Francis W. Hughes and the 1862 Pennsylvania Election

Election issues in Pennsylvania in 1862 were similar to those elsewhere in the North. Democrats claimed that Lincoln was creating a military despotism, bankrupting the country, and making the war an abolitionist crusade. The resolutions adopted by the Democrats of Blair County, for example, favored the use of all legitimate means to quell the rebellion and to restore the Union as it was, but warned "the present is no time to press [for] emancipation schemes or any other schemes which may be calculated to divide loyal people North or South." As political arrests and newspaper suppressions grew in number, Democrats began to fear that their freedom of speech and their right to vote would be challenged. Moreover, inflation was causing frequent rises in the price of goods. The Harrisburg *Patriot and Union* warned that "a paper dollar is worth only seventy-six cents. This is but one of the crushing consequences of placing the government in the hands of the Abolitionists."* 

Unionists, on the other hand, insisted that the paramount duty of the nation was to defeat the Rebels as quickly as possible. They warned that "no greater calamity could happen . . . than that the State of Pennsylvania should be carried by the Secession Democracy." Such a "disaster," they declared, "would be a worse blow to the National Government [than] . . . the total rout of McClellan's great army."* Unionists dismissed Democratic claims that emancipation would cause hordes of blacks to move to Pennsylvania and compete with white laborers for their jobs, for they believed that the northern climate was not congenial to the slaves; Negroes, they thought, loved "the torrid temperature of the tropics."* Voters were

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told that even voting for "loyal" Democrats would be helping the enemy. These claims and counterclaims were not unlike the campaign rhetoric heard in New York, Illinois, Ohio, and Indiana; but the Keystone State did have a unique issue, the alleged treason of the chairman of the Democratic State Committee, Francis W. Hughes of Pottsville.

In 1862, Francis Wade Hughes was the jovial and ambitious Democratic political boss of Schuylkill County. The forty-five-year-old Hughes was one of the state's best criminal and corporate lawyers. At the age of twenty-six he had been elected to the State Senate by the largest percentage of popular votes cast in Schuylkill County in several decades. Later he served as Attorney General of Pennsylvania and Secretary of the Commonwealth. In the latter position he promoted reform in the state public school system. In 1860, he was elected a delegate to the Democratic National Convention and was instructed to support Stephen Douglas. He preferred John Breckinridge to the "Illinois Giant," and he therefore conveniently forgot his instructions. Several public meetings were held in Schuylkill County to remind him of his duty, but, after he convinced a Pottsville audience that Douglas opposed a protective tariff, his course of action was endorsed. During the presidential canvass of 1860, Hughes worked hard to promote the Breckinridge ticket, claiming that he could never vote for Douglas, whom he called a "free trader."

After the election of Lincoln, Hughes realized that a civil war was probable, and he urged Simon Cameron to support efforts to submit the Crittenden Compromise to the voters of Pennsylvania. Following the firing on Fort Sumter, he contributed $100 to a fund to assist families of volunteer soldiers and he served on local patriotic com-

5 Pittsburgh Dispatch, Sept. 30, 1862.
6 Paul Hartranft, The History of Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania (New York, 1881), 76, 311.
8 George Fort Milton, The Eve of Conflict (Boston, 1934), 460.
9 Pottsville Miners' Journal, June 9, 1860.
10 Ibid., June 30, 1860.
11 Hughes to Cameron, Jan. 23, 1861, Cameron MSS, Dauphin County Historical Society, Harrisburg.
mittees. On July 4, 1861, he addressed a Pottsville rally and condemned secession as illegal and unjustified; he also criticized abolitionists for their divisiveness and fanaticism.\(^\text{12}\)

In 1862, Hughes was selected to preside at the Pennsylvania Democratic Convention and to direct the ensuing political campaign. In addition to such minor state officers as the auditor general and the surveyor general, Pennsylvania voters had to select men to fill all of the state’s congressional seats, all of the positions in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, and one-third of those in the State Senate. Before leaving for Harrisburg, Hughes spoke in Pottsville and denounced the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus and condemned “secessionism.” Resolutions were passed stating “That there can be no Union without the Constitution, and that the enemies of one are the enemies of both. . . . Abolitionists and Secessionists are traitors and each [is] to be alike opposed by the loyal men of the country.”\(^\text{13}\) These resolutions foreshadowed the ones that would be adopted at Harrisburg on July 4.

A sizeable and enthusiastic crowd gathered in the state capital on the anniversary of the nation’s independence. Sensing that victory would be theirs in October, the delegates adopted resolutions criticizing the Administration but supporting efforts to defeat the Rebels and restore “the Union as it was” and preserve “the Constitution as it is.” They equated Unionists and Abolitionists and called their opposition the “party of fanaticism or crime.” The resolutions opposed confiscation and all attempts to give Negroes political or social equality with whites. Before the delegates returned home, Hughes made a speech in which he proclaimed “There are but two parties in the country. One is the friends of the Constitution, and the other its enemies.”\(^\text{14}\)

Hughes wasted no time in launching his campaign. In a widely-circulated letter he warned that unless something was done, foreign intervention in the war was imminent. Later that month he attacked


\(^{13}\) Miners’ Journal, June 7, 1862; Patriot and Union, June 10, 1862.

\(^{14}\) Appleton's Annual Cyclopaedia . . . of the Year 1862 (New York, 1870), II, 703–704; Patriot and Union, July 9, 1862.
the Lincoln Administration for arming Negroes, declaring that this policy was extinguishing the last remnants of Union sentiment in the South. On August 23, he spoke at a mass rally in Philadelphia and sternly warned that "a war of conquest or subjugation means eternal disunion. It means anarchy and despotism."\(^{15}\) His warning that civil liberties were in danger took on special relevance a few days later when one of the speakers at this rally, Charles Ingersoll, was arrested for claiming that the corruption of the Lincoln Administration had no parallel in the "despotisms of the Old World."\(^{16}\)

Hughes also tried to give his campaign national significance. On August 11 he wrote to Secretary of State William Seward and promised that millions of patriotic men would remain loyal to the government if Lincoln "put down the demon of Abolitionism." Eight days later Seward responded that the duty of the government was to suppress the rebellion. He added, "It cannot wisely turn aside from the chase of the fearful demon of Disunion to pursue any inferior demon, whether imaginary or real."\(^{17}\) On August 22, the Pittsburgh Gazette sarcastically asked, "Why did not Mr. Hughes request [of Seward] that [James] Buchanan, and [Clement] Vallandigham, and [Jesse] Bright be invited to take seats in the Cabinet and direct the future policy of the country."\(^{18}\) Hughes made no more efforts to write to government officials.

Unionists were on the defensive. At first they attacked Hughes for having supported Breckinridge in 1860 and declared that he was in sympathy with the Rebels and "just the man to preside over a conclave of Northern sympathizers."\(^{19}\) But as Hughes' campaign became increasingly forceful, it was realized that proof would have

\(^{15}\) Philadelphia Public Ledger, Aug. 25, 1862; Patriot and Union, July 21, Aug. 2, 28, 1862.

\(^{16}\) Public Ledger, Aug. 25, 26, 28, 1862.

\(^{17}\) Dispatch, Aug. 22, 1862; Patriot and Union, Aug. 23, 1862; Miners' Journal, Aug. 23, 1862; Crawford Democrat (Meadville), Sept. 2, 1862; Washington Reporter and Tribune, Sept. 4, 1862.

\(^{18}\) Clement Vallandigham was an outspoken critic of the Lincoln Administration. The Ohio Congressman was the leader of his state's Peace Democracy. In 1863 he was forcibly exiled to the South because he had publicly castigated the war effort. He returned home in 1864 but was not bothered by federal officials. Jesse Bright of Indiana was expelled from the United States Senate on Feb. 5, 1862, because he had addressed a letter to Jefferson Davis in March, 1861, and had called the Mississippian "President of the Confederate State of America." Unionists considered both men to be traitors.

\(^{19}\) Miners' Journal, July 12, 1862.
to be found that Hughes was in fact hoping for a Confederate victory. Supporters of the Administration began to scrutinize Hughes' past to learn how he had made the transformation from a Breckinridge Democrat in 1860 to an opponent of disunion.

The first discovery the investigators made concerned his nephew and former law partner, John Hughes, the unsuccessful Democratic congressional candidate in 1860 for the Schuylkill-Northumberland district. After the fall of Fort Sumter, John Hughes returned to the home of his father, Dr. Isaac Hughes, in New Bern, North Carolina. Soon he and his brother Collin enlisted in the Rebel Army, and both rose to ranks of prominence. Unionist journals gleefully reported that Francis Hughes' nephews were killing Pennsylvania soldiers to perpetuate treason. With each passing week the stories became more elaborate; before long it was claimed that Isaac, a "large slaveholder," was also in the Confederate Army and that his brother Theodore had furnished a son for the Confederacy.

Because of these stories Francis Hughes felt that he had to set the record straight. He admitted that two of his nephews were fighting for the Confederacy, but he noted that two of Lincoln's brothers-in-law were also wearing the gray. None of the sons of his brother Theodore, he wrote, was fighting for Jefferson Davis; in fact, while in Georgia Theodore had been sentenced to hang for disloyalty to the Confederacy but had escaped to his native state, Pennsylvania. Finally, he declared, another of his nephews, Francis Percival Dewees, had joined a Pennsylvania regiment on April 17, 1861. Unionists cynically alleged that Dewees had been reluctant to enlist and had left the army gladly when his three months' service was over.

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20 Actually, the Miners' Journal had reported that John Hughes was in the Confederate Army as early as May 31, 1862. At that time, it sarcastically commented, "What a beautiful representative Schuylkill County would now have if he had been elected to Congress."


22 Letter dated July 17, quoted in Patriot and Union, July 21, 1862, and in Bellefonte Democratic Watchman, July 25, 1862; see also Wallace, 15.

23 Miners' Journal, Oct. 4, 11, 1862. According to Benjamin Bannan, editor of this newspaper, Dewees' relatives in North Carolina were furious that he had served in the Union Army. In 1863, Dewees was drafted, but, like thousands of others, he paid the commutation fee. Wallace, 291.
Since many Pennsylvanians had relatives in the Confederacy, voters were reluctant to believe that Hughes was a traitor merely because several of his nephews were in the Rebel Army. Unionists were therefore forced to find other evidence of Hughes' "treason." For a while it was falsely alleged that Hughes was a native of North Carolina, but this too had little effect upon the electorate.24

On September 27, 1862, however, Benjamin Bannan, the editor of the Pottsville Miners' Journal and Hughes' inveterate political foe, published a series of sworn statements and letters about Hughes. Christopher Loeser, a rival lawyer of Hughes' in Pottsville, authored two of them. First, he alleged that Hughes had, in the summer or fall of 1861, pointed to a map of the United States and claimed that the rebellion could not be suppressed. Peace, Hughes supposedly had said, would come only after the recognition of the Confederacy, and all Pennsylvania would get out of the war would be a heavy tax burden. Hughes also had predicted, according to Loeser, that the West would then secede from the remnant of the United States and that New England would be unable to pay its share of the war debt. Pennsylvania, the "traitor" was alleged to have concluded, would also suffer and would lose its position as a trading and manufacturing center. Loeser also claimed that in the presence of John Werner, the sheriff of Schuylkill County from 1846 to 1849, Hughes had told a public rally prior to the outbreak of war that "cotton was king" and that he "was glad of it."

Statements from David Lomison and Jerome Boyer declared that in January or February, 1861, Hughes had written a resolution proposing that Pennsylvania secede from the Union. This was so extreme in tone, they said, that even John Hughes urged his uncle not to offer it to the State Democratic Convention scheduled to meet in February. Hughes had disregarded this advice and would have proposed that his resolution be adopted had General G. Y. James not threatened to throw him out of a window if he dared to make its text public.25

24 Telegraph, Sept. 16, 20, 1862; Crawford Democrat, Oct. 14, 1862. Hughes had been born in Upper Merion Township, Montgomery County, Pa.
25 Sworn statement from Christopher Loeser, Sept. 8, letter from Loeser, Sept. 17; letter from David Lomison, Sept. 13; letter from Jerome Boyer to Charlemagne Tower, Sept. 8, all quoted in Miners' Journal, Sept. 27, 1862; see also Oct. 11, 1862, issue.
These accusations were printed in Unionist journals all over the state, and it was obvious that they could not be ignored. Hughes' immediate reaction was to call Loeser an insane man and Charlemagne Tower, Loeser's law partner, a "knave." Hughes was worried though, for he feared that the voters might actually believe that he was a traitor. On September 17, before these allegations were made public, he had had to stop in the middle of a speech to rebuke members of the audience for cheering for the South. Lest Pennsylvanians believe that he sympathized with Jefferson Davis, he decided to write a letter in answer to his critics.

This letter was a remarkable document. First, he explained it was true that he had once stated, "cotton is king, and I thank God for it," but he insisted that the statement had been taken out of context. What he had meant was that England's prosperity was dependent upon cotton. As long as the United States was united, whenever England menaced the nation, King Cotton could shake his white head and force the British to back down. Second, he stated that he had never proposed that his native state leave the Union. In February, 1861, he had prepared a resolution on the crisis before the country because he believed that New England would rather see the Union dissolved than make a just compromise with the South. If this happened and secession of the South resulted, he thought that Pennsylvania might be uncomfortable in a shattered Union dominated by New England and she might decide to "go where her natural bonds took her."

Hughes furnished the text of this resolution, which he had not presented at Harrisburg. It is worthy of being quoted in its entirety:

Resolved, That Pennsylvania owes her growth in population and the increase of capital and wealth to her citizens, chiefly to the advantages which the American Union has afforded for the development of her natural resources, and that her glory and paramount interests are identified with the continuance of that Union. Should, however, causes hitherto resisted by the Democracy of the country, rend assunder the bonds that bind

26 See, for example, Telegraph, Oct. 1, 7, 9, 13; Bellefonte Central Press, Oct. 10; Evening Bulletin, Sept. 29, Oct. 1; Pittsburgh Gazette, Sept. 30; Reporter and Tribune, Oct. 9, 1862.

27 Miners' Journal, Oct. 4, 1862. Loeser did in fact have occasional bouts with insanity. Moreover, he was quite bitter since he had lost several court cases in which Hughes had been the opposing lawyer. Meredith, 42-43.

28 Miners' Journal, Sept. 20, 1862.
together these States; and should the fifteen slaveholding States, claiming to be driven by the necessity of mutual protection against the effect of such causes, successfully establish another confederacy, then Pennsylvania must regard her relation to the facts which circumstances beyond her control have produced. She cannot then refuse to perceive that she must either take her place in some Northern fragment of a once glorious Union and rest content to be shorn of the greater part of her manufacturing industry, and of her export and import trade to hold a secondary and helpless relation to the northeastern States, with no outlet or approach from the ocean for her great eastern or her great western metropolis, except through the waters and before the forts and guns of a foreign nation and thus practically for want of ability to protect be made to yield up all reliable direct foreign trade; or she may, if a member of the new Confederacy, become the great manufacturing workshop for a people now consuming annually $300,000,000 worth of products and manufactures from and imported through the northern States; her cities become the great commercial depots and distributing points for this Confederacy, and her wealth, population and glory be promoted in a degree unparalleled in the history of and prosperity of any people. That it will be the right and duty of her citizens to consult their own best interests in a position so momentous and decide between the awful alternatives, and that in stating the truths here announced, we have no desire to conceal that our object is to present to the people of other States the position they may severally occupy, if the coercion disunionists in their midst succeed in defeating an equitable compromise of existing difficulties.

Unionists seized upon this letter as a confession of treason and happily and frequently reprinted it in their newspapers. To the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin the resolution was "documentary proof that the present leader of the Breckinridge Democracy was, at the close of the Buchanan and Breckinridge Administration, plotting to carry Pennsylvania out of the Union." On October 9, the Washington Reporter and Tribune said of Hughes' resolution, "A darker and more infamous plot against the rights of a loyal but unsuspecting people has rarely been met with in the history of politics." The Administration press began to assure its readers that the election of Democrats to office would give aid and comfort to the enemy.

29 Letter from Hughes, Sept. 29, quoted in Patriot and Union, Oct. 7, 1862.
31 Evening Bulletin, Oct. 1, 1862. The editorial concluded, "Now can loyal Democrats let Hughes act for them? Is he to be their true representative? He taints everyone he supports with treason."
Moreover, if Democrats won control of the state legislature, they would elect Hughes United States Senator to replace David Wilmot, whose term was about to expire.\(^{32}\)

Hughes was perplexed. Before he could decide how best to defend himself, his enemy, Christopher Loeser, wrote another letter about him. This time the Unionist lawyer claimed that in the spring of 1861 Hughes had tried to persuade William Till to go to Georgia to manage 90,000 acres of timber land he owned there. Hughes also owned a saw mill and a railroad, said Loeser, and he had a contract with British and French firms to supply them with ship timber. Till, a mechanic from Reading, claimed that Hughes told him that within four months there would be a separation of the states. Britain and France would recognize the independence of the South, and there would be no further trouble. Till refused the offer.\(^{33}\)

Hughes had his brother Theodore respond to this allegation. Francis Hughes, his brother said in a sworn statement, had owned only 2,900 acres of land in Georgia worth no more than $5,000. To the best of Theodore’s knowledge—and he had managed the tract of land—there were no contracts with British or French businesses. Furthermore, he stated, Francis had urged him not to take up arms against the Federal Government, and, after Theodore fled Georgia, the land that his brother owned had been confiscated by the Confederates.\(^{34}\)

Despite all of this controversy Hughes continued to function as the head of the Democratic campaign effort. He continued to voice the same arguments he had stressed before he was charged with treason. He insisted that the issues of the campaign were the following: preventing the abolitionists from destroying slavery, prohibiting the entry of blacks into the state, and preserving the constitutional liberties of all white Pennsylvanians. “To claim to support the Union by violating the Constitution,” he wrote, “is to seek to build up by destroying.”\(^{35}\)

In October he found an opportunity to “prove” his loyalty. When he heard that the Confederates were invading Pennsylvania, he

\(^{33}\) Letter from Loeser, October 6, quoted in *Gazette*, Oct. 10, 1862.
\(^{34}\) Letter from Theodore Hughes, October 8, quoted in *Patriot and Union*, Oct. 11, 1862.
\(^{35}\) Letter from Francis Hughes, *ibid.*
circulated a patriotic letter in which he urged "every man capable of bearing arms . . . to fly to repel the invaders," and promised "that at the call of the Governor, we will march against the enemy two hundred thousand men."\textsuperscript{36}

Apparently the voters did not believe that a Democratic electoral victory would help the South. Some Pennsylvania soldiers even agreed with part of Hughes' gloomy forecast of the nation's future if Lincoln stayed in power. Charles F. Taylor, a supporter of the Administration, wrote to his brother Bayard, "The Army . . . is demoralized. . . . We seem to be verging every day more rapidly towards a war with England, revolution at the North, and a Military Despotism."\textsuperscript{37} Democrats elected their candidates for auditor general and surveyor general, and they captured half of the state's twenty-four congressional seats and a majority of the vacancies in both branches of the state legislature. The Democrats were now able to select a replacement for Wilmot since they now had a majority of the seats in the legislature.\textsuperscript{38} Democratic leaders thanked Hughes for his work in the campaign and assured him that the victory demonstrated "the return of Pennsylvania to her state-rights birth right."\textsuperscript{39}

But for Hughes the election marked a turning point in his political career. Democrats now thought that he was too controversial to represent them in the Senate, and so they selected Charles Buckalew to succeed Wilmot. The Pottsville lawyer, however, insisted that he had "little occasion for any regret" over losing his bid for the Senate seat to such a worthy man as Buckalew.\textsuperscript{40} Hughes retained the position of Solicitor of Schuylkill County,\textsuperscript{41} and he was still the Democratic boss of Pottsville, but he was to lose all but a fraction of his power in the state party organization.


\textsuperscript{37} Charles Taylor to Bayard Taylor, Oct. 25, 1862 (in possession of Prof. Charles Hobson, Georgia State University). Note, this was dated just after the election.

\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Appleton's Annual Cyclopaedia}, II, 705.

\textsuperscript{39} Meredith, 40.

\textsuperscript{40} Card from Hughes, Jan. 14, 1863, quoted in \textit{Post}, January 23; \textit{Gazette}, January 24; \textit{Reporter and Tribune}, January 28; Bellefonte Democratic Watchman, Feb. 13, 1863. Hughes warned that if New England insisted "upon the destruction of the Union by the subjugation of the Southern States or by their separation from them, I am ready to yield to the latter rather than to the former of such alternatives." He also suggested that if the West seceded from the Union, Pennsylvania might follow suit.

\textsuperscript{41} Charles McCarthy, \textit{The Great Molly Maguire Hoax} (Wyoming, 1969), 121.
In 1864, when stories were circulating about the activities of the Organization of American Knights and the Sons of Liberty, the Pottsville Miners’ Journal claimed that Hughes belonged to these secret societies. This, of course, had no basis in fact. Yet it was widely believed that were it not for his friendship with Edwin Stanton, Hughes would have been arrested as a political prisoner at some time during the war.

After the surrender of Lee, Hughes was never able to recapture the power he had held in July, 1862. He had guessed wrong about the war and had made some unfortunate statements after the election of Lincoln, but there is no evidence that he ever committed treason. Nonetheless, he was penalized for those indiscretions he had made.

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43 Hartranft, 312.