeded in 1960, and Barry Goldwater triumphed in 1964 is well known. Historically, one of the ways factions have sought to control these assemblies has been by capturing the office of temporary chairman. This was particularly true at the 1896, 1912, and 1932 Democratic conventions, and the 1884 and 1916 Republican conventions. The first time it happened was in 1844.

Before the fourth Democratic national assembly convened, the most controversial issue in the country was the question of annexing Texas. The people were demanding a statement from the leading presidential hopefuls indicating on which side of the fence each stood. Henry Clay announced his opposition to annexation because he felt it was inexpedient and would lead to war with Mexico. President Tyler, who had broken with the Whigs and Clay soon after he assumed office upon Harrison's death, had already sent to the Senate a treaty for annexation. Former President Jackson and many Democrats sided with Tyler. Martin Van Buren, however, was reluctant to declare his views, and, when he did, he made a fatal political de-

¹ Henry Minor, *The Story of the Democratic Party* (New York, 1928), 206.

cision. On April 20, 1844, he wrote William Hammett a twenty-page letter setting forth his anti-annexation views. The *Globe* published the letter a week later when the Democratic convention was only a month away, an untimely political move for Van Buren since the letter infuriated many party leaders.

Immediately, a desperate movement began among some Democratic delegates to escape from the instructions of state conventions. Nevertheless, when the national assembly met, Van Buren still had a majority of delegates instructed to vote for him, sufficient to have nominated him on the first ballot.² Some means of defeating the "Little Magician" had to be found, and John C. Calhoun devised a plan which included his own nomination. His representatives came to Baltimore with explicit directions: (1) break up the convention before a nomination is made; (2) failing that, call for a new convention "fresh from the people" for July or August; (3) if a delay should be unpopular, join the Tyler group and nominate Calhoun; (4) select a compromise candidate as a last resort.³ This strategy was well conceived but not put into use since the most effective plan came from yet another faction of the party.

The Tylerites met in Calvert Hall in Baltimore on May 27, 1844, the same city and date of meeting as the Democrats, and debated the advisability of waiting to hear whom the Democrats nominated before they selected their own candidates. Eventually, Tyler was named, but no vice-presidential nominee was chosen "because the convention decided to hold out the olive branch to portions of the Democratic party from which it had no desire to take final leave."⁴ Although Tyler accepted the nomination, he later withdrew from the race before his running mate was selected.

Over in another part of Baltimore, some of the three hundred and twenty-five delegates from all the states except South Carolina were filing into the Egyptian Saloon of Odd Fellows' Hall. One newspaper reported that the assembly was "as respectable and dignified a body as we have ever seen convened on similar or any other occasions."⁵

² Thomas H. Benton, *Thirty Years' View* (New York, 1854), II, 591.

³ Oscar D. Lambert, *Presidential Politics in the United States, 1841-1844* (Durham, N. C., 1936), 147-148.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁵ *Baltimore Sun*, May 28, 1844.

However, another observer on the scene noted that "the very atmosphere is burthened with putrid corruption."⁶

Twenty minutes before the scheduled noon-hour session, Romulus M. Saunders of North Carolina rose from his seat and nominated Hendrick B. Wright for temporary chairman. "Immediately bedlam ensued among the delegates. Van Buren men were indignant; many of their followers had not yet taken their places. They protested bitterly but to no avail. The convention voted to approve of Wright as President."⁷

Wright's election was only one part of the plot which the anti-Van Burenite leaders had machinated. As soon as the temporary chairman assumed his office, he recognized Saunders who once again addressed the convention, but this time to move the adoption of the two-thirds rule. Angry speeches, turbulent words, and heated debates went on all afternoon and into the night. Balloting was not held until the following morning, when Saunders' motion passed by a vote of 168-118. Some of the delegates instructed to vote for Van Buren "took that method of betraying their trust while affecting to fulfill it."⁸ The whole scheme was now in full view and Van Buren was beaten. He could have managed a simple but not a two-thirds majority for the nomination.

The leaders in this plot had worked efficiently. Occasionally, they had help from Van Buren's own party managers, as, for example, when the latter had agreed to postpone the convention from the fall of 1843 to the spring of 1844,⁹ but most of their work was done between the time Van Buren's letter was published in the *Globe* and the opening of the convention, about a month later.

Hendrick Bradley Wright was one of the influential members in this anti-Van Buren movement. Considered a "vain, pompous, selfish, egotistical, ambitious, narrow-minded, bigoted" person,¹⁰ Wright had earned for himself the unenviable title, "Old-Man-Not-

⁶ John O'Sullivan to Van Buren, May 27, 1844, Martin H. Van Buren Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. (Hereinafter cited as Van Buren Papers.)

⁷ Daniel J. Curran, "Hendrick B. Wright: A Study in Leadership," unpublished Doctor's thesis (Fordham University, 1962), 124.

⁸ Benton, 592.

⁹ James C. N. Paul, *Rift in the Democracy* (Philadelphia, 1951), 63-65.

¹⁰ Curran, iv.

Afraid-to-be-Called-Demagogue.”¹¹ Adlai E. Stevenson was later to describe him as “the most venerable in appearance of the Representatives in the Forty-sixth Congress”: Of massive build, stately bearing, lofty courtesy; neatly apparelled in blue broadcloth, with brass buttons appropriately in evidence, he appeared indeed to belong to a past generation of statesmen.

‘And thus he bore without abuse
the grand old name of gentleman.’”¹²

Wright was born in Plymouth, Pennsylvania, on April 24, 1808. He attended Wilkes-Barre Academy in 1824 and excelled in scholarship, public speaking, and theatricals.¹³ Later, he entered Dickinson College, studied law in Wilkes-Barre, and began practicing law there in 1831. Within three years he had become district attorney for Luzerne County and a colonel in the militia. An ardent Jacksonian, he was elected to the state house of representatives in 1841, 1842, and 1843, serving as speaker in the last term. Except for 1864 and 1872, Wright was named a delegate to every national convention from 1844 through 1876.

When Van Buren was defeated in 1840, Wright had decided that the Democrats needed a new leader, his choice falling on James Buchanan.¹⁴ Corresponding with Buchanan in December, 1843, Wright inquired whom the party should support if Buchanan’s nomination could not be secured. The Pennsylvania Senator replied that he did not see how he could win, and suggested that his state support Van Buren, who had overwhelming backing.¹⁵ Reluctantly, Wright agreed, and proposed to the state convention on March 4, 1844, that Pennsylvania should vote as a unit at the national convention for Van Buren. After this convention, Wright notified Van Buren of his support and asked if there was anything further he could do.¹⁶

¹¹ Julian P. Boyd, “Hendrick Bradley Wright,” *Dictionary of American Biography*, Dumas Malone, ed. (New York, 1946), XX, 554.

¹² Adlai E. Stevenson, *Something of Men I Have Known* (Chicago, 1909), 128.

¹³ Boyd, 553.

¹⁴ Curran, 112.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁶ Wright to Van Buren, Mar. 10, 1844, Van Buren Papers.

Then followed Van Buren's Texas letter which made it expedient for Wright to beat a hasty retreat, for it now looked as though the "Little Magician" would lose. Wright wanted very much to be on the winning side; he aspired to be rewarded with the position of Collector of the Port of Philadelphia, a good paying patronage job.¹⁷ Searching for another candidate to support, he became associated with an influential group of Pennsylvanians who also were hostile to Van Buren. Simon Cameron, Richard Rush, and Charles J. Ingersoll were prominent members of this dissident clique. By a secret arrangement, these men agreed to co-operate with an assortment of Congressmen, primarily from the South, known as the "Nocturnal Committee," in blocking Van Buren's nomination. This "Committee," which favored Buchanan,¹⁸ included on its roster Levi Woodbury, Romulus M. Saunders, William Hammett, John Slidell, Andrew Kenedy, Charles J. Ingersoll, and possibly John C. Calhoun and Stephen A. Douglas. Robert J. Walker of Mississippi, called "one of the most effective promoters in American history,"¹⁹ was its leader. The "Nocturnal Committee" effectively agitated the Texas question and originated the idea of using the two-thirds rule to defeat Van Buren.

A few days before the convention, an advance group of the committee met in Washington to prepare the strategy to be used in Baltimore. At this time, Charles J. Ingersoll suggested Wright for the chairmanship of the convention.²⁰ Many years later, William Montgomery wrote to Wright informing him that Stephen A. Douglas had been instrumental in securing this nomination for Wright,²¹ but not much credence can be given this letter since it was obviously written to attract Pennsylvania's support of Douglas in the 1860 Charleston convention.

The various factions of the party met on the eve of the convention to plan their actions. The Cass men caucused in the Exchange Hotel

¹⁷ Paul, 73.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁰ Charles J. Ingersoll to Wright, Washington, D. C., June 2, 1844, Hendrick B. Wright Papers, Princeton University Library.

²¹ Montgomery to Wright, Washington, D. C., Mar. 5, 1860, Hendrick B. Wright Papers, Wyoming Historical and Geological Society, Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

in the quarters of David Porter, Governor of Pennsylvania. These Westerners agreed upon Jesse Bright, Lieutenant Governor of Indiana, as their nominee for the convention chairmanship. "Mainstay of the 'madmen' from Indiana," wrote James Paul, "was Jesse Bright, a political upstart whom Silas Wright accurately appraised as capable of infinite 'mischief' in anything he undertook."²² A second nominee for chairman of the convention came from the Van Buren camp—Henry Hubbard, Governor of New Hampshire. At the final strategy session of the "Nocturnal Committee", the group agreed that the implementation of the two-thirds rule for presidential and vice-presidential nominations was all important to defeat Van Buren. Additional strategy was also required since organizational decisions required only majority votes, and the New Yorker controlled a majority of the delegates. Obviously, his enemies would lose out unless some unusual tactics were devised. It was, therefore, decided to begin the first session early, before all delegates were present, and to elect a chairman who would be favorable to the group's goals. Charles J. Ingersoll's suggestion of Hendrick B. Wright for this position gained acceptance. Saunders was appointed to start the session early, and he and Walker were assigned to lead the floor fight for the two-thirds rule.²³

When the convention met on May 27, the careful tactics of the "Nocturnal Committee" proved successful. To the surprise of almost everyone, Wright was elected chairman. In a letter to James K. Polk, Cave Johnson guessed that Wright's election favored a ticket of Buchanan and Richard M. Johnson.²⁴ John O'Sullivan sullenly wrote Van Buren that "the President [*Wright*] is therefore against us—and Saunder's trick of starting the organization 20 minutes before the hour was successful in giving them the President. I understand he is a freedom rascal [*Wright*], but as likely to betray one way or the other, according to his last ideas of his interest." According to O'Sullivan, Wright would make a "precious vassal" to enemies of

²² Paul, 147.

²³ For comments on this planning session, see James P. Shenton, *Robert John Walker* (New York, 1961), 44; Paul, 147; Curran, 122.

²⁴ Johnson to Polk, Baltimore, May 27, 1844, James K. Polk Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

Van Buren.²⁵ A Philadelphia newspaper, *The Pennsylvanian*, called the convention's action highly "irregular."²⁶

Wright did not make a speech upon assuming the temporary chairmanship; events had to move rapidly. But he did address the assembly when he was elected permanent chairman on May 28, acknowledging the "unexpected honor" conferred upon him, and urging the convention to work for "unanimity of action, conciliation and harmony." Wright implored the gathering to follow the principle of "measures not men." "Gentlemen should willingly surrender their individual preferences and sacrifice their prejudices upon the altar of their common country, and redeem the pledges of their democratic faith."²⁷

Ironically, after the convention Wright joined the ranks of the disappointed office seekers. Encouraged by the many congratulatory letters he had received, including those from James Buchanan, Thaddeus Stevens, and Isaac Fell, Wright had decided to push hard for the job of Collector of the Port of Philadelphia, using his "influence" with President Polk. But the President did not consider Wright seriously, and Henry Horn obtained the office.

Wright's prominence during the convention did win him the secret support of Henry A. P. Muhlenberg for a seat in the national senate, "but Muhlenberg's untimely death and Wright's failure to secure a complimentary nomination for Congress sent those hopes glimmering."²⁸ He ran unsuccessfully for the United States House of Representatives in 1850 and 1854, but was elected in 1852 and again in 1860, when he was nominated by both the Democrats and Republicans. He again served in the national legislature from 1877 to 1881, going down to final defeat at the polls in 1880, when he forsook the Democratic party for the Greenbacks.

The 1844 Democratic national convention, in which he played so prominent a role, represented the first time several factions of the party proposed candidates for the office of chairman. In the three previous assemblies, the arrangements were made by the administra-

²⁵ O'Sullivan to Van Buren, Baltimore, May 27, 1844, Van Buren Papers.

²⁶ *The Pennsylvanian*, May 29, 1844.

²⁷ *Baltimore Sun*, May 29, 1844.

²⁸ Boyd, 553.

tion or its party managers. In 1848, a national committee was formed, and it assumed more and more control over naming convention officers as the years passed. Yet, factionalization of parties into silverites or gold men, progressives or conservatives, radicals or liberals has persisted. As each group has sought to exercise a dominant power over the parliamentary structure of a convention, usually for the ultimate purpose of securing the nomination of its candidate for president, such activities recall Hendrick B. Wright and the "Nocturnal Committee" at Baltimore in 1844.

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