

Vice Presidents of the United States Thomas A. Hendricks (1885)

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Introduction by Mark O. Hatfield.



There were no neutral tints in his own political colors.

—Senator Daniel Voorhees

American political parties have traditionally been coalitions of contradictory and contentious forces. The electoral college is largely responsible for the loose-knit nature of these political parties. Victory requires a majority of electors from throughout the nation, a feat nearly impossible for any party rooted in a single region or clustered about one ideology or interest group. To build such national coalitions, politicians must reach out to those with whom they may disagree. The Democratic party emerged from Thomas Jefferson's defense of the yeoman farmer against Alexander Hamilton's efforts to use the government to promote American industry and finance. Yet to build a national party, Jefferson needed to embrace New York's Tammany Hall, which represented urban interests. Nearly a century later, Indiana's Thomas A. Hendricks confronted that same split. He was a "soft-money" agrarian reformer, who ran twice for vice president on Democratic tickets headed by two different "hard-money" New York governors.

Early Years

A son of the Mississippi Valley, Thomas A. Hendricks was born on a farm near Zanesville, Ohio, on September 7, 1819, to John and Jane Thomson Hendricks. When just six months old, he moved with his parents to Indiana, where his father's older brother, William, was a U.S. representative and a soon-to-be governor of that new state. Hendricks was raised as a staunch Presbyterian and a Jacksonian Democrat, the two pillars of his thinking throughout his life. He attended the Presbyterian-run Hanover College in Indiana, where he proved an average student but a skillful debater. After graduating, he went east to Pennsylvania to study at a law school run by one of his uncles. In 1843 he was admitted to the bar and practiced in Shelbyville, Indiana. That same year, he met Eliza Morgan, a vivacious teenager from Ohio who was visiting in Indiana. After two years of correspondence, he felt financially secure enough to propose, and they were married in 1845. Their only child died at age three. In later years, an old neighbor

said that he doubted whether Hendricks could have achieved his political success without Eliza. "She is generous, wise and discreet. The man born to get on in the world always marries that kind of woman, it appears."¹

Slavery and Politics

Always ambitious, Hendricks plunged into politics. He was elected to the Indiana house of representatives in 1848, served as a delegate to the state constitutional convention in 1849, and won a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives in 1850. A popular member of the House, he became a follower of Illinois Democratic Senator Stephen A. Douglas and supported Douglas' controversial Kansas-Nebraska Act. That statute repealed the Missouri Compromise and permitted residents of the territories to determine whether or not to permit slavery, a concept known as "popular sovereignty." Public outrage in the North caused the dissolution of the old Whig party and a period of political instability that eventually resulted in the emergence of the new Republican party. Hendricks believed his vote for the Kansas-Nebraska Act reflected the sentiments of his constituents, although it was later cited as the cause of his defeat for reelection in 1854. He was opposed by a former Democrat representing a coalition of Free Soilers, abolitionists, temperance advocates, Know-Nothings, and Whigs. Hendricks denounced the nativism of the Know-Nothing movement and defended the rights of immigrants and religious minorities. Despite these admirable stands for minority rights, he had a blind eye on racial issues. As a delegate to the Indiana constitutional convention in 1849, he had led the move to enact "Black Laws" that promoted segregation and restricted the migration of free blacks into the state.²

After losing his seat in Congress, Hendricks in 1855 accepted an appointment from President Franklin Pierce to become commissioner of the General Land Office in the Interior Department, a post he held through 1859. As a Douglas Democrat, he felt increasingly out of step with the anti-Douglas administration of James Buchanan and resigned his office to return to Indiana, where in 1860 he ran unsuccessfully for governor. He then moved to Indianapolis to practice law.³

A Pro-Union Democrat

When the Civil War erupted in 1861, the Democratic party in Indiana divided between peace and pro-Union factions. Jesse D. Bright, the president pro tempore of the U.S. Senate, led the party's peace wing, while Hendricks became a leading "War Democrat." Bright, an imperious man who had tolerated no opposition in his twenty-year domination of the state Democratic party, was expelled from the Senate in February 1862, when it was discovered that he had written a letter addressed to Jefferson Davis as "President of the Confederate States," recommending that the Confederacy purchase rifles from an Indiana manufacturer. Bright expected that the Indiana legislature would reelect him, but instead Judge David Turpie was chosen to fill the few months remaining in his term. The legislature elected Thomas Hendricks to take the seat during the next full term. Bright thereafter blamed Hendricks for his defeat.⁴

When peace Democrats in the state legislature attempted to pass antiwar resolutions, pro-Union members bolted. Hendricks recognized that the peace movement would discredit the party, and he was sufficiently familiar with the legislature to be certain that there were enough pro-Union Democrats to defeat the resolutions. Accepting both his reasoning and his head counting, the bolters resumed their seats and defeated the peace resolutions.⁵ Hendricks took his oath as a U.S. senator in 1863, becoming one of only ten Democrats facing thirty-three Republicans. He soon assumed the role of his party's recognized leader in the Senate. Hendricks was a thorough partisan. "There were no neutral tints in his own political colors," future Indiana Democratic Senator Daniel Voorhees later commented. But even Republican senators acknowledged that his speeches were well prepared and that his arguments were plausible—if one accepted all of his premises. Assessing Hendricks' Senate career, the journalist A.K. McClure later said, "He was a Democratic Senator in the most trying times of the war, when many less faithful or less discreet men made hopeless shipwreck of their political future, but the record of Mr. Hendricks has stood the severest test and is conspicuous for its freedom from the partisan blunders which then and since have ranked as crimes."⁶

President Abraham Lincoln cultivated the support of War Democrats like Hendricks. As Congress prepared to adjourn in March 1865, Hendricks paid a last visit to the president, who told him, "We have differed in politics,

Senator Hendricks, but you have uniformly treated my administration with fairness." During the period of congressional Reconstruction of the South that followed the war, Hendricks never missed an opportunity to remind Republican senators that President Lincoln had opposed such radical Reconstruction measures as the Wade-Davis bill and had wanted a speedy return of the southern states to the Union. Hendricks consistently opposed repealing the fugitive slave laws until slavery was constitutionally abolished, and he tried to prevent African Americans from gaining the right to vote. "I say we are not of the same race," Hendricks declared; "we are so different that we ought not to compose one political community."⁷

Hendricks emerged as one of the few prominent Democrats not to be stigmatized as a Copperhead (or southern sympathizer) during the war. As a result, his name arose for the 1868 Democratic presidential nomination. He lost the nomination to New York Governor Horatio Seymour but went back to Indiana, where he was nominated to run for governor. In the fall, both Seymour and Hendricks were defeated. Hendricks returned to his law practice and bided his time for a revival of Democratic fortunes. Looking toward the 1872 presidential election, former Iowa Senator A.C. Dodge recommended Hendricks as a "worthy, able and excellent man." He believed that there was strong support throughout the Midwest for the Indianan, although he doubted that Hendricks would run well in the East. The Democrats instead nominated the eccentric newspaper editor Horace Greeley for president on a fusion ticket with liberal Republicans who opposed the corruption of the Ulysses Grant administration. That same year, Indiana Democrats nominated Hendricks to run again for governor and, while Greeley went down to a crashing defeat, Hendricks won the Indiana state house.⁸

Tilden-Hendricks

His victory in that important swing state made Hendricks a frontrunner for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1876. However, after the panic of 1873 and the widespread economic crisis that followed, Hendricks became publicly identified with agrarian reform and "soft money." Currency reformers believed that postwar contractions of the currency had caused the economic depression and that inflation of the currency through issuance of greenbacks or increased minting of silver currency would lower farmers' costs of repaying their debts. Such arguments struck fear into eastern financial circles, whose members supported sound currency based on gold and believed that any debasing of the currency would rob creditors of just returns on their investments. The hard-money element within the Democratic party rallied behind the nomination of Samuel J. Tilden, known in some circles as the "Great Forecloser." To balance Tilden, the party nominated the soft-money Hendricks for vice president.

The Republican candidate, Ohio governor Rutherford B. Hayes, carried every midwestern state except Hendricks' Indiana. On election night, it appeared that the Tilden-Hendricks ticket had won both the popular and the electoral vote, but the outcome in three southern states still controlled by Reconstruction governments remained in dispute. Both Republicans and Democrats claimed these electoral votes. The Democrats needed just one more state to win, the Republicans needed all of the disputed votes. When a deadlock developed between the Republican Senate and the Democratic House over counting the electoral votes, both sides reluctantly agreed to set up a special electoral commission. Republicans gained an 8-to-7 majority on the commission, and by that straight party vote the commission assigned all of the disputed electoral votes to Hayes, who was sworn in as president. To prevent a new civil war, Tilden and Hendricks accepted the outcome, but thereafter Democrats charged that the election had been stolen from them.⁹

Hobbled by Illness

After the electoral disappointment, Hendricks and his wife consoled themselves with a long journey through Europe. He returned to his law practice and continued to speak out on the issues of the day. Hoosiers were "a speech-loving people," as one of Hendricks' biographers noted, and large crowds always showed up for his orations. In 1880, Indiana once again boosted Hendricks for president, but while he was vacationing at Hot Springs, Arkansas, Hendricks suffered a stroke. Two years later, he developed a lameness in one foot—a result, claimed the journalist Ben: Perley Poore, of Hendricks's frequent public speaking engagements:

While speaking he was in the habit of bending forward on the tip of his right foot, resting the entire weight upon it. From the pressure of his right shoe a swelling arose on one of his toes. . . . In twenty-four hours erysipelas [an acute

skin inflammation] developed, and it was only after an illness of six months that he recovered. But he always afterwards was somewhat lame, especially when he was fatigued.¹⁰

As the 1884 election approached, Samuel Tilden, who had also suffered a paralytic stroke, mentioned to a newspaper reporter that his old running mate Thomas Hendricks wanted a reprise of the 1876 ticket of Tilden and Hendricks, "and I do not wonder, considering my weakness!" Tilden announced his withdrawal from the race, which left the Democratic nomination wide open. No one doubted that Hendricks was available for the nomination in 1884, but his constant availability in every presidential election since 1868 had devalued his candidacy. The party looked for a new face to unite them and lead them to victory after so many years in the minority. Hendricks was dismissed as a man of "inordinate ambition."¹¹

Cleveland-Hendricks

Hendricks attended the Democratic National Convention in 1884 not as a candidate but rather as a delegate who would nominate former Indiana Senator Joseph E. McDonald. His appearance at the convention drew much enthusiastic applause, since he represented the "old ticket" of 1876 that had been robbed of victory. As the convention moved toward nominating the reform governor of New York, Grover Cleveland, Cleveland's opponents—especially New York City's Tammany Hall—concluded that Hendricks was the only man around whom the opposition could be united. They planned a strategy to stampede the convention to Hendricks the next day. Just as Indiana swung its vote to him, Hendricks entered the convention hall through a door facing the delegates. The band struck up a tune as Tammany Hall boss John Kelly and his henchmen leaped from their seats and began shouting for Hendricks. As the delegates paraded, Hendricks sat calmly. "To those near him," Indiana Senator Daniel Voorhees asserted, "he simply appeared to enjoy in a quiet silent way the popular approval of his long and faithful services."¹²

These tactics might have worked, except that Cleveland's managers got wind of the conspiracy and sent messages to all the delegates warning them not to get caught up in any spurious demonstrations. Cleveland's supporters argued that New York was essential for a Democratic victory and that Cleveland, a hard-money reform governor, could attract liberal Republican voters, a group known as the mugwumps. These arguments prevailed, and the Hendricks boom fizzled when Illinois increased its vote for Cleveland, followed by enough other states to give Cleveland the nomination at the end of the second ballot. Hendricks was rewarded with the vice-presidential nomination, once again to balance a hard-money presidential candidate and to offer the promise of carrying the swing state of Indiana.¹³

The prospect of victory invigorated Hendricks, and he campaigned valiantly, proving "a tower of strength for the ticket" in what has often been described as the "dirtiest" campaign in American political history. He attacked the incumbent Republican administration, helped stop a party bolt by Tammany Hall, drew large crowds to his speeches, and dramatically survived a late-night train wreck while campaigning in Illinois. Hendricks won praise as an "urbane leader." He stood five feet nine inches tall and was described as "well proportioned and stoutly built, though not corpulent." His once light hair had turned silver, and he wore "the least of side whiskers, which are light gray, and his complexion is fair." As a speaker he was clear and forceful, while in conversation he was "easy, courteous, cautious, and deferential."¹⁴

Vice President of the Spoilsmen

In 1884, Democrats won their first presidential election since 1856, and Thomas Hendricks returned as presiding officer to the Senate where he had once served in a pitifully small minority. From the start, however, Hendricks found himself at odds with President Cleveland, a scrupulously honest man with good intentions but limited vision. Unlike Hendricks, who had long called for more government intervention in the economy to promote agrarian reform, Cleveland advocated laissez-faire economics and was a Social Darwinist who thought the slightest hint of government paternalism would undermine the national character.¹⁵

Mugwump reformers waited to see if Cleveland would expand the Civil Service System recently established by the Pendleton Act, but Democrats, long out of power, demanded patronage. Vice President Hendricks and many

Democratic senators, furious when Cleveland ignored the patronage requests of their state party organizations, considered the president's conduct "treacherous." Cleveland dismissed these complaints as the howls of old Jacksonian spoilsmen and wild-eyed currency reformers, among whom he counted his vice president. But by midsummer 1885, Cleveland buckled at the threat of revolt within his party. He replaced his civil-service-reform-minded assistant postmaster general with former Illinois Congressman Adlai Stevenson, "who understood practical politics." Given free rein, Stevenson replaced Republican postmasters with deserving Democrats at a fast clip, until more than 40,000 federal jobs changed hands.¹⁶

The Indiana Democratic organization was particularly outspoken about its dissatisfaction with Cleveland's skimpy patronage, and Vice President Hendricks became known as "Vice President of the spoilsmen." The label "spoilsman" distressed Hendricks. As one senator who knew him explained, Hendricks felt the charge came from those who "had been wont to linger in the shade and slumber while he and the 'boys,' as he loved sometimes to call the party workers, had borne the heat and dust and burden of the battle."¹⁷

In September, Hendricks left Washington to attend the thirty-fifth anniversary reunion of the surviving members of the constitutional convention of Indiana and to rest in anticipation of the coming session of Congress in December. While at home in Indianapolis, he died in his sleep on November 25, 1885.

Death of the Vice President

Hendricks' death eliminated the leader of the possible rival camp to Cleveland's presidency, but also for the second time in a decade deprived the nation of a vice president for more than three years, raising concerns about the problem of presidential succession. If Cleveland should die, who would become president? The Presidential Succession Act of 1792 provided that the Senate's president pro tempore and the Speaker of the House, in that order, should succeed. There was concern that one of these offices might soon be filled with members of the opposition rather than members of Cleveland's party, since both posts were vacant at the time of Hendricks' sudden death and, while Democrats controlled the House, Republicans controlled the Senate. On the recommendation of Massachusetts Republican Senator George F. Hoar, Congress in 1886 adopted a law that eliminated congressional officers from the line of succession in favor of cabinet officers, in order of their rank. This system prevailed until 1947, when the death of a president had again left the vice-presidency open for almost an entire term, stimulating another reevaluation and a different solution to the problem.¹⁸

When President Cleveland ran for reelection in 1888, Democrats had to choose a replacement for Thomas Hendricks. The honor went to former Ohio Senator Allen G. Thurman. This time, Cleveland faced a Hoosier Republican, Senator Benjamin Harrison. Without Hendricks on the ticket, the Democrats failed to carry Indiana. Although Cleveland won a plurality of the popular vote, he lost the electoral college and with it the presidency. Hendricks' death, as the veteran journalist Ben: Perley Poore judged, "removed an official around whom the disaffected Democrats could have crystallized into a formidable opposition," for Hendricks had not been disposed to accept being what Hannibal Hamlin had described as the fifth wheel on a coach.¹⁹

Notes:

1. W.U. Hensel, "A Biographical Sketch of Thomas A. Hendricks," in William Dorsheimer, *Life and Public Services of Hon. Grover Cleveland* (New York, 1884), pp. 184-95; John W. Holcombe and Hubert M. Skinner, *Life and Public Services of Thomas A. Hendricks with Selected Speeches and Writings* (Indianapolis, 1886), p. 93.
2. Hensel, pp. 210-12; Holcombe and Skinner, pp. 117-18; Ralph D. Gray, Thomas A. Hendricks: Spokesman for the Democracy," in *Gentlemen from Indiana: National Party Candidates, 1836-1940*, ed. Ralph D. Gray (Indianapolis, 1977), p. 126.
3. Gray, p. 128.
4. Holcombe and Skinner, pp. 195, 245.
5. Christopher Dell, *Lincoln and the War Democrats: The Grand Erosion of Conservative Tradition* (Rutherford, NJ, 1975), p. 201.
6. U.S. Congress, *Memorial Addresses on the Life and Character of Thomas A. Hendricks* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1886), pp. 26, 38-39; Hensel, p. 225.
7. Holcombe and Skinner, p. 267; Hensel, p. 226; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*,

- 1863-1877 (New York, 1988), pp. 278-79.
8. Horace Samuel Merrill, *Bourbon Democracy of the Middle West, 1865-1896* (Seattle, 1967; reprint of 1953 edition), p. 71.
 9. The best account of the disputed election is Keith Ian Polakoff, *The Politics of Inertia: The Election of 1876 and the End of Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1976). See also Chapter 19 of this volume, "William Almon Wheeler," pp. 7-8.
 10. Hensel, pp. 279, 284; Ben: Perley Poore, *Perley's Reminiscences of Sixty Years in the National Metropolis* (Philadelphia, 1887), 2:503-4.
 11. Herbert Eaton, *Presidential Timber: A History of Nominating Conventions, 1868-1960* (New York, 1964), pp. 102-7; Allan Nevins, *Grover Cleveland, A Study in Courage* (New York, 1932), pp. 146-47; *Memorial Addresses*, p. 25.
 12. Nevins, p. 154; *Memorial Addresses*, p. 29.
 13. Eaton, p. 111; Nevins, p. 154; Poore, p. 284; Richard E. Welch, Jr., *The Presidencies of Grover Cleveland* (Lawrence, KS, 1988), pp. 28-29.
 14. Nevins, p. 177; Hensel, p. 255; Holcombe and Skinner, pp. 7, 363-64.
 15. Vincent P. De Santis, "Grover Cleveland: Revitalization of the Presidency," in *Six Presidents from the Empire State*, ed. Harry J. Sievers (Tarrytown, NY, 1974), pp. 90-91.
 16. John A. Garraty, *The New Commonwealth, 1877-1890* (New York, 1968), pp. 288-90; Horace Samuel Merrill, *Bourbon Leader: Grover Cleveland and the Democratic Party* (Boston, 1957), p. 99. See also Chapter 23 of this volume, "Adlai Ewing Stevenson," pp. 3-5.
 17. Nevins, pp. 237, 247; *Memorial Addresses*, p. 63.
 18. Chester L. Barrows, *William M. Evarts: Lawyer, Diplomat, Statesman* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1941), p. 446; Richard E. Welch, Jr., *George Frisbie Hoar and the Half-Breed Republicans* (Cambridge, MA, 1971), p. 137; John D. Feerick, *From Failing Hands: The Story of Presidential Succession* (New York, 1965), pp. 140-46.
 19. Poore, 2:503-4.