

“A Bloody Shirt and a Pair of Ripe Ruby Lips”

Reconstruction, Sex Scandals, and Oliver P. Morton’s Bid for the Presidency in 1876

A. JAMES FULLER

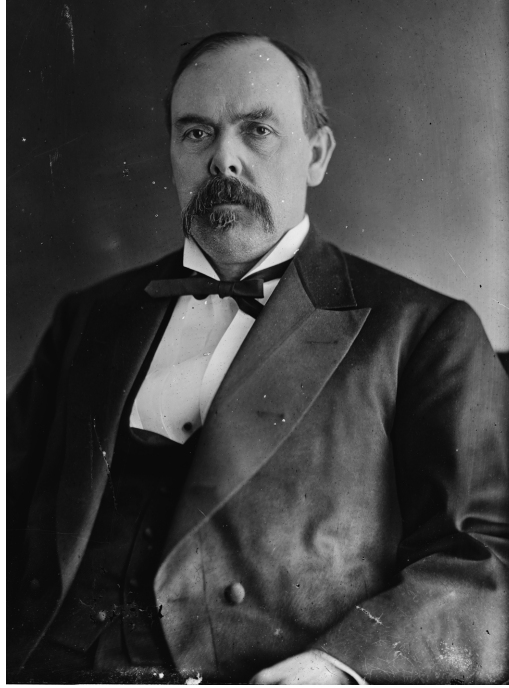
ABSTRACT: As the 1876 election season began, Senator Oliver P. Morton of Indiana was widely regarded as a frontrunner for the Republican nomination for president. Morton biographer A. James Fuller examines Morton’s political history—from his time as Indiana’s war governor through his Senate career—and the tactics of his political opponents to discover why Morton failed in his bid for the presidency. By 1876, Morton’s consistent alignment with the Radical Republican faction in the Senate—centered on support for Reconstruction and the 14th and 15th Amendments—had become an unpopular stance among many Northerners. In addition, Democratic use of old political scandals, centered around accusations of financial impropriety and sexual misconduct, dogged Morton and damaged his reputation.

KEYWORDS: Oliver P. Morton, Reconstruction, U.S. Senate, Radical Republicans, Indiana politics, Republican Party, 1876 election

The stakes were high in the presidential election; many saw the contest as a referendum on the policies of the previous administration, and a deeply polarized electorate seemed frustrated with the status quo. A crowded Republican field of candidates fought for their party’s nomination, even as the Democrats seemed likely to coalesce around an experienced,

establishment standard bearer from New York. Economic issues mattered, as many voters felt that the recovery from the most recent financial crisis had not been fully realized and that only the wealthiest Americans were benefiting, while workers and middle-class families struggled amid anemic growth and a changing economy. Racial politics divided the country, as riots and violence continued to thwart the efforts of those who hoped to achieve civil rights and equality. Many white Americans were tired of racial issues and wanted to move on to other things; they argued that African Americans had been given enough and that it was time to end government policies aimed at helping black citizens. One leading Republican who enjoyed widespread support had served as governor of Indiana. He had shaped the politics of his state and become a national figure and a leader of one of his party's most powerful factions. But some thought he might be too extreme and that the changing nature of American politics had rendered his views less popular than they once had been. And he was only one of several leading candidates. Many observers thought that the front-runners might defeat each other, leaving the door open to a dark-horse outsider candidate.

The year was 1876 and the Hoosier frontrunner was Senator Oliver P. Morton. As the fight for the Republican nomination began in earnest in 1875, it looked like the Indiana senator might indeed win the day. Throughout his career, he had worked hard to help his fellow Republicans, often traveling to campaign for them during election seasons. He had several strongholds of support, including what would come to be called the Midwest, and he was an able and experienced leader. He was also ruthless and uncompromising. As governor of Indiana during the War of the Rebellion, he had tirelessly supported Union soldiers and had relentlessly pursued the Copperheads—Northern Democrats who went so far in their opposition to Abraham Lincoln and the Republican war effort that they planned treasonous schemes of sabotage and even overthrow of the state government. During Reconstruction, Morton had perfected the practice of waving the bloody shirt, a tactic that involved blaming his Democratic foes for starting the rebellion and constantly reminding voters that his opponents were rebels and traitors who had the blood of martyred Union soldiers on their hands. Fearing what the Indiana Republican might do as president, his enemies sought to deny Morton the nomination and nip his bid for the White House in the bud. They began to attack him, pointing out that he was crippled—a stroke in 1865 had left him paralyzed and he could walk only with the aid of canes or crutches—and dusting off old



Senator Oliver P. Morton, 1876. Because of his appeal to voters from the Midwest and West, as well as black Southern voters, Morton was considered one of the frontrunners for the Republican Party's 1876 nomination for president.

Courtesy, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

accusations about his tenure as governor. They also drudged up sordid stories in hopes that a sex scandal could stop his campaign.¹

Best remembered as Indiana's Civil War governor, Morton had served for a decade in the U.S. Senate, becoming a leading Radical Republican. A champion for the rights of African Americans, he had supported all of the major policies of congressional Reconstruction, from voting for the impeachment of President Andrew Johnson to supporting the 14th Amendment,

A. James Fuller is Professor of History, University of Indianapolis. He is the editor of *The Election of 1860 Reconsidered* (2011) and the author of *Chaplain to the Confederacy: Basil Manly and Baptist Life in the Old South* (2000). His biography *Oliver P. Morton and the Politics of the Civil War and Reconstruction* (2017) is forthcoming as part of the Civil War in the North series published by Kent State University Press.

¹ For more on Morton's career, see Fuller, *Oliver P. Morton*. While this article focuses only on part of the election and Morton's role in it, the book contains an expanded version of the story told here.

playing an instrumental role in passing the 15th Amendment, and leading the political fight against the Ku Klux Klan. Unapologetically partisan, Morton was sometimes accused not only of extremism but also of political opportunism. While he was certainly ruthless and always willing to seize an advantage, the Hoosier Republican was more than a power-hungry opportunist. Throughout his career, he was motivated by a consistent ideology of freedom, Union, power, and party. He believed that ordered liberty under the law and the nation embodied in the Union were sacred principles that had to be preserved by the use of power concentrated in the government. Because such power could itself become a threat to freedom and the nation, it had to be entrusted to a party dedicated to those sacred doctrines—according to Morton, his own Republican party. This belief made Morton a fierce partisan because, for him, party *was* principle. When he sought the presidency in 1876, he saw himself as continuing to fight for cherished doctrines in an ongoing struggle that was nothing less than a continuation of the war. Morton had to face the reality that voters were moving away from the politics of extremism and that many wanted reunion between the North and the South. This spelled doom for Reconstruction, unless the Hoosier leader and his party recommitted to the cause. In the end, the contest of 1876 would force Morton to decide what to do when the core principles to which his career had been dedicated seemed to become incompatible with one another.²

The race for the presidency began with debates over whether or not President Ulysses S. Grant should seek a third term. Even as the speculation swirled, a long list of Republicans emerged as possible candidates for the nomination. One leading choice was Vice President Henry Wilson, but the Massachusetts politician had been tainted by the Crédit Mobilier scandal and, then, just as it seemed that he might overcome the corruption in his past, he died in the fall of 1875. Other top candidates included an array of Morton's fellow U.S. Senators, including James G. Blaine of Maine, New Yorker Roscoe P. Conkling, Simon Cameron of Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin's Matthew H. Carpenter. Members of the cabinet also threw their hats into the ring, as Secretary of State Hamilton Fish of New York, Secretary of the Treasury Benjamin Bristow, and Postmaster General Marshall Jewell of Connecticut all sought the nomination, as did Illinois's favorite son, Minister to France Elihu Washburne. Governors like John Hartranft

² This summary and the argument for Morton's ideological motivation and consistency is drawn from Fuller, *Oliver P. Morton*.

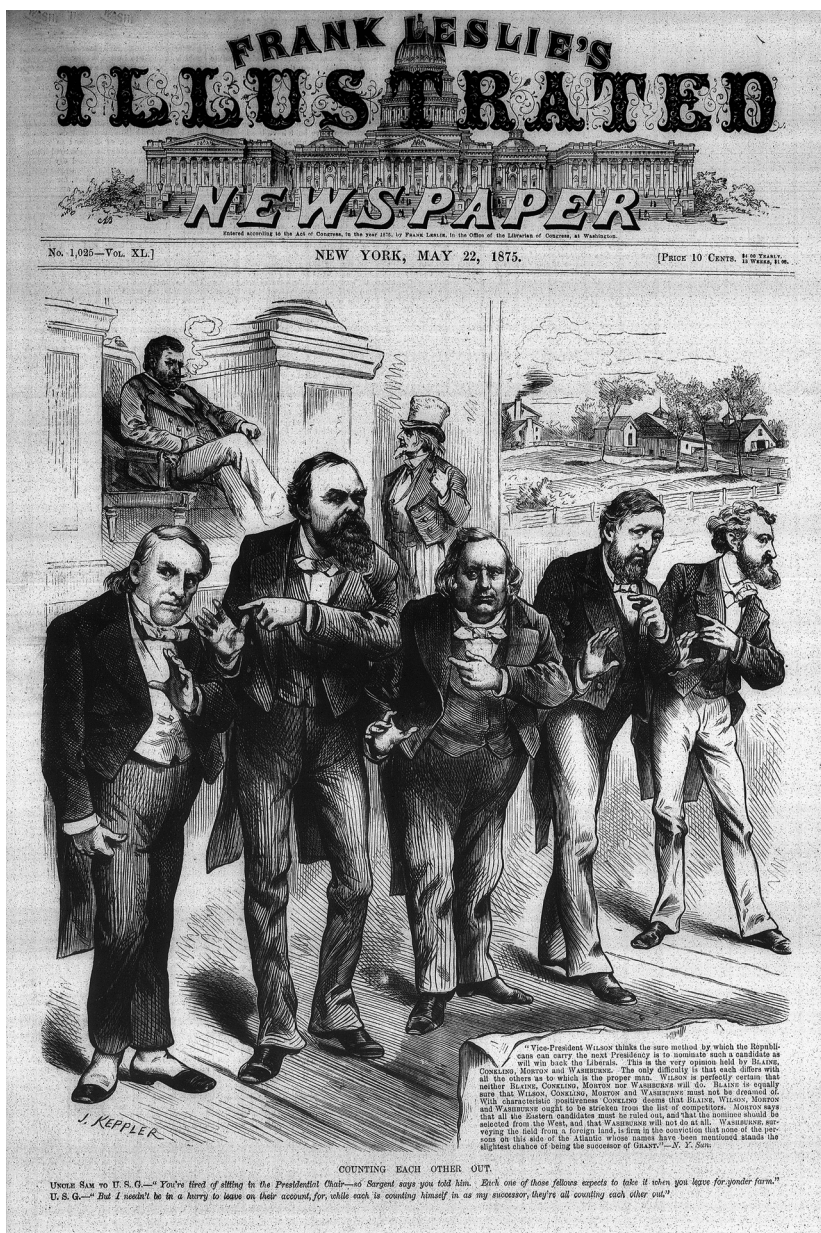
of Pennsylvania and Rutherford B. Hayes of Ohio rounded out the field. Each man had his strengths and weaknesses, with appeals to certain states and regions, and support coming from one faction or another within the Republican Party.³

By the summer of 1875, the top three candidates seemed to be Senators Blaine, Conkling, and Morton. But the three men overlapped in their appeal and support. All three were Radical Republicans who enjoyed reputations as strong Union men who had fought for Reconstruction. Both Morton and Conkling were Stalwarts who had supported the Grant administration, but this meant that the president was less likely to endorse either of them because he liked them both. And the charges of corruption that had rocked the administration meant that many voters hesitated to back a candidate who had been too close to the scandals. Reformers had accused all three senators of being part of the corruption, but such charges had failed to stick to either Morton or Blaine. Conkling had been smeared by scandalous charges about his liberality in dispensing patronage through the spoils system, and he had a reputation as a philanderer whose womanizing included adulterous affairs with well-known Washington socialites. Soon enough, both Morton and Blaine would also have to deal with scandals in their bids to take the White House.⁴

Among the rest of the field, Bristow drew the support of reformers because he had cleaned up the Whiskey Ring, a scheme in which Republican politicians had lined their pockets with millions of dollars paid in liquor taxes, but his candidacy never gained much traction. Secretary of State Fish was secretly Grant's choice as a compromise between the other candidates, but the president's endorsement never became public and did little to help him. The secretary's foreign policy expertise made him an attractive candidate, but the urbane Elihu Washburne also brought impressive

³ For discussion of the leading candidates, see Michael F. Holt, *By One Vote: The Disputed Presidential Election of 1876* (Lawrence, Kan., 2008). Holt challenges the traditional interpretation that Republicans stole the election and is the most reliable recent study. A popular history that provides color and drama is Dee Brown, *The Year of the Century: 1876* (New York, 1966). Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York, 1988) and Mark Wahlgren Summers, *The Ordeal of the Reunion: A New History of Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2014) are accurate and offer valuable insights. An unreliable work that repeats the old view that the Republicans stole the election in order to continue their corrupt plundering of the South is Roy Morris Jr., *Fraud of the Century: Rutherford B. Hayes, Samuel Tilden, and the Stolen Election of 1876* (New York, 2003). Morris sees the past through the lens of the 2000 election, conflating events and distorting facts while mostly ignoring the use of force and fraud by the Redeemer Democrats in the South.

⁴ This sketch of the candidates is taken from Fuller, *Oliver P. Morton*, chapter 11.



Frank Leslie's Illustrated, May 22, 1875. "Counting Each Other Out" depicts (from right) Vice President Henry Wilson, Senator James Blaine, Senator Roscoe Conkling, Senator Oliver Morton, and U.S. Minister to France Elihu Washburne, each pointing to another candidate who should be counted out of the presidential race.

Internet Archive

credentials that offset such an advantage. And because foreign affairs did not dominate the election cycle, neither man was able to expand his support. Senator Carpenter had been involved in the Whiskey Ring and had publicly defended Secretary of War William Belknap, who was brought down in yet another scandal. Carpenter had also bucked the party line too many times over the years, diminishing his appeal as a candidate. Jewell had staunch support in Connecticut, but little anywhere else; his only hope was as a fallback candidate should the frontrunners fail to secure the nomination. The same was true of the governors, Hartranft and Hayes, both of whom maneuvered to position themselves as compromise choices when others failed to win in early balloting. Hayes, especially, was seen as a dark horse, a candidate who could run as an outsider free from any association with the Grant administration, someone from outside Washington who could change things in the capital if he was elected.⁵

Oliver Morton ranked in the top tier of candidates for good reason. With a strong base of support in Indiana and the Midwest, he was also the favorite of most Southern Republicans. His many years of campaigning for other Republicans meant that he had many allies in the party, especially in Indiana and the surrounding states. And his long fight on behalf of African Americans meant that the black Republicans of the South saw him as their champion. Furthermore, he was a skilled campaigner who knew what it took to win. He knew how to make deals and how to use the party organization to his advantage. For example, he and his operatives angled to locate the party's national convention in Cincinnati, where Morton had many friends and allies. His friends also published the customary campaign biography—a brief, softcover volume for wider distribution than the thick hardcover that had been published in 1864, when Morton had sought reelection as governor.⁶

Although he was widely known as a Stalwart Republican who had supported President Grant throughout his two terms, Morton had not been tainted by the administration's many scandals. He was an experienced leader

⁵ Ibid.

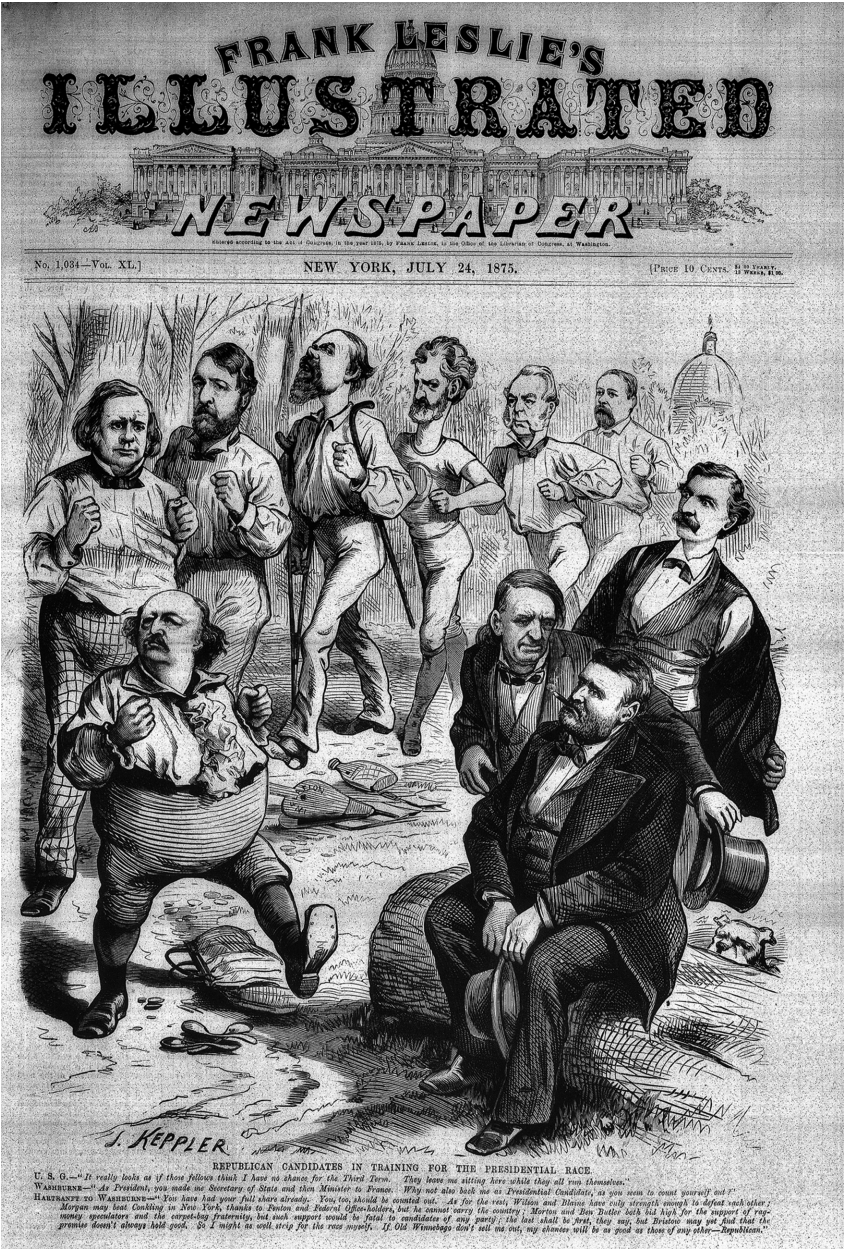
⁶ The campaign biography is *Oliver P. Morton of Indiana: Sketch of His Life and Public Services Prepared by Direction of the Indiana Republican State Central Committee* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1876). In 1864, William French had written a long life-and-letters style biography for use in Morton's reelection campaign. The Republicans reprinted a revised version in 1866 to support his election to the Senate; see William M. French, ed., *Life, Speeches, State Papers and Public Services of Gov. Oliver P. Morton* (Cincinnati, 1866). In 1876, his supporters set the French biography aside in favor of the shorter, cheaper pamphlet-like volume.

with wide-ranging knowledge of the issues of the day, a leading authority on economics, especially the currency question, and an important presidential advisor during the Panic of 1873 and the resulting depression. Although the effects of the economic crisis were still felt in some parts of the country, expertise on financial matters lent strength to Morton's candidacy. So, too, did his foreign policy experience, due to his long service on the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and his deep involvement in diplomatic affairs. And, of course, as the chair of the Committee on Privileges and Elections, he had often led the fight for Reconstruction, as his investigations of elections in the Southern states led to new legislation and battles over disputed results. On top of all of this, Morton was energetic and tireless, a fine orator whose blunt, plainspoken style made him a formidable debater and speaker. Indiana's favorite son was a likely choice for the nomination, as his many strengths gave him advantages over his rivals.⁷

But Morton also had weaknesses that detracted from his appeal, the most obvious of which was his health. Despite a decade of paralysis, Senator Morton had served with great energy, the force of his will seeming to overcome his lack of mobility. But his condition fluctuated over the years, and Washington newspapers printed all of the latest reports and rumors about his condition. Morton had delivered most of his speeches sitting down, which somehow added to his oratorical power, as it tamed his restless energy and made his hand gestures all the more impressive. But eventually he was able to stand at the podium while speaking and, when the congressional session opened in December 1875, he seemed stronger than he ever had since the debilitating attack. The capital press noted that the candidate was "walking easily on canes," but they also reported every time he fell, including a collapse in March 1876, when he lost his balance upon exiting the elevator at the Ebbitt House Hotel where he was living in Washington. Two months later, published rumors had him sick and dying, although he quickly recovered from what was probably a cold and returned to work. Under such close scrutiny, Morton's health remained an issue, and the reports reminded readers of his disability.⁸

⁷ For in-depth analysis of Morton's senate career, see Fuller, *Oliver P. Morton*, esp. chapters 8–10.

⁸ For some of the dozens of reports on Morton's health in the Washington newspapers, see *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), July 16, September 8, 1868, April 23, December 6, 1869, July 27, November 13, December 3, 1874, July 12, 1875. His speaking while standing is recounted in *Evening Star*, October 14, 1872; walking easily on canes in *Evening Star*, December 6, 1875; his elevator fall in *Evening Star*, March 30, 1876; rumors of the senator dying in *Evening Star*, May 4, 1876.



Frank Leslie's Illustrated, July 24, 1875. "Republican Candidates in Training for the Presidential Race" depicts Morton on his feet but using a cane on his left side and a crutch on his right, echoing many other press accounts of his health issues.

Another obvious disadvantage for Morton's presidential bid was his position as a leading Radical Republican who had uncompromisingly pushed for a harsh Reconstruction. His relentless calls for punishing the rebels and refusal to give up the fight grew stale. Waving the bloody shirt had worked for many years, but it reminded voters that Morton was an extremist, a man cut out for battle. He was the blunt instrument of war, not the congenial arbiter of peace. At a time when many Americans longed for an end to the Southern Question, Morton symbolized the War of the Rebellion and the struggles of Reconstruction. In December 1875, he had reaffirmed his nationalist ideology by introducing a resolution in the Senate declaring that "the people of the United States constitute a nation, and are one people in the sense of national unity." His resolution also drew the lines of battle clearly, as he took aim at the Democrats who opposed Reconstruction by denouncing the idea of state sovereignty and saying that, "the doctrine that a State has the right to secede from the Union is inconsistent with the idea of nationality . . . and should be regarded as having been forever extinguished by the suppression of the rebellion." Morton remained uncompromising in his fight for equality and against the foes he considered to be the same old rebels and Copperheads who now sought to win through the ballot box what they could not win with bullets on the battlefields of the rebellion. His insistence that Reconstruction was the continuation of the war and, his staunch support for African Americans' civil rights, as well as for women's and immigrants' rights, made him too extreme for many in his own party, as conservative and moderate Republicans disagreed with him on both style and substance.⁹

Furthermore, Morton was not a likable man. Ruthless, vindictive, ambitious, and often arrogant, he rubbed people the wrong way. He never forgave a slight, holding grudges and seeking revenge. The most famous example of this had been his long-running feud with fellow Hoosier George Washington Julian. The two men were lawyers from Centerville, Indiana; both hated slavery and had helped to create the Republican Party. Julian had aided the younger man in his legal career, and his son had sold Morton a house in the mid-1850s. But they fell out over political matters—Julian could not or would not recall the exact reasons in his memoirs—and became bitter foes. They battled openly in the local arena and at the state

⁹ For Morton's resolution, see *Congressional Record*, 44th Congress, 1st Session, December 15, 1875, Misc. Doc. No. 18. For more on Morton fighting for immigrants and women's rights, see Fuller, *Oliver P. Morton*, esp. chapters 9 and 11.

party convention, and Morton worked tirelessly to defeat Julian whenever his rival ran for reelection to Congress. Finally, after many years of waiting, Senator Morton was able to help defeat Julian by supporting another candidate who took the nomination from his old enemy in 1870. The senator watched Julian turn to the Liberal Republicans in an ill-fated bid for the vice presidency. Taking his revenge served cold, Morton finally defeated his long-time rival. Still, the senator had many devoted followers who offered him unwavering support, and he could be loyal to a fault to his many friends and allies. But he also had many enemies. His personality was such that he was respected and feared, but not as often loved; his charisma was the kind to shine during a crisis; and his support grew from personal loyalty, organization, and adherence to principles rather than from the warmth of his character.¹⁰

Charges of scandal also hurt Morton's candidacy. As had been the case throughout his entire career as governor and senator, the accusations against him came first from the *Indiana Sentinel*, the Indianapolis newspaper that served as the state's leading Democratic Party organ. During the war, the *Sentinel* had trumpeted Democratic charges that the governor had stolen state funds and abused his power. Even though several investigations had cleared Morton of all such charges, the *Sentinel* raised them again as their hated foe gained support for the presidency. The paper also accused Morton of involvement in the Whiskey Ring. The story was wrong, as the senator had not been connected to the scandal in any way. But hurling the false charge against him allowed the Democrats to call him a hypocrite, since Morton was a teetotaler and strong temperance proponent. If he made money from alcohol, then he was not only corrupt, but a liar guilty of moral hypocrisy. Character and moral issues mattered to voters, especially at a time when evangelical Christians were increasingly active in politics. Dwight L. Moody's revivals continued to sweep the country, and the cause of temperance (and that of prohibition) could make or break a politician hoping to attract evangelical support. Although Morton never made a profession of faith and did not join a church, his wife was a devout Methodist and he often attended services. More importantly, his long-time opposition to slavery and his advocacy of temperance aligned him with

¹⁰ For Morton's feud with Julian, see Fuller, *Oliver P. Morton*, chapters 9 and 11. For G. W. Julian's side of the story, see Julian, *Political Recollections, 1840–1872* (Chicago, 1884), 270–71; Patrick W. Riddleberger, *George Washington Julian: Radical Republican* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1966), 260, 262–75, 277–321.

Northern evangelicals. Any doubts about his character could hurt him in the presidential race.¹¹

Morton's morality had been an issue lurking just beneath the surface of Indiana politics for many years and, now, as he sought the White House, the Democrats renewed their efforts to ruin him with sex scandals. During his tenure as governor, rumors had circulated about his sexual appetites and his infidelities. When he suffered his stroke in 1865, the Democrats claimed that it was the result of venereal disease, the consequences of his moral debauchery. Hoping to recover his health, Morton had traveled to Europe and sought a treatment called the Moxa, an Asian remedy that involved burning herbs near or on the skin. Often prescribed for nerve damage, it was sometimes used to treat syphilis, and the Democrats chortled that "Moxa Morton" had really needed the treatment for his sexually transmitted disease. Other rumors claimed that he handed out commissions to army officers only if they allowed their pretty wives to sleep with him. Perhaps the most consistent story was that he had kept a mistress in Knightstown for many years and had children with her.¹²

The sex scandals remained in the background, occasionally bubbling to the surface during bitter partisan battles over various issues. In April 1873, the Democratic *Milwaukee Daily News* revived the story of "Moxa Morton of Indiana," claiming that "there is not, probably, in this country, a more conscienceless, corrupt, and utterly profligate man in public life than Morton. He is rotten physically, morally and politically." A year later, when Morton supported legislation to give women the right to vote, the Democratic *St. Paul Daily Pioneer* snorted, "Why shouldn't Morton espouse the woman's cause? It is woman that has made him what he is—so the gossips say." Southern Democrats hated Morton deeply and, as the so-called Redeemers returned to power, they debated the Hoosier Radical on the senate floor and joined their Northern brothers in attacking him in the press. In February 1876, the *Raleigh Sentinel* expressed the unreconstructed rebel

¹¹ *Indiana Sentinel*, September 8, October 21, December 22, 1875, January 24, February 7, March 15, June 7, 1876.

¹² *Evening Star*, December 16, 1875; *Indiana Sentinel*, December 22, 1875. The Knightstown liaison has resulted in recent attempts by a supposed descendent of this affair to obtain DNA tests to prove that Morton fathered an ancestor with his mistress. The descendent has approached employees at the Indiana State Library requesting their help in such an endeavor: Marcia Caudell, Reference Librarian, Indiana State Library, conversation with author, February 28, 2015, at Indiana Association of Historians Annual Meeting, Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis, Indiana.

perspective, when it proclaimed Morton “a vice-reeking Hoosier bundle of moral and physical rottenness, leprous ulcers and caustic bandages.”¹³

Was there anything to such charges? The Republican papers—especially the *Indianapolis Journal*, which served not only as the party’s leading newspaper in the state but also as Morton’s mouthpiece—usually ignored such rumors. Sometimes, they dismissively sneered at the stories as unworthy of rebuttal. Morton apparently destroyed his personal papers at some point in his life, and the lack of such materials meant that no paper trail led to any adultery or sexual escapades. But among the few personal letters that remained intact were several written to his wife, Lucinda Burbank Morton, who apparently safeguarded them over the years. Among these precious few epistles are references to a woman who confronted Morton in Washington in 1870, threatening to reveal stories about some sort of scandal unless he gave her money. Morton wrote to Lucinda that he had given the woman money because he was “afraid of a scene” and worried that he did not “know how to get clear of her.” Whatever the reality behind the confrontation, the incident hinted at personal misconduct, and Morton felt it necessary to explain the situation to his wife before she might hear about it from others.¹⁴

Morton also defended himself against more general charges of sexual impropriety in a long, heartfelt letter to Lucinda. The accusations, he told her, were partisan and made for political reasons. Morton complained about how false charges, even when proven untrue, tainted the target. He blasted the Democrats for using such tactics: “They have accused me, but they dare not face me with their accusation.” Opponents uttered their “dirty insinuations” anonymously, behind the cover of newspapers, and then scurried away when confronted. Morton appealed to Lucinda’s Christian morality, reminding her of the sacred bonds of marriage and vowing that he would rather kill himself than break those cords that connected them. He expressed his love for her in heartfelt terms, saying that she “had awakened within me a new life” and had shown him that he possessed “a higher and purer nature” than he had known. Morton closed his defense

¹³ *Milwaukee Daily News*, April 16, 1873; *St. Paul Daily Pioneer*, June 3, 1874; *Raleigh Sentinel*, February 18, 1876.

¹⁴ For examples of how some Indiana Republicans supported his presidential bid and defended Morton against attacks, see *Marshall County Republican*, March 30, June 17, 1875, May 11, 25, June 8, 1876. For the woman confronting Morton in D.C., see O. P. Morton to Lucinda Morton, December 12, 1870, and O. P. Morton to Lucinda Morton, November 22, 1873, Oliver P. Morton Papers, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis, Indiana.

swearing his devotion to Lucinda: “May that God who searches the heart judge me in this.”¹⁵

Lucinda Morton accepted her husband’s emotional plea and apparently refused to believe the rumors that swirled about him throughout his political career. Perhaps she kept the letters as reminders of his denials of infidelity. Lucinda’s trust remained intact, and Morton did not have to worry about the vile stories ruining his marriage. But the Democrats continued to spread the stories in hopes of ruining his political fortunes. An endorsement from the National Convention of Colored People meeting in Nashville, Tennessee, in March 1876 showed that Morton could count on black Republicans to deliver the Southern states. That, combined with his base in the Midwest and his popularity in the West, gave the Hoosier senator momentum and a clear path to the nomination. Morton would be set up as the fallback choice for the Eastern states when they divided their votes between Blaine and Conkling. Faced with the possibility of Morton becoming president, his enemies turned to the dirtiest kind of politics and tried to destroy his campaign with an explicit account of his supposed sexual misdeeds.¹⁶

The lurid tales of the “Hellish Liaisons and Attempted Seductions by Indiana’s Favorite Stud Horse” were detailed in the April 15, 1876, edition of the *Chicago Times*. Splashed across two full pages, the attacks on Morton claimed to compare him with Hoosier Democratic governor Thomas A. Hendricks, who was a candidate for his party’s nomination for the presidency. The two had been long-time political foes, and now, as both eyed the White House, an article comparing what the administrations of the two men might look like was itself a legitimate topic. But the article was instead a nasty attack on Morton’s character by the paper’s editor, Wilbur F. Storey, a Democrat who had been a Copperhead opponent of the Republicans during the Civil War. Storey routinely took sensationalism to the lowest levels with his character assassinations and libelous assaults on political enemies. Now the editor dragged out the old charges about Morton stealing state money and abusing his office as governor. The *Times* also revived the claim that the Hoosier Republican was a heavy drinker

¹⁵ This unsigned, undated emotional defense in Morton’s handwriting is found in Oliver P. Morton Scrapbook, Oliver P. Morton Papers, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis. More on this document is found in Fuller, *Oliver P. Morton*, chapter 11, note 8.

¹⁶ *Chicago Times*, March 20, 1876. For more on Morton’s chances, see Fuller, *Oliver P. Morton*, chapter 11.

whose staff had to work constantly to keep his drunkenness hidden from the public.¹⁷

Turning to the issue of the candidate's morality, the Chicago paper declared that "the reign of Morton as governor was reckless, swaggering, full of vim, noisy, personal, with an atmosphere of demoralization, impurity, and unchaste womanhood about it." The lascivious governor, the article claimed, had abused his power by demanding that men who sought commissions in the military or jobs in the state government allow him to seduce their wives or girlfriends. The *Times* cited as a source General Robert Milroy, who reportedly recounted a story heard from a judge about Morton demanding sexual favors from a pretty girl who had come to him begging for a pardon for her imprisoned brother. The paper quoted Milroy—"Morton is a lecherous scoundrel"—and detailed how the poor girl had been propositioned by the governor. The judge named in the article quickly denied the account and demanded a retraction. But he was the source for only one story and the newspaper printed many more, including rumors about Morton's escapades as a young lawyer in Centerville, where he had once escaped out of a bedroom window to avoid being caught by his lover's husband.¹⁸

The article featured a joke that was supposedly widely told in Indiana. According to the *Times*, when two schoolboys got into an argument, one of them threatened to lick the other one with his fists. The intimidated boy replied to this threat by saying, "I know one thing. I can't lick you, but Gov. Morton sleeps with your ma!" His opponent responded: "Shucks! That's nothing. Gov. Morton sleeps with *everybody's* ma!" Beyond jokes, the titillating article cited a newspaper reporter who had worked for the *Indianapolis Journal* and had seen Morton's infidelities firsthand. The reporter got to know his neighbor across the street and the man's "beautiful, voluptuous young wife." Apparently, Morton also knew the couple. According to the story, the neighbor told the reporter that the governor had called him to the statehouse, where he offered him a commission as a regimental lieutenant colonel. The man accepted the commission and reported to duty in Georgia. The journalist remembered that, "As my journalistic duties kept me up till from midnight to 2 o'clock a.m., I was

¹⁷ *Chicago Times*, April 15, 1876. For more on Storey, see Justin E. Walsh, *To Print the News and Raise Hell! A Biography of Wilbur H. Storey* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1968).

¹⁸ *Chicago Times*, April 15, 1876. The retraction is in *Chicago Times*, April 19, 1876.

an unwilling discoverer of what was very painful to me.” Sitting up late to write his newspaper reports, he saw that “night after night Morton’s carriage would drive up there and the festive governor would alight, and go into Mr.—’s house, remain three or four hours, and before day-light re-enter his carriage and drive away.” The woman cheating on her soldier husband soon became a widow, as the colonel died and was buried in the South. The *Times* reminded readers that the biblical King David had sent Uriah the Hittite off to war so that he could be with Bathsheba. In 1860s Indianapolis, Governor Morton had sent an officer to fight in the war so that he could be with the man’s wife. If the gossips were to be believed, Morton’s depravity reached biblical proportions.¹⁹

Storey went on to claim that even after his stroke, Morton had continued to indulge his appetites, using his patronage powers as a senator to trade jobs for sexual favors. In Washington, the Hoosier senator lived in several different hotels over the years, including a tenure at the National Hotel. The *Times* claimed that the National was a “sinkhole of immorality, lobbying, corruption, and nastiness” and that Morton’s residence there made it even more of a den of iniquity. Ironically, Wilbur Storey was himself guilty of many of the charges he threw at the Indiana Republican. A notorious womanizer and drinker, the Chicago editor eventually contracted syphilis, which caused him to have a paralytic stroke—the very disease and consequence that Democrats so long had claimed for Morton.²⁰

Discussing what a Hendricks presidency might look like, Storey admitted that the Democrat would end Reconstruction and give white Southerners their way on race relations. He charged that, in contrast, Morton would appoint blacks and Radicals to his cabinet. Expanding the corruption of the Grant presidency, Morton would declare “relentless war on all enemies” and reward his friends in unabashed nepotism. He would sell offices and favors, and let his sexual appetites run wild in the White House: “Buxom beauty would be rampant and ruling in Washington,” the

¹⁹ *Chicago Times*, April 15, 1876.

²⁰ *Ibid.*; Walsh, *To Print the News*. Without much evidence, it is difficult to determine whether there was any actual truth to the rumors about Morton’s sexual habits. Because of Storey’s reputation, his tendency to print vile sensationalism, and the nature of the stories, most of the accounts about Morton were probably absurd lies. But I think that where there is smoke, there is fire. It seems likely that he must have had an affair—perhaps with the Knightstown woman—and this became the basis for more exaggerated rumors. For more on my thoughts about this issue, see Fuller, *Oliver P. Morton*, chapter 11, note 19.

Times predicted. The emblem of Morton's brazen decadence would be "a bloody shirt and a pair of ripe ruby lips."²¹

As was the custom in the nineteenth century, other papers picked up the story and reprinted parts of it, spreading the scandalous tales across the country. The *Indianapolis Journal* led other Republican newspapers in denying the charges of corruption, but it deemed the tales of dissipation and immorality as unworthy of reply. Rather than defending Morton against accusations of sexual misconduct, his allies ignored them, believing that their vigorous denials of political corruption implied a denial of the sexual improprieties as well.²²

Then in March 1876, Morton was accused of being part of the Emma Mine scandal, a swindle involving a Nevada silver mine. Morton allegedly had accepted a bribe as part of a scheme to remove a Utah judge in an attempt to save the Republicans involved in the corrupt plan, including Nevada senator William M. Stewart. Although he denied the charges and the government investigators cleared Morton of any involvement, the scandal became part of a growing narrative of corruption. Democrats believed that if they fired enough false charges, eventually they would convince voters that Morton was guilty of something.²³

No sooner was Morton's name cleared in the Emma Mine scheme than the Democratic-leaning *New York World* dredged up the old charges that he had stolen federal funds while serving as Indiana's war governor. The paper claimed that records existed proving his misconduct. Illinois Democratic congressman William M. Springer took up the cause and began calling for an investigation, insisting upon an audit of state books to see if Morton had stolen government money. Morton moved quickly to handle this charge. He met with Springer, saying that he welcomed an audit and investigation, but wanted to have his own aides from the war years present for such an inquiry. He brought two former assistants to Washington with records from Indiana proving that the governor had been scrupulously honest. After the two men met with Springer, the congressman backed off his call for an official inquiry, but Morton worried that the charges left the whiff of scandal in the air. He took to the senate floor and delivered a speech defending his conduct as governor and blaming the traitorous

²¹ *Chicago Times*, April 15, 1876.

²² William Dudley Foulke, *Life of Oliver P. Morton, Including His Important Speeches* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1899), 2:391–94.

²³ For the Emma Mine scandal and Morton's self-defense, see *Evening Star*, March 21, 1876.

Democrats for the war. The speech, which was published and widely distributed, refuted all charges of corruption while attacking his political foes. Morton waved the bloody shirt against his Democratic opponents while trying to put the old charges to rest once and for all.²⁴

Although the *New York World* apologized and withdrew its charges, many voters now saw Morton as unscrupulous. Republicans crowed that he had been vindicated and hailed him as a hero, but Morton's presidential campaign had been damaged. The sheer weight and number of false charges and repeated rumors cast doubts about his honesty. And beyond issues of corruption and morality, many voters were simply tired of Reconstruction and the Southern Question. As other Radical Republicans had died, lost elections, or given up the cause, the Indiana senator had become the face of congressional Reconstruction. Morton symbolized the Radical agenda, including its struggle for civil rights and the increased power of government to achieve equality. He also represented Radicals' uncompromising devotion to their cause as well as their posture of self-righteous moral superiority. By 1876, many Americans were ready to move on. Northerners had grown weary of the constant stream of reports about violence and fraud and corruption in the South, and they hoped for peace and reunion. Even some Republicans argued that African Americans had been given freedom and insisted that that was enough, especially after years of government policies designed to help them.²⁵

Morton's dream of winning the nomination seemed dimmer in light of public opinion, but he remained a frontrunner. His supporters still hoped to carry out their plan for the convention, in which he would become the fallback choice of other top candidates who failed to win the nomination in early balloting. But in the days leading up to the Republican gathering in Cincinnati in June, James Blaine began to gain momentum, and Morton's operatives realized that the Indiana politician did not enjoy the Northern support that they had hoped he would. Only the Hoosier state stood solidly in his camp; the rest of his midwestern base had evaporated, it seemed, with delegates divided in their loyalties. Morton still claimed the overwhelming

²⁴ For the charges that Morton stole money during the war, see *New York World*, April 28, 1876; Oliver P. Morton, *Personal Explanation*, O. P. Morton, *Governor of Indiana: Alleged Misapplication of \$250,000, Revolutionary Policy of Democratic Legislature, in the Senate of the United States*, May 3, 1876 (Washington, D.C., 1876); *Evening Star*, May 3, 1876.

²⁵ *New York World*, May 3, 4, 1876.

support of the Southern states and could count on an early strong showing because of that. But the vote totals were not enough.²⁶

When the convention opened on June 14, 1876, Morton's hopes were dashed. Indiana put forward the nomination of its favorite son, as expected, but things immediately turned sour. Richard W. Thompson of Terre Haute had been selected to give the nominating speech. A one-time Know Nothing who had become a Constitutional Unionist in 1860, Thompson represented the nativist and conservative wings of the state party. A fine orator, he was also a political powerbroker and even Morton, who dominated the Republican organization in the Hoosier state, needed Thompson's support. Thus, the Terre Haute leader was a logical choice to give the speech at the convention. But his effort fell flat. Rather than a rousing and enthusiastic endorsement that would help build momentum among the delegates, Thompson's speech was filled with boilerplate and sounded eerily like an obituary. Perhaps he lacked enthusiasm because he did not share Morton's Radical views on the issues, but even that could not explain why Thompson was so lackluster. Compounding the error, Thompson called the candidate the "old war governor" and referred to the senator's paralysis. The speech was a disaster.²⁷

Morton's old friend P. B. S. Pinchback of Louisiana seconded the nomination. The Indiana senator had spent years trying to seat the African American leader in the U.S. Senate, but had been unable to do so as Democrats disputed Pinchback's election and blocked the effort. Pinchback had campaigned for his Hoosier friend, and at the convention he delivered a warm endorsement that expressed the preference of most Southern black delegates for Morton. Two days later, when the first round of balloting was complete, Morton finished second behind Blaine, but no one had enough votes to win the nomination. The deal-making was already underway, however, as campaign operatives met and schemed with one another to help their own man while denying others the victory. Thereafter, Morton's vote total began to fall, as his campaign threw votes to others and worked to defeat Blaine. After six ballots, it was clear that the Indiana senator could not win and that it was time to release his delegates. His operatives decided to support Morton's old friend and fellow midwesterner, Rutherford B. Hayes of Ohio. On the seventh ballot, Hayes won the nomination, having

²⁶ Continuing newspaper calculations of Morton's chances that spring are found in the *Evening Star*, May and June 1876.

²⁷ Holt, *By One Vote*, 90–93; Foulke, *Life of Oliver P. Morton*, 2:398–400.



P. B. S. Pinchback, 1873. Governor of Louisiana, Pinchback was elected to the U.S. Senate but blocked from final seating by Senate Democrats and some Republicans. Morton was among Pinchback's most outspoken supporters.

Courtesy, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

played the strategy employed in 1860 by Abraham Lincoln—becoming the second choice for delegates when their favorite failed to win. The dark-horse Buckeye governor, not the front-running Hoosier senator, was the fallback choice who won the day at the convention.²⁸

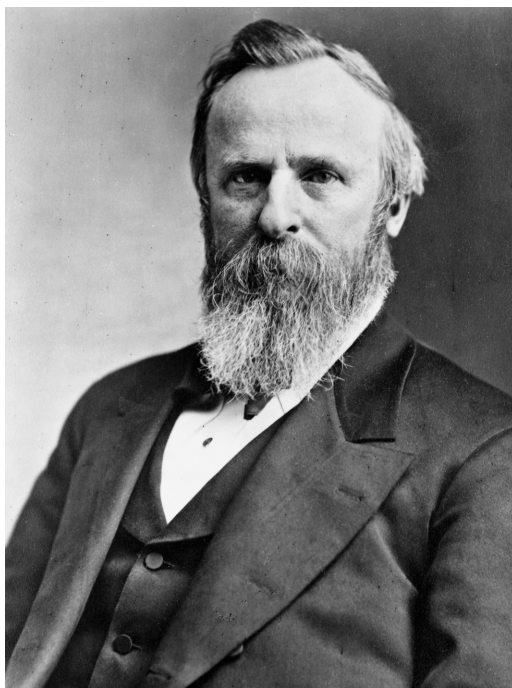
Disappointed, Morton did not waver in his party loyalty, sending the first telegram of congratulations to Hayes and pledging to campaign for the Republican nominee. True to his word, the senator threw himself into the fray, traveling widely to help his party win election for Hayes and other Republican candidates. The Democrats nominated Samuel J. Tilden

²⁸ For more on Pinchback, see James Haskins, *Pinckney Benton Stewart Pinchback* (New York, 1973). For Morton's attempts to seat Pinchback in the Senate, see Fuller, *Oliver P. Morton*, esp. chapter 9. For Pinchback campaigning for Morton, see Philip Dray, *Capitol Men: The Epic Story of Reconstruction Through the Lives of the First Black Congressmen* (Boston, 2008), 365. For Hayes becoming the nominee, see Holt, *By One Vote*, 54–66.

of New York for president and Morton's old Indiana foe Thomas Hendricks for vice president. In that summer's campaign, even seemingly unrelated issues provided political battles. In a senate speech on funding internal improvements—in this case, work on rivers and harbors—Morton joined other Republicans against the Democrats who wanted to cut drastically federal spending for such projects. But he used the speech as an opportunity to blame the Democrats for the war and trying to destroy the Union. The Hoosier orator also electioneered on the topic, in one July speech attacking the Democrats for having done nothing good in the past twenty-five years. He blamed them for the politics of slavery and sectionalism, waved the bloody shirt insisting that the Democrats were responsible for the rebellion, and accused them of treason. He charged the Democrats with supporting the Ku Klux Klan and described his opponents as “continually evil” men who aided the murderous nightriders. Just a few days earlier, on July 8, the Hamburg Massacre in South Carolina had resulted in the murder of at least half-a-dozen black men by a mob of more than one hundred whites trying to disrupt Republican campaign activities. The Democrats had only two arguments in the campaign, Morton said: “The argument has been in the South, violence, intimidation; and the argument in the North is the cry of reform and corruption. The first argument is the shotgun, the revolver, the bowie knife, and it is sharp and murderous; and the second argument is false and hypocritical.”²⁹

Back home in Indiana in August, Morton blasted away again at Democratic charges, calling Tilden and Hendricks “slanderers of our good name.” The senator railed against his enemies, calling them hypocrites who had carried out the misdeeds of which they accused others. Undaunted and uncompromising, Morton refused to give ground. The stakes were too high, and he couched the election in extreme terms, with his party the defenders of the righteous Union cause. In the Democrats, he saw “assembled the mourners for slavery, the organizers of rebellion, the Ku-Klux and . . . the Northern sympathizers and dough-faces, the advocates of state sovereignty, and the representatives of every element that had torn the

²⁹ Morton still had ambitions for a future run at the presidency, and this influenced his loyal pledge to support Hayes; see O. P. Morton to Simon T. Powell, June 25, 1876, Oliver P. Morton Papers, Indiana Historical Society. On the internal improvements debate, see *Evening Star*, July 18, 1876; Oliver P. Morton, John Sherman, and George S. Boutwell. *River and Harbor Bill and the Dead-lock: Speeches of Senators Morton, Sherman, and Boutwell*, July 18, 19, and 22, 1876 (Washington, D.C., 1876), 1–2.



President Rutherford B. Hayes, 1877. Hayes emerged as the compromise candidate of the 1876 Republican convention and went on to win the general election, with strong support from Oliver Morton.

Courtesy, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

country with civil war, drenched it with blood, and watered it with the tears of widows and orphans.”³⁰

He launched an enthusiastic assault on Hendricks, arguing that the Hoosier Democrat’s career surpassed all others in being “barren of good or important results.” Hendricks had backed Buchanan, blamed the rebellion on the Republicans, led the Peace Democrats in criticizing the Union, and helped create the Copperhead Sons of Liberty with his rhetoric. He was a racist who had opposed emancipation and, even after the end of slavery, “had been against the repeal of the Fugitive Slave law, and had opposed propositions to allow negroes to ride in the street cars or sit on juries or hold office.” Hendricks had resisted Reconstruction, opposing all three of

³⁰ Oliver P. Morton, “Tilden and Hendricks as Slanderers of Our Good Name,” *Cincinnati Gazette*, August 11, 1876.

its constitutional amendments. With such an “unbroken record of blunders, unredeemed by any good measure,” Morton marveled that anyone still claimed that Hendricks was “promising material for a great reformer.”³¹

The *Sentinel* deemed the August 11 speech “one of the poorest of Morton’s efforts” and noted his “low and scurrilous attack upon Mr. Hendricks’ political record, the most indecent and ungentle that even Morton ever uttered against a political opponent.” The Democratic paper lamented that Morton had then assaulted Tilden with “vituperation and venom, and if that distinguished reformer had spent twenty years of his life at Sing Sing, his character could not be painted blacker.” In Shelbyville, a few days later, Hendricks defended his own record and agreed with a member of his audience who called Morton a liar.³²

Morton responded in a speech at LaPorte. He again blamed traitorous Democrats for forcing him to run the state on his own when he was governor. He reminded voters that Hayes had fought for freedom and Union, calling Tilden and Hendricks the “Confederate Democracy” who still stood for rebellion. For Morton, the 1876 election was nothing less than another round in the continuing conflict against rebellion. The election was “a struggle between the blue and the gray; between the loyal and the disloyal. . . . They say we wave the bloody shirt; that we keep talking about the war. They would have us forget about the war, but they do not forget about it. Everything, in the South, turns on the war.” Southern Democrats would vote only for rebels and their so-called “Redemption” was rebellion by another name. Morton warned that “if the Democratic party shall carry the election this year, depend upon it, it will not be a triumph of Northern Democracy, but the triumph of Southern Democracy.” To end Reconstruction would be to lose the fight against rebellion, which was still going on.³³

Waving the bloody shirt and carrying the fight to the Democrats invigorated Morton, and he gave his speeches that summer standing up, moving across the platforms with the aid of his canes or crutches. His health seemed to improve and, as always, he spoke with great energy and the blunt force of his oratory battered down his opponents. But the campaign took its toll and, by October, he had to give his speeches while

³¹ Ibid.

³² *Indiana Sentinel*, August 16, 1876.

³³ Oliver P. Morton, “The History of Indiana Democracy Ventilated, Speech of Oliver P. Morton at LaPorte, Indiana,” *Indianapolis Journal*, August 15, 1876.

seated. The Democratic newspapers called him “Sitting Bull”; one paper commenting that Morton had to speak from his seat because “his views were too narrow to stand on.” Such cruel jabs underscored that Morton’s physical disability would have remained a disadvantage had he won the nomination. Still, he soldiered on, dogging Hendricks, especially, and remaining on the offense against his political opponents. Democratic papers speculated that the reason he worked so hard for Hayes was because Morton thought that he would be the power behind the throne and that the Buckeye Republican would be his puppet.³⁴

When election day arrived, 81 percent of registered voters went to the polls. Hayes lost the popular vote by more than 250,000, but Tilden fell one vote short of victory in the electoral college (184 to Hayes’s 165, with 185 needed to win). The disputed election stood as exactly the kind of crisis that Morton had predicted a few years earlier when he had proposed a plan to abolish the electoral college. Twenty electors were disputed, one from Oregon and the rest from Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina—the three Southern states still undergoing Reconstruction, complete with occupying federal troops. Elsewhere across the former Confederacy, the Democrats won in the states where Redeemers had returned to power. They also claimed wins in the three disputed states, but Republicans argued that the Democrats had used fraud and violence to steal ballots and intimidate voters. Morton and other Republicans gathered evidence of how Democrats had listed their candidates on ballots printed with Republican symbols, including a picture of Abraham Lincoln, in order to confuse illiterate or barely literate voters. Reports came from across the South that terrorist organizations including the Ku Klux Klan had intimidated African Americans to prevent them from voting. Armed with evidence of such tactics, Morton argued that Democrats were stealing the election and that Hayes had actually won.³⁵

Each of the three Southern states in question put forward two different sets of electoral results, one from Democratic-controlled legislatures showing that Tilden had won, the other from Republican-dominated election boards that declared Hayes the victor. If Hayes were awarded all of those electors and the disputed Oregon elector, he would win the election. If Tilden got just one more electoral vote, he would go to the

³⁴ *Evening Star*, August 12, 16, September 4, 7, 29, October 17, 26, 1876.

³⁵ Holt, *By One Vote*, 175–203.

White House. Congress would have to decide which electoral ballots to count. This raised another crisis that Morton had predicted and tried to prevent. When his plan to abolish the Electoral College had failed, the Indiana senator had proposed reforming the rules for counting the electors, especially the Twenty-Second Joint Rule that had been adopted in 1865. Under this rule, which was not a law and could have been changed by Congress at any time, when the electoral votes were counted any senator or representative could challenge any vote for any reason. The two houses of Congress would then immediately meet separately to vote on whether or not to sustain a challenge. If one body approved challenged ballots and the other did not, the disputed votes would be discarded. Morton had feared that someday the Democrats would have a majority in the House of Representatives and use this rule to exclude votes cast for a Republican. If no majority were reached, it would throw the election into the House of Representatives where the Democrats could steal the White House.³⁶

Trying to prevent such a case, Morton had failed in his effort to change the rules early in 1876. Now, at the end of the year, his fears seemed to be coming true. With two opposing sets of ballots from three different states, there would be challenged votes. The Democrats held a majority in the House and the Republicans controlled the Senate. This meant that the two bodies would disagree and no majority would be reached in the Electoral College. The election would go to the House of Representatives, where Tilden would be elected. Hoping to stop this, Senate Republicans voted to repeal the Twenty-Second Rule, but the House Democrats insisted that it remained in force.³⁷

The crisis mounted as Southern Democrats muttered about another civil war if the Republicans stole the election, and Republicans complained that the Democrats had already stolen the contest and should not be allowed to do so. Some Southerners threatened to refuse to attend the required joint session of Congress, denying a quorum and further muddying the waters. Others menacingly talked about impeaching President Grant for using the military to overturn the election results, because the Army had

³⁶ For more on Morton and the Twenty-Second Joint Rule, see *Congressional Globe*, 42nd Congress, 3rd Session, January 17, 1873, pp. 663–64; Holt, *By One Vote*, 26–28, 175–207; *Evening Star*, October 16, 20, 1876.

³⁷ *Congressional Record*, 44th Congress, 1st Session, February 11, 1876, pp. 1020–1024; *Evening Star*, February 11, 1876.

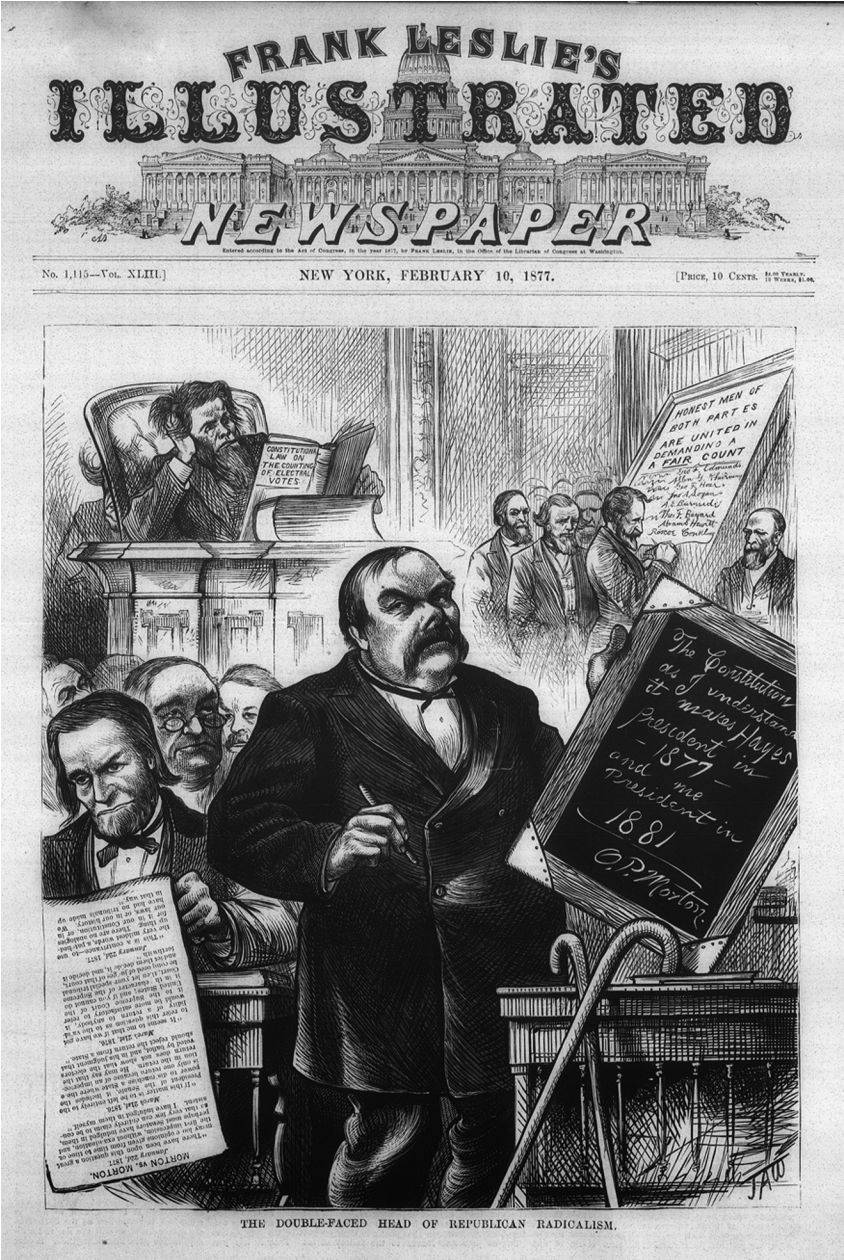
supported the election return boards that said that Hayes had won in the three disputed Southern states. Congressional leaders worked out a compromise joint committee composed of seven representatives and seven senators (including Morton). The committee eventually agreed to appoint an electoral commission to decide the disputed votes. This fifteen-member commission would consist of five representatives, five senators, and five associate justices of the Supreme Court. Only one member of the congressional committee voted against the commission plan: Senator Morton. He refused to endorse the scheme, arguing that Hayes had won the election and that the Democrats were trying to steal it in order to end Reconstruction and overturn the Union victory in the Civil War.³⁸

Morton vigorously opposed the commission plan when it came to the Senate for a vote on January 18, 1877. The commission, he argued, would go down in history alongside the Missouri Compromise and the Compromise of 1850 as examples of the North yielding to the South and good compromising with evil. He cried that “the shadow of intimidation has entered this chamber” and worried that the Democrats were using the threat of violence to coerce the Republicans into supporting the plan. Morton insisted that “Hayes has been elected President of the United States; that he has been elected under the forms of law and according to law” and argued that if the Republicans just followed the law, the Buckeye candidate “will be inaugurated, and there will be no violence and no revolution.” Although he managed to rally some support, Morton failed to stop the compromise plan and the commission was created. Perhaps because of his strong opposition, he was one of the five senators appointed to serve on the commission.³⁹

The newly-formed body divided along partisan lines, with the judges from the Supreme Court standing with the party of the president who had appointed them. Although later historians labeled him a partisan opportunist, Morton’s partisanship in this case was part of his consistent adherence to his nationalist ideology of freedom, Union, power, and party. He believed that freedom and Union were at stake, that the Democrats would overturn the hard-won victory of the North if they carried the election. The power of government was necessary to ensure the victory, to save freedom and

³⁸ Holt, *By One Vote*, 210–13.

³⁹ For coverage of the Senate debate and Morton’s part in it, see *National Republican*, January 25, 1877. Morton’s speech can be found in the *Congressional Record* and in *Appleton’s Annual Cyclopedia*, 144–47.



Frank Leslie's Illustrated, February 10, 1877. "The Double-Faced Head of Republican Radicalism" depicts Morton as a corrupt politician seeking to secure the presidency, by any means, for Rutherford Hayes.

the country. Only the party dedicated to the cause of the nation and of true freedom could be trusted to preserve the ideals and principles for which Morton and so many others had so long fought. Thus, in the commission debates, he argued forcefully for accepting the returns submitted by the Republican-controlled election boards. In the end, the commission voted along party lines to do just that, with the eight Republicans outweighing the seven Democrats in deciding to award all twenty contested electors to Hayes. The disputed election of 1876 came to an uneasy conclusion with the Republicans taking the White House.⁴⁰

Morton sincerely believed that Hayes would preserve the victory. He liked the Buckeye governor and the two men were friends. He knew that Hayes was committed to the principles of Reconstruction and would do what he could to protect the civil rights of African Americans. The Indiana senator was disappointed when the new president agreed to withdraw the last troops from the South, but recognized the reality of the situation. House Democrats had blocked military appropriations, and no funds remained to pay for a continued military occupation. Morton refused a cabinet position although Hayes offered to appoint him. Nor would he take over as chair of the Committee on Foreign Relations. Instead, he chose to remain chair of the Committee on Privileges and Elections and used that position to continue to fight for seating Republicans who he believed had won elections in states like Louisiana and South Carolina. Once again, as had too often been the case in recent years, he failed and Redeemer Democrats swept to power. Reconstruction came to an end, although Southern Democrats promised to protect African Americans' civil rights and President Hayes insisted that he would make sure that they did. Morton was enough of a realist to see the truth of the situation. Even if the Republicans had managed to seat their candidates in Louisiana and South Carolina, Democrats would have won those offices in the next round of elections. Violence, fraud, and corruption had carried the day, even as many voters, including many Republicans, had grown tired of the fight. The Democrats had won; Reconstruction was over.⁴¹

⁴⁰ The report of the Electoral Commission, including Morton's opinions, are found in *Congressional Record*, 44th Congress, 2nd Session, January 18, 1877, pp. 713–24; also see Foulke, *Life of Oliver P. Morton*, 2:461–77.

⁴¹ Oliver P. Morton, *The President's Southern Policy: Letter of Hon. O. P. Morton Upon the Overthrow of the Republican State Governments of South Carolina and Louisiana, May 24, 1877* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1877).

In the end, Morton's core principles proved unsustainable. For him, freedom under the law included equality and civil rights for all. The Union meant the nation committed to the ideals of the Founding Fathers as outlined in the Declaration of Independence. To preserve these cherished principles, power had to be employed by the government and only a party dedicated to the ideals of the freedom and Union could be trusted with such authority. In 1877, as Reconstruction came to an end, Morton faced the stark reality that he had lost his long struggle against the Democrats he still called rebels and Copperheads. His own Republican Party had abandoned the cause. At this juncture, the Indiana Radical had to choose, and he remained loyal to his party. After all, what was the alternative? He might leave the Republican organization for another, but what chance would a third party have to win elections? Even though many Republicans seemed to have sold out the principles of freedom and Union, Morton stayed with them. The only path forward was to keep the party united and to win more elections. The context was always changing and, perhaps, in 1880, the winds would shift and a Radical like Morton would win the nomination and the presidency. Staying in the party would allow the senator to influence his friend, President Hayes, and do what he could to guard the precarious rights of African Americans. If he broke with the party, he would be isolated, without a political home. Morton explained his decision well when he said, "Political principles do not execute themselves, they need a party to do that." He found that in 1877—as so many times before—party was principle.⁴²

Oliver P. Morton suffered a stroke that summer and died on November 1, 1877, at the age of fifty-four. With him died his dreams and ambitions of returning the Republican Party to a commitment to his Radical views and of one day becoming president. His one real bid for the presidency had come in 1876 and he had failed to win the nomination of the party to which he was so devoted. His campaign came up short on one hand because of concerns about his physical disability and charges of sexual impropriety and corruption—although the scandals were based on rumors and outright falsehoods. On the other hand, he lost because the country had changed and Americans had grown tired of his waving the bloody shirt. The extremist politics of the War of the Rebellion had worn thin, and the voters were ready to reunite and move beyond sectionalism. The

⁴² Ibid.

leader who thrived on political extremes failed to win the support of an electorate longing for peace and reconciliation. It was fitting that Morton passed from the scene when he did, for his death symbolically marked the end of Reconstruction and the closing of the Civil War era.⁴³



⁴³ For more on Morton's death symbolizing the end of Reconstruction, see Fuller, *Oliver P. Morton*, esp. chapter 11.