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Vice-President Stevenson and the Politics of Accommodation

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Adlai Ewing Stevenson of Bloomington, Illinois (1835-1914), Vice-President of the United States from 1893 to 1897, has been largely ignored by political scientists and practically forgotten by the American people. Although he has been relegated basically to a footnote in American government, he was quite prominent politically in his time, including two terms in the national House of Representatives, four years as First Assistant Postmaster General, and an unsuccessful try as a gubernatorial candidate in 1908. Stevenson most certainly deserves better treatment than that which he has received in the past, especially since his grandson later achieved national recognition as a presidential candidate and statesman.¹

In their attempts to concentrate their attention on other personalities of the period, such as Grover Cleveland and William Jennings Bryan, political scientists have neglected to observe the most outstanding characteristic of Stevenson’s political behavior. This was his ability to serve as a mollifying force within the Democratic Party. As a political moderate, he did not antagonize either the Cleveland or Bryan factions and was accepted as a compromise candidate. The Vice-President was a coalition Democrat who preached the politics of accommodation to others and followed that practice in his career. He sought harmony in an era of vituperation and professional partisanship, offered soothing medicine to heal party wounds, and did not indulge in personal hatreds or rancorous partisan behavior.² Holding his opponents in respect, Stevenson, a gentleman of the old school of politics, reportedly never made a personal enemy out of a political adversary. Moreover, his position in Illinois as an independent removed from boss politics further strengthened his national role in working for party pacification.

Stevenson was a party regular rigidly devoted to Democratic principles.

¹ Adlai E. Stevenson, patriarch of a prominent family and founder of a political dynasty, was the grandfather of Adlai E. Stevenson II (1900-1965), the late Ambassador to the United Nations, and the great-grandfather of Adlai E. Stevenson III, United States Senator from Illinois.
² For examples of Stevenson’s attempts to seek harmony and heal party wounds, see Adlai E. Stevenson to William Freeman Vilas, May 6, 1892, William Freeman Vilas Papers, The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison; Stevenson to Carter H. Harrison I, July 13, 1892, Carter Henry Harrison II Papers, The Newberry Library, Chicago; Stevenson to Grover Cleveland, September 6, 1892, Grover Cleveland Papers, Division of Manuscripts, The Library of Congress; Stevenson to William Jennings Bryan, July 24, 1900, William Jennings Bryan Papers, Division of Manuscripts, The Library of Congress; and Stevenson to Henry G. Davis, July 10, 1904, Henry Gassaway Davis Papers, West Virginia University Library, Morgantown.
Always a faithful follower of his party rather than a maverick who charted his own course, he could maneuver as the party and times demanded. Free from the inflexible positions of leadership into which Cleveland and Bryan pushed themselves, Stevenson pursued a different course that was far more satisfactory to his personal tastes. In this way, the Bloomington politician, emerging on the right side at the right time, became the Democratic Talleyrand of the age and a political rarity. Nominated for Vice-President in 1892 as a “liberal” to run on a ticket headed by a “conservative,” he was renominated in 1900 as a “conservative” to balance a slate led by a “liberal.” The Democrats changed leaders but kept Stevenson. Unfortunately for the Vice-President, his survival ratio was not high enough to capture the presidential nomination. By attempting to please everyone and remaining too vague on certain controversial issues, he appeared to be a straddler and ended up in 1896 satisfying nobody at the national convention. Helplessly caught in the mire between party loyalty and personal survival, Stevenson became an unwilling victim of his own political practice.  

Stevenson’s pursuit of the politics of accommodation characterized his four years in office as Vice-President. His role as presiding officer of the United States Senate afforded him an opportunity to broaden his base of support in the party for the future. Having included in his rules for politics a determination to exercise patience and a desire to be courteous and conciliatory, he proceeded to exercise his official duties in this same spirit.

The Vice-President endeared himself to the senators with his pleasant personality, impartiality, and understanding manner. He was never intolerant of the views of others, and this fairness gained him the respect of all factions in the upper chamber. Senator Shelby M. Cullom, a Republican from Illinois, once commented: “Adlai E. Stevenson became much beloved by the Senate. He also fell in love with the body. Hence he left us with benedictions.” Moreover, because senators rarely like to submit to intimidation or any vigorous exercise of power on the part of the presiding officer, they found in Stevenson’s handling of Senate business an acceptable mode of behavior. In discussing the conduct of Vice-Presidents Levi P. Morton and Stevenson, Senator George F. Hoar of Massachusetts, a Republican, contended that these two leaders asserted their authority “with as little show of force as if they were presiding over a company of guests at their own table. But the order and dignity of the body have been preserved.”

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Another reason why Stevenson became a popular President of the Senate was that he cherished a deep respect for the rules of that body and harbored no desire to see them changed. To him, the Senate was enduring, well-organized, and "the continuing body of our national legislature." He vigorously opposed all movements directed toward cloture. In this respect, those senators who advocated unlimited discussion and the unrestricted right of amendment found in Stevenson a worthy ally.

Stevenson’s popularity with the senators was further enhanced by his sense of humor that prevailed so often at the many formal and informal gatherings. Here Stevenson employed, to a highly successful degree, a political trait that could be called the power of the anecdote. His humorous remarks on these occasions gained for him a reputation in Washington society and helped to bridge gaps between political opponents, at least for the duration of the dinner.

This characteristic of Stevenson’s social life did not go unnoticed by other politicians. William L. Wilson, the Postmaster General during the latter period of Cleveland’s second administration, recorded in his diary on January 14, 1896 that at a particular gathering “when smoking began the Vice-President entertained us with several very amusing anecdotes.” A year later Wilson again mentioned Stevenson’s humor when he wrote: “Some good stories were told over the cigars, especially by Stevenson, who seems to have an exhaustless repertoire and is an excellent raconteur.”

Wilson’s view was shared by others. Andrew Dickson White, a diplomat, politician, and professor, first met the Illinois Democrat at a social event in New York and next saw him at a dinner given by the Secretary of War, Daniel S. Lamont. White found the Vice-President to be “one of the most admirable raconteurs” he had ever met. Champ Clark, the Democratic wheel horse from Missouri, recognized these same qualities in Stevenson. “Being a first-class raconteur,” Clark wrote, “he was a prime favorite with the Senators.”

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9 Andrew Dickson White, *Autobiography of Andrew Dickson White* (2 vols.; New York: The Century Company, 1907), II, pp. 126-27. The Vice-President had a supply of anecdotes ready for any occasion. One in particular that he liked to tell concerned an old Illinois farmer who walked into Stevenson’s law office one day in early 1872, the year in which Stevenson favored the nomination of Judge David Davis of Bloomington for President. After discussing a number of family matters, the visitor, a lifelong Democrat, asked for Stevenson’s preference for President. The Bloomington lawyer quickly responded that he supported Davis. The friend was rather disappointed at first to hear this news but instantly recovered enough to announce his support of the judge. He explained to Stevenson, however, that he thought it was still too early to bring “Old Jeff” out of retirement. See Stevenson, *Something of Men I have Known*, pp. 286-87. Many of Stevenson’s famous anecdotes have been recorded in his published memoirs.
Having a broad knowledge of American political history, Stevenson demonstrated a high regard for his position and accepted it despite the obvious shortcomings.\footnote{Interview with Miss Letitia E. Stevenson, Saint Louis, Missouri, October 13, 1968.} His view of the office was a strict constitutional one; as such, he realized that the duties of a Vice-President involved little that was of political significance.\footnote{Adlai E. Stevenson, "The Vice-Presidency," \textit{Collier's Weekly}, XXV (September 1, 1900), p. 3.} On the other hand, Stevenson admitted that the Vice-President could become an important force, especially when the parties were nearly balanced in the Senate. Regarding this particular concept of the office, the Bloomington politician wrote:

The office of Vice-President is one of great dignity. He is the presiding officer of the most august legislative assembly known to men. In the event of an equal division in the Senate, he gives the deciding vote. This vote, many times in our history, has been one of significance. It will readily be seen that the contingency may often occur when the Vice-President becomes an important factor in matters of legislation.\footnote{Stevenson, \textit{Something of Men I Have Known}, pp. 63-64. Vice-President Stevenson voted only twice during the four years that he held office. See Henry Barret Learned, "Casting Votes of the Vice-Presidents, 1789-1915," \textit{The American Historical Review}, XX (April, 1915), p. 571.}

Stevenson believed that as Vice-President he had a responsibility to all the people and that they should be kept informed of his views. He revealed to a Washington reporter in 1893 how he planned to conduct his office:

You boys will be just as welcome as in the old days. There will be no sentry standing in front of the vice-president's room. You will not be forced to dive into your pockets and fish out a card to be transmitted to me on a salver. The door will stand wide open. There are sofas inside for you to occupy. You will walk right in and if I am not there you will send for me. Wherever I am, the newspaper man is welcome. I am the vice-president of the people, and the people are entitled to know what I am doing. There will be no red tape about the office.\footnote{The \textit{Daily Bulletin} (Bloomington), March 6, 1893, p. 4.}

The most obvious example of Stevenson's practice of the politics of accommodation during his vice-presidential years occurred at the time of the repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act. That measure required the Secretary of the Treasury to purchase 4,500,000 ounces of silver bullion every month at the prevailing market price and to issue in payment legal tender treasury notes that would be redeemable in silver or gold at the discretion of the government. It had been a compromise solution to a perplexing problem but did not satisfy the demands of those who advocated free coinage.

Although the advocates of repeal scored an easy victory in the House of
Representatives on August 28, 1893, winning by a vote of 239 to 108, the real battle over repeal occurred in the Senate. It appeared at first that the reliable spirit of compromise might once again triumph. Democratic Senator Arthur Pue Gorman of Maryland and Republican Senator John Sherman of Ohio encouraged their colleagues to move in that direction. Even though the sentiment ran strongly in favor of conciliation, the attitude of Cleveland on the matter caused difficulty. The President stubbornly refused to consider compromise proposals and demanded unconditional repeal. His determined position eventually caused the compromise movement to collapse, but not before a lengthy debate had engulfed the Senate.\footnote{Horace Samuel Merrill, \textit{Bourbon Leader: Grover Cleveland and the Democratic Party} (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1957), pp. 179-82. Also, Stevenson, \textit{Something of Men I Have Known}, p. 243. For a study of the Senate in post-Civil War America, see David J. Rothman, \textit{Politics and Power: The United States Senate, 1869-1901} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966); Thomas A. Bailey, "Party Irregularity in the Senate of the United States, 1869-1901," \textit{The Southwestern Political and Social Science Quarterly}, XI (March, 1931), pp. 355-76; and Hannah Grace Roach, "Sectionalism in Congress (1870-1890)," \textit{The American Political Science Review}, XIX (August, 1925), pp. 500-26.}

The passage of the repeal bill was resisted vigorously by a group of recalcitrant senators who conducted a filibuster. Senators William V. Allen of Nebraska, William A. Peffer of Kansas, James K. Jones of Arkansas, and George G. Vest of Missouri were among those who spearheaded the movement against repeal. Western silver Republicans, including the two senators from Colorado, Henry M. Teller and Edward O. Wolcott, who even owned some silver mines, joined with silver Democrats in opposition to the hard money senators from the eastern states. Together the opponents of repeal marshaled their forces and secured an effective temporary block of the repeal of an act which, for want of a better piece of legislation, they regarded as still being in the best interests of their sections.

On September 25, 1893, several influential senators, who represented Cleveland's view on the bill for repeal, spoke privately with Stevenson about the filibuster and urged him to break the deadlock. They wanted him to refuse to recognize those senators who planned to speak merely for reasons of delay and obstruction. In this way, the debate would be terminated and the bill passed.\footnote{Harry Thurston Peck, \textit{Twenty Years of the Republic, 1885-1905} (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1932), p. 346.} Although he listened to their advice, the Vice-President refused to consider the plan, and the embittered contest dragged on until late October.

Stevenson's handling of the repeal measure in the Senate was the subject of some controversy. Because he did nothing to break the filibuster, the belief was widespread that he lacked the courage to stop the marathon or that his secret sympathies were with the silver senators.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 346-347. Also, Jeannette Paddock Nichols, "The Politics and Personalities of Silver Repeal in the United States Senate," \textit{The American Historical Review}, XLI (October, 1935), pp. 26-53.} The political predicament into which Stevenson was thrown by Cleveland's refusal to compromise on the
issue and by the duration of the filibuster would have been more embarrassing to the Vice-President had either of these two ideas been correct.

The Vice-President was well aware of the political significance of the repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act. Its repercussions on the Democratic Party and the administration would be profound. In a letter to his wife on October 16, 1893, in the heat of the filibuster, he revealed his innermost thoughts about the struggle which he had been witnessing:

We are in the midst of one of the most important and desperate struggles ever known to the Senate or to any legislative body. What the outcome will be, no man can forecast now. If you have time to look at the Record, you will see some of the decisions I have made. I have been sustained in every decision by the Senate. I think I have the rules pretty well in hand, and have no fears as to coming out all right. I have received many compliments from Senators on both sides of the Chamber.\(^\text{18}\)

In addition to the compliments, Stevenson also encountered criticism for his decisions. Besides the suggestions that he heard from a few administration senators as how to deal with a group of loquacious colleagues, he received correspondence regarding the matter. One letter, which came from a lawyer representing the businessmen of Boston, informed the Vice-President of his constitutional duties as the presiding officer of the Senate and then added:

In this crisis, Sir, the necessity of ending an obstruction which may have been brought about by lawless means is imperative. . . . Let the precedent be established that shall rule hereafter that the Senate of the United States has vested in its Presiding Officer the discretionary power to end obstruction by a minority which has passed the stage of legitimate discussion.\(^\text{19}\)

Because Stevenson's public speeches, including his statement that the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890 was an "ill-advised enactment," put him on record as a supporter of repeal, his refusal to break the deadlock clearly reflected his deep regard for the established tradition of unlimited debate in the Senate.\(^\text{20}\) To have done what the administration senators wanted him to do — namely to refuse to recognize those who were engaged in delaying tactics — would have run counter to his practice of the politics of accommodation. The opponents of repeal knew his position, and the advocates of the measure realized that one day they would be on the other end of a filibuster and would

\(^{18}\) Stevenson to Letitia Green Stevenson, October 16, 1893, Stevenson Family Papers, The Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield.

\(^{19}\) Leonidas L. Hamilton to Stevenson, October 18, 1893, Cleveland Papers.

\(^{20}\) The Chicago Daily Tribune, October 11, 1894, p. 5.
want the same treatment accorded them. Upholding Senate tradition, an exercise in the politics of accommodation, worked both sides of an issue. In this way, Stevenson made no enemies among his colleagues by his actions, because he was, after all, following the traditions that senators had been practicing for years. According to the Vice-President, temporary popularity in the Senate was not as important as permanent respect.

During the debate over repeal, Stevenson refused to take the responsibility for violating the rules of the Senate. To him, it would have been tantamount to destroying the shield that the politics of accommodation afforded each senator. He regarded himself as bound by his oath to obey the regulations of that body, rules which he believed had been “founded deep in human experience.” Stevenson maintained that two essentials of wise legislation and good government were the right of amendment and debate. Contending that great evils often result from hasty legislation, the Vice-President defended the procedures of the Senate when he wrote about unrestricted debate: “It secures time for consideration and full discussion upon each question. In the end the vote will be taken. Debate is rarely prolonged beyond reasonable limit. Not infrequently the public welfare is imperilled by too much, rather than too little, legislation.”

By a heavy application of his patronage power, Cleveland achieved his objective in forcing the measure through the Senate. The vote, on October 30, 1893, was forty-eight to thirty-seven. The Democrats, who totaled forty-four in the upper chamber, split evenly at twenty-two for and twenty-two against the bill. Supported by more Republicans than Democrats, the President succeeded in gaining his victory. In the process of winning, however, he helped to divide his party. Repeal of the act, moreover, failed to solve the financial crisis and did not restore confidence. As the depression deepened and the clamor for free silver increased, Cleveland was caught in a quagmire from which he could not escape.

Although Stevenson remained neutral during the debate, he expressed satisfaction with the outcome. Had he been President during that period, he probably would have compromised with the silver senators and would have tried to pull the Democratic Party together. Unlike Cleveland, he was not one to ignore the personal element in politics. The Vice-President preferred a campaign of education based upon the politics of accommodation.

Stevenson handled his duties as President of the Senate with extreme care. Shortly before his term expired in 1897, the senators individually and collectively revealed their appreciation in several ways. These manifestations found

21 Stevenson, Something of Men I have Known, p. 65.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., p. 73. Also, David S. Barry, Forty Years in Washington (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1924), pp. 188-93.
expression in resolutions of thanks passed unanimously by the Senate and in a
handsome silver service which was presented to the Bloomington Democrat,
along with a signed testimonial, by the members for his fairness and efficiency
in presiding over the deliberations of that body. 25

On March 3, 1897, the Vice-President administered the oath of office to his
successor, Garret A. Hobart, a Republican from New Jersey. Upon the
conclusion of this duty, Stevenson delivered his farewell address to his col­
leagues in the United States Senate. In his last speech to the senators, he
thanked them for the courtesy they had extended to him over the years and for
the fidelity with which they had performed their duties. He hoped that this
same cooperation would be given to Hobart. 26

Stevenson pointed out that he considered it his good fortune to have
presided over the Senate for four years. It had been a great honor and a
rewarding experience. "Intentionally, I have at no time given offense; and I
carry from this presence," he said, "no shadow of feeling of unkindness toward
any Senator, no memory of any grievance." He added: "It has been my
earnest endeavor justly to interpret, and faithfully to execute, the rules of the
Senate." 27

These closing remarks gave Stevenson the opportunity once more to defend
his support of the rules governing the upper house of Congress. Viewing the
Senate as a perpetual body, the retiring Vice-President told its members:

During the term just closing, questions of deep import to political parties
and to the country have here found earnest and at times passionate
discussion. This Chamber has indeed been the arena of great debate. The
record of four years of parliamentary struggles, of masterful debates, of
important legislation, is closed, and passes now to the domain of his­
tory. . . . By its rules, the Senate wisely fixes the limits to its own power.
Of those who clamor against the Senate and its mode of procedure it may
be truly said, "They know not what they do." 28

Upon the conclusion of this speech, Stevenson went to his office to take care
of several matters demanding his attention. Late into the night, he found time
to write his last letter as Vice-President. It was addressed to his mother in
Bloomington. He wrote:

26 Stevenson had pledged his assistance to Hobart during the transitory period between the
two administrations. The new Vice-President graciously accepted this offer from his immediate
predecessor and claimed that he could learn something from Stevenson's "great experience." See
Garret A. Hobart to Stevenson, March 26, 1897, Scrapbook, Stevenson Family Papers.
27 Stevenson, Something of Men I Have Known, p. 64. Also, U. S. Congressional Record, 54th
28 Stevenson, Something of Men I have Known, p. 65.
29 Ibid., pp. 64-65.
This is my last letter from the Vice-President’s chamber. I pass out of office at twelve tomorrow. I will be here all night to sign bills before they go to the President. My public career will then close. I sent you in advance a copy of my farewell speech. Did you see a notice of the present given me by the Senate? I wish you could have heard the speeches. I have a terrible cold — am very hoarse indeed. We will all be home soon. I am tired and need a little rest. Good night.\textsuperscript{30}

Stevenson’s political philosophy was one based upon the practice of accommodation. For one thing, he worked for a reconciliation of difference between the silverites and goldbugs within the Democratic Party. A moderate bimetallist on the vexatious currency issue of the day, he emerged as a political chameleon to represent both points of view. The Vice-President supported the conservative money plank in the 1892 Democratic platform as well as the concept of free silver in the party document of 1896. To have survived politically in both camps at the same time was a remarkable feat not equalled by any other prominent leader in the party at that time. Perhaps Cleveland and Bryan should have taken a lesson in the politics of accommodation from their running mate.

The Illinois Democrat also served as a conciliator between North and South. Born in Kentucky and having family ties in North Carolina, he could appeal to southerners in a convincing manner, as he did in campaigning against the Populists during the presidential election of 1892. On the other hand, as a northerner by choice, Stevenson spoke for the Midwest and an expanding industrial economy.

Although he was known for his willingness in performing services for Democrats, Stevenson earned a reputation among Republicans for his dedication to the politics of accommodation. Representing a rural Republican constituency, the Bloomington politician won two elections to Congress. As a lawyer who had many Republican clients, he counted members of the opposition party as among his closest friends. His friendship with President William McKinley, for example, earned him a place on the Bimetallic Monetary Commission in 1897. When he campaigned for Governor of Illinois in 1908 against a Republican incumbent, the former Vice-President came within 23,000 votes of winning at the very time that the Republican presidential nominee, William Howard Taft, swept to victory in the Prairie State. Throughout his contests, Stevenson, a loyal Democrat, always commanded more than just his party’s strength. He appealed to vast numbers of Republicans and independents by successfully making politics out of the issue of nonpartisanship and accommodation. Stevenson once remarked shortly after his election as Vice-President in 1892: “While, as Democrats, we rejoice over

\textsuperscript{30} Stevenson to Eliza Ann Ewing Stevenson, March 3, 1897, Scrapbook, Stevenson Family Papers.
the great victory we have achieved, we should not forget that we are all Americans. Democrats and Republicans alike, we have one country, one destiny. The glory which attaches to the American name and to American achievements belongs exclusively to no party or section, but is the common heritage of all our countrymen." Statements such as this were a key to understanding Stevenson's success at the polls.

Above everything else, Stevenson was a shrewd politician who carefully mapped out his strategy. He knew the importance of political friendships in Congress and how they could be used in the future. The Vice-President was cognizant of the necessity for cementing political alliances with the Bourbons in 1884 and 1892 and with the silverites in 1896 and 1900. For example, he early championed Cleveland for the presidential nomination in 1884 and again in 1892, but he endorsed Bryan for the party's prize just as quickly in 1900 and 1908. Knowing that he could do more by working within his party rather than temporarily joining a splinter group, Stevenson engaged in practical politics, paid his dues, and collected the favors owed him.

Stevenson failed in his pursuit of the Presidency in 1896. In the first place, he waited too long before announcing his intentions. Secondly, he lacked a meticulous organization to advance his interests. Finally, his position necessitated moderation, for too forceful an announcement of his presidential availability might have triggered an unwelcome response from Cleveland Democrats. In fact, the dilemma in which Stevenson found himself was not unlike that of one of his successors in the Vice-Presidency, Hubert H. Humphrey, in 1968. Not since 1860, on the eve of the Civil War, had the Democratic Party been as divided as it was in 1896. As happened in 1860 and to a certain degree again in 1968, the Democratic party in 1896 split openly, broke away from its leaders, and went on to lose the general election. In short, Stevenson was Vice-President in an administration that was castigated by one branch of his party. The same ability that had won him fame as a compromise choice four years earlier wrecked his presidential hopes when conditions favored another approach. Because of this, he failed to achieve the nomination.

Stevenson's practice of the politics of accommodation was indeed a striking characteristic of his political career. He was both a reformer and a conformer who functioned as a unifying leader to conciliate differences within the Democratic Party and to provide it with the opportunity to govern the nation. As such, the Vice-President served to bridge the gap between the more conservative tradition of Democracy under Cleveland and the more progressive brand under Bryan and President Woodrow Wilson. In the end, the most lasting contribution to American politics that Stevenson made was in founding a political dynasty. He thrust his family onto the political stage and developed a tradition of service to the nation that has continued to the present time.