

By One Vote: The Disputed Presidential Election of 1876

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Review

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Holt, Michael F. *By One Vote: The Disputed Presidential Election of 1876.* University of Kansas Press, \$34.95 hardcover ISBN 9780700616084

The Compromise of 1876?

Having recently endured a presidential election that seemed to go on forever, why would we want to read about another? To a true political junkie such a question would be as incomprehensible as if you asked a basketball fan who had followed last year's interminable NBA playoffs why he would watch this year's.

True political fans can never get enough of their favorite sport, which is probably why the University of Kansas Press has launched a series of monographs on American Presidential Elections. This study of the election of 1876 has been assigned to Michael F. Holt, a historian at the University of Virginia, best known for his studies of pre-Civil War politics. Earlier volumes in the series have examined the elections of 1848, 1888, and 1960. It will be noticed that each of these initial selections were hotly contested and closely decided canvasses, and that of 1876 is often regarded as the most suspenseful of all (at least up to that of 2000 which it resembles in so many ways).

Four years earlier, in 1872, the Republican president, Ulysses S. Grant had been overwhelmingly reelected against a Democratic party so demoralized that it had not even run a candidate of its own, choosing instead to endorse the Liberal Republican, Horace Greeley. Yet, in American politics landslides are often followed by reversals (see 1964 and 1972). By 1876 the Grant administration, plagued by scandals and discredited by the worst economic collapse in a generation, was staggering to an unmourned end. Democrats, scenting victory, reverted to their traditional strategy of nominating a New York governor for president, the strangely passive Samuel J. Tilden. Republicans, following *their* favorite strategy, nominated a bearded Ohio Civil War hero, Rutherford B.

Hayes.

Both candidates were considered reformers of a sort, but civil service reform, for all of its support among the "better element" was probably not decisive in the minds of most voters. More than likely it took a back seat to two more pressing issues: money and section. Holt manfully grapples with the "money question," but it might be hard for the uninitiated reader to grasp what all the fuss was about. Significantly, Holt frames the monetary debate mainly in geographic rather than economic terms, i.e., East vs. West rather than farmer versus manufacturer, thereby driving one more nail into the coffin of Charles Beard's moribund economic determinism and reviving, to a degree, Frederick Jackson Turner's emphasis on sectionalism.

Sectionalism in the 1870's, of course, primarily meant North versus South. With the Civil War scarcely a decade in the past and with the Reconstruction experiment waning, the revival of the Democratic party in the former Confederate states was well underway, accomplished through intimidation and disenfranchisement of Southern freedmen. By 1876 only three Southern states, South Carolina, Florida and Louisiana, remained under Republican control.

From Jackson to Lincoln the Democrats had been the nation's dominant political party, with strength concentrated in the South and in the northern big cities. Civil War and Reconstruction had shaken their grip by removing the South from the political equation. Now, with the white South recovered from its self-inflicted wounds, the question for 1876 was whether Democrats could regain their prewar national dominance.

For a few hours on election eve it seemed as if they had. Tilden had won a majority of the popular vote and could claim 184 electoral votes, only one shy of victory, but the three unredeemed Southern states were claimed by both parties. There was no precedent for resolving such a conflict and political leaders groped for a solution for months, ultimately authorizing an extra-constitutional electoral commission composed of senators, congressmen and Supreme Court justices: seven from each party and one "independent," Justice Joseph Bradley who voted with Republicans and swung the decision to Hayes. Resemblances to the exciting contest of 2000 are too obvious to need enumeration and one might expect that a history of the earlier election would reflect the tension we felt at that time. On such history, written in the aftermath of the 2000 contest bore the lurid title, *Fraud of the Century*.

Holt eschews such theatrics. Indeed, he could be accused of underplaying the drama to the point of blandness. For example, he omits the threats of renewed civil war muttered by some disgruntled Democrats and the apparent attempted assassination of Hayes. Nor does he pass judgment on who really won the election (whatever "really" may mean in that context). My own feeling, which Holt's account does not challenge, is that the Democrats stole the election by force (driving blacks from the polls) and that the Republicans then stole it back by fraud.

Holt's moral agnosticism probably stems from his conclusion that the election didn't really matter, since Tilden's course as president would very likely have been much the same as Hayes's. Although, if the result made so little difference, one wonders what inspired a record breaking 81.8% of the eligible voters to march to the polls.

Holt's low key approach deflates some of the legends surrounding the 1876 story; he finds no evidence that improper last minute pressure was applied to sway Justice Bradley; he regards the notion that a secret deal was negotiated to settle the issue as having been "utterly demolished" by recent research (277); and acknowledges that the election did not, as has been widely stated, end Reconstruction, which was finished in any event. Even the long-term consequences of the election are minimized. Rather than turning a new page, 1876 merely signaled a political equilibrium which would last for two decades.

Such sober conclusions may not satisfy those political junkies who crave excitement above all, but others may find in Holt's measured judgments a welcome corrective to the excess of previous treatments of this fascinating episode.

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