

Vice Presidents of the United States Levi P. Morton (1889-1893)

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Introduction by Mark O. Hatfield.



Business experience had taught him conservatism. He never was influenced by crazy theorists.

—Senator Thomas C. Platt

Like a hero from the pages of a Horatio Alger novel, Levi P. Morton worked his way up by pluck and luck to fame and fortune. From a boy toiling in a country store, he rose to become one of the nation's wealthiest and most influential bankers and vice president of the United States. Morton might have become president as well, had his political acumen matched his financial ability.

Youth

Born on May 16, 1824, in the little village of Shoreham, Vermont, Levi Parsons Morton was named for his uncle, the first American missionary to Palestine. He was the son of a Congregational preacher, who moved his family from church to church in New England, never accruing much wealth. Although young Morton wanted to attend college, his father was too poor to send him. An older brother advised him not to worry about further schooling since "a self-taught man is worth two of your college boys." Instead, Morton took a job in a country store. After getting his fill of heavy manual labor, he sought respite as a teacher in a country school. Then he took another clerkship in the general store of W.W. Estabrook, in Concord, New Hampshire, where he learned the bookkeeper's art of calculating profit and loss.¹

Estabrook dispatched Morton to run his store in Hanover, New Hampshire. There the young Morton lived with the family of a Dartmouth College professor and met Lucy Young Kimball, whom he would eventually marry thirteen years later. But first he had a fortune to earn. Morton later recalled that he was happiest "when I was learning how to accomplish things; when I was building up my business." When his employer went bankrupt, the chief creditor, James M. Beebe, came to New Hampshire to inspect the situation and was impressed enough with Morton's industriousness to invite him to join James M. Beebe & Co. in Boston—"the business Mecca for every Yankee boy." Beebe & Co., Boston's largest importing firm, soon took Junius Spencer Morgan as a partner, thus introducing Levi Morton to Morgan's son, J.P. Morgan, who would one day become his principal rival as a banker. In 1854, Beebe

sent Morton to New York City to take charge of the company's operations there. A year later, Morton formed his own dry goods company in New York. Finally wealthy and secure enough to settle down, he married Lucy Kimball in 1856. The new Mrs. Morton disliked his Old Testament name of Levi and began calling her husband "L.P.," as he became known among family and friends thereafter.²

Banking and Politics

Morton's chief business was importing cotton from the South for New England's textile industry and exporting manufactured goods from the North to the agricultural South. When the Civil War broke out in the spring of 1861, his loss of southern clients forced him to suspend business. For the next decade, Morton worked to pay back his own creditors, dollar for dollar. Although the war soon stimulated the northern economy and rebuilt Morton's financial base, he saw a safer and more profitable future in banking. In 1863, he founded a Wall Street banking house, later named Morton, Bliss & Co., with a London firm called Morton, Rose. By the end of the war, Morton's bank could challenge the powerful Jay Cooke & Co. for the right to handle government transactions. In 1873 Cooke's bank failed, leaving Morton as one of the preeminent bankers in the nation.³

Morton's gracious manners and generous campaign contributions made him many friends in Washington, among them President Ulysses S. Grant and Grant's strongest supporter in Congress, Senator Roscoe Conkling of New York. Morton and his British partner, Sir John Rose, expanded their financial and political fortunes by facilitating U.S. negotiations with Great Britain to settle the "Alabama Claims." During the war, Britain had violated its neutrality by allowing the construction of Confederate shipping on its soil. Senator Charles Sumner, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, pressed the administration to demand large-scale compensation from Britain, including the annexation of Canada, even if those claims led the two nations to war. Morton and Rose persuaded the British and Americans to accept international arbitration of their war claims; the U.S. to reduce its demands; and the British to pay \$15 million in damages, for which the house of Morton, Rose acted as disbursing office. When advised that the government's position would be strengthened by using Morton, Rose as its agent, President Grant questioned whether Morton's firm was strong because of the government's patronage rather than the other way around.⁴

After his wife Lucy died in 1871, L.P. Morton married Anna Livingston Reade Street in 1873. Anna's connections as a member of New York's old Knickerbocker society helped propel Morton into New York's political scene. From all accounts, Anna Morton combined great charm, wisdom and prudence, making her admirably suited to be the wife of a political man. In 1876, Morton became financial chairman of the Republican National Committee. Aware that success in this position might reward him with an attractive diplomatic post, he was also considering a race for Congress. Morton asked his friend Whitelaw Reid, editor of the *New-York Tribune*, "If elected, and I wanted a foreign mission, could I well resign and accept that, or if defeated, what then?" adding "I have never made a speech in my life." Reid encouraged him not to worry about speechmaking but advised that a resignation from a newly won office would create some bitterness. When Morton declared his candidacy for a House seat from New York's Eleventh District, a fashionable residential area around upper Fifth Avenue, he ran on a platform of sound currency based on the gold standard. That plank would remain consistent through his next quarter century in politics. His opponents pictured him as a plutocrat and "a tool of Wall Street," charges that would similarly follow him in every election. Morton lost by a narrow margin but won when he ran again for the seat in 1878.⁵

The Conkling Machine

In politics, Morton identified himself with the New York political faction, the "stalwarts," headed by Republican Senator Roscoe Conkling. Opposing the stalwarts were the "half-breed" Republicans who rallied behind Senator James G. Blaine of Maine. Conkling and Blaine were bitter personal and political rivals, yet few substantive differences existed between their rival factions on the issues of the day. Conkling's machine was more identified with New York's financial interests and made sound currency its chief legislative aim, while the half-breeds placed more emphasis on railroads, industry, and the protective tariff. Both organizations, however, thrived on government patronage and opposed civil service reform. Morton's presence in the Conkling machine attested to its connections with Wall Street financiers.

Entering Congress in 1879, Morton acted as much as a representative of Morton, Bliss & Co. as he did as a representative of the Eleventh District, since he saw no difference between his own interests and those of his constituents. The newspaper reporter George Alfred Townsend described Morton as "not a loquacious man, and yet an interesting talker, and one of the pleasantest expressions of his face is that of the respectful, intelligent listener." He stood six feet tall, straight-limbed and erect, and walked with "flexible and quiet movements." With close-cropped hair and a square jaw, his face had a cosmopolitan appearance, "though the New England lines are decided." The "whole tone of his talk and character are toward tranquillity," Townsend observed. In the House, Morton was "a close listener, a silent critic, a genial answerer; neither intrusive nor obtrusive." Since Morton was wealthier than his colleagues, he was able to establish his family in a handsome house on Lafayette Square that became a popular meeting place for politicians and high society. Morton won a reputation for his urbanity and generous hospitality. Among the friends he made was Representative James Garfield of Ohio.⁶

Declining the Vice-Presidency

In 1880, Morton went to the Republican convention as a Conkling lieutenant, dedicated to winning a third-term nomination for Ulysses S. Grant. Conkling's stalwarts were equally determined to stop the nomination of Blaine. When a deadlock developed, Blaine's half-breeds threw their support to Garfield, a darkhorse candidate. Once Garfield won the nomination, he realized that he would need a New Yorker on the ticket and immediately thought of his wealthy and well-positioned friend, L.P. Morton. Morton scurried to find Conkling, who objected. When Morton declined the offer, the vice-presidential nomination went instead to another Conkling man, Chester A. Arthur, who had fewer scruples about breaking with the boss.

Still trying to make peace with the Conkling faction, Garfield came to New York in August 1880 for a meeting in Morton's suite at the Fifth Avenue Hotel. There, Garfield promised to support the Conkling machine's patronage demands, which included the post of secretary of the treasury. The Treasury Department oversaw the New York customhouse, upon whose patronage the New York machine had been built. Morton agreed to chair Garfield's campaign finance committee, assuming that the treasury portfolio would be his. After winning the election, however, Garfield insisted that he had made no specific pledges. In December 1880, Garfield recorded in his diary that Morton was "under misapprehension" that he had been promised the Treasury Department. "This was not my understanding and seems wholly inadmissible. It would be a congestion of financial power at the money centre and would create jealousy at the West."⁷

Blaine, who had been named secretary of state, pronounced Morton "unfit" for the treasury, while Senator Conkling traveled to Garfield's home in Mentor, Ohio, to lobby for Morton. Conkling wanted to balance Blaine in the cabinet, to protect his organization's control over the New York customhouse, and to remove Morton from a hotly contested race for the other Senate seat from New York, which Conkling wanted for Tom Platt. Haughtily, Conkling told the president-elect that New York would rather be passed over completely in the cabinet if it could not obtain the Treasury Department. Even Garfield's wife Lucretia joined the fray when she wrote from a New York shopping trip: Mr. [Whitelaw] Reid told me this morning that Morton had been very ugly in his talk about you, using the expression that seems to be so gratifying to the Conkling clique, "That Ohio man cannot be relied upon to stand by his pledges."

Shortly before the inauguration, Garfield offered Morton the secretaryship of the navy, which he accepted. But Conkling and Arthur roused Morton from his bed in the middle of the night and persuaded him to decline the post. The next day Garfield recorded: "Morton broke down on my hands under the pressure of his N.Y. friends, who called him out of bed at 4 this morning to prevent his taking the Navy Dep't. . . . The N.Y. delegation are in a great row because I do not give the Treasury to that state." Despite his exasperation, Garfield still owed Morton something for his work as campaign finance chairman and settled on making him minister to France.⁹

Collapse of the Conkling Machine

As president, Garfield confronted the Conkling machine by appointing the half-breed Republican William Robertson to be collector of the port of New York and head of the customhouse. His action triggered a series of events that culminated in the resignations of Senators Conkling and Platt, who expected to be reelected by the New York legislature as a show of support. Instead, both were defeated. In the midst of this monumental struggle, on July

2, 1881, President Garfield was shot by a deranged follower of Conkling's stalwarts. On July 20, when Morton sailed for France, Garfield was still lingering and recovery seemed possible. But on September 19, the president died, making Chester Arthur—and not L.P. Morton—president of the United States. Morton spent the next four years in the diplomatic service, attending largely to the ceremonies connected with France's gift of the Statue of Liberty to the United States. But he still harbored ambitions for a seat in the Senate.¹⁰

By the time Morton returned to the United States, Roscoe Conkling had quit politics for a lucrative law practice and Tom Platt had picked up Conkling's leadership of the New York party. In 1884 Platt decided to support Blaine for president, on the grounds that Chet Arthur had deserted his former friends. Morton followed the Platt machine into the Blaine camp. He was one of the two hundred businessmen who attended the infamous "millionaires' dinner" given in Blaine's honor at Delmonico's restaurant on October 29, 1884. At that dinner, a Protestant minister rose to denounce the Democrats as the party of "rum, Romanism, and rebellion." Blaine ignored the remark, but Democrats seized upon it and publicized it widely among Irish voters. Blaine lost New York by a narrow margin and with it the presidency.¹¹ Platt put Morton forward unsuccessfully for senator in 1885 and 1887. In the former instance, Morton was perceived as the frontrunner, having greater resources and the full backing of Platt's machine. But Platt's men had made the mistake of taking all the key committee posts in the state assembly, causing the "soreheads" who had been left out to unite behind another candidate, who snatched away the coveted Senate seat. The 1887 election was a three-man race, in which another candidate appeared to have a better chance of winning for the stalwarts. Morton's withdrawal from the race, seen as an expression of his selfless sense of duty to his party (or faction of the party), raised his chances for the vice-presidential nomination in 1888.¹²

A Strange Victory

When James G. Blaine, declining in health, made it clear he would not run again for president in 1888, Tom Platt threw New York's support to Indiana Senator Benjamin Harrison—the grandson of former President William Henry Harrison. Blaine recommended Harrison as the best candidate and suggested for vice president former Representative William Walter Phelps of New Jersey. However, Platt's support of Morton helped the banker defeat Phelps by a margin of five to one. The ticket of Harrison and Morton put together a strange victory in the presidential election. They lost the popular vote by 90,000 but still managed to beat the incumbent President Grover Cleveland in the electoral college, 233 to 168. The journalist Arthur Wallace Dunn attributed the Republican success in 1888 to the combined political shrewdness of Republican National Committee chairman and Pennsylvania Senator Matt Quay and New York party boss Tom Platt.¹³

As president, however, Benjamin Harrison would not allow Platt and Quay to dictate his cabinet and other federal appointments. Although principled, his stand against the spoilsmen alienated him from those most responsible for his election. A thoughtful man, Harrison was cold in person but articulate and compelling as a public speaker. By contrast, Vice President Morton was no public speaker, but "a loveable personality," who "filled every position with grace, dignity, and ability." In an era of greed, corruption, and excess, Harrison and Morton both epitomized family life and puritanical religious values. Harrison's cabinet was conservative and business oriented, with the department store magnate John Wanamaker serving as postmaster general. The political office-seekers ridiculed the publicity received by Harrison's family, particularly his granddaughter, known as Baby Ruth (namesake of the candy bar); they scoffed that the supposedly puritanical Morton owned Washington's Shoreham Hotel (which he named after his Vermont birthplace), where liquor was sold; and they belittled the attention given to Wanamaker's Sunday school teaching. As a spoilsmen's verse put it:

The baby rules the White House,
Levi runs the bar,
Wanny runs the Sunday school,
And dammit here we are!¹⁴

Due to Mrs. Harrison's illnesses and death in 1892, Anna Morton often entertained on behalf of the administration at the vice president's mansion on Scott Circle. "Mrs. Morton became the leader of society in Washington, and there was never a more brilliant and popular leader than she," according to one account. "It was her innate graciousness, her innate tact, and her kindness of heart . . . which won her admiration and respect of all." Morton, whose only child by his first marriage had died in infancy, had five daughters by his second wife and boasted a lively home.¹⁵

The Businessman's Cabinet and the Millionaires' Club

Just as Harrison's cabinet was called the "businessman's cabinet" for its inclusion of Wanamaker and the Vermont marble baron Redfield Proctor, the Senate over which Vice President Morton presided was dubbed a "millionaires' club." In the late nineteenth century, businessmen had steadily gained control over both the Republican and Democratic parties and used their political positions to advance their economic interests. Senators became identified as spokesmen for railroads, timber, mining, and other industries. As California Senator George Hearst, who had made his millions in mining, proclaimed: "the members of the Senate are the survivors of the fittest." It seemed appropriate, therefore, that the Senate's presiding officer should be one of the nation's most prominent bankers.¹⁶ President Harrison considered the greatest failure of his administration to be its inability to pass the federal elections bill sponsored by Henry Cabot Lodge. Known as the "Force bill," it was intended to force the South to permit black men to vote and thereby protect their civil rights. After Republican losses in the congressional elections of 1890, the Senate had taken up the Lodge bill again, only to encounter a Democratic filibuster by those who believed it would restore a Reconstruction-like Republican rule in the South. Harrison summoned Republican senators to the White House and urged them to do everything possible to pass the bill. But western silver Republicans believed that the nation's most pressing need was an inflated currency to cure economic ills. These Republicans joined Democrats in passing a resolution to take up a new currency measure in place of the elections bill.

The elections bill reached the Senate floor only because of Vice President Morton's tie-breaking vote. But the bill immediately encountered another filibuster, and Morton did nothing to help Republican efforts to break it. Republican senators hoped to persuade Morton to vacate his chair, in order to allow a more sympathetic member to preside, but Morton insisted on being present throughout the debate. Because the vice president had announced that he planned to preside as a neutral figure and not follow the dictates of the Republican caucus, he was accused of doing little to maintain party discipline and compared unfavorably to Speaker of the House Thomas Brackett Reed, who presided with an iron fist. Massachusetts Senator George F. Hoar sneered at Morton as one of those vice presidents who "asserted their authority with as little show of force as if they were presiding over a company of guests at their own table." Finally on January 22, 1891, a resolution to replace the elections bill with another was passed 35 to 34, and the elections bill died.¹⁷

Unceremoniously Dumped

As the Republican convention approached in 1892, Morton's supporters floated his name for the presidency, but he lacked the necessary delegate votes. Then Secretary of State Blaine resigned from Harrison's cabinet to become a candidate himself. The "Old Guard" bosses, notably Pennsylvania's Quay and New York's Platt, supported Blaine, but President Harrison held the majority of the delegates. Morton was unceremoniously dumped from the ticket in favor of another New Yorker, his supposed friend Whitelaw Reid. President Harrison apparently had never cared much for his vice president—or forgiven him for his neutrality over the Force bill—and did not demand his renomination. At the same time, the "Platt Contingent" at the convention determined that a Harrison ticket was doomed to defeat, and they had better plans for Morton.¹⁸

In 1894, Platt ran Morton for governor of New York, a race that he won handily. Platt later memorialized Morton as "the safest Governor New York ever had. Business experience had taught him conservatism. He never was influenced by crazy theorists, but conducted his administration as he did his great private financial institutions." Senator Chauncey Depew similarly credited Morton as bringing to the governorship "business ability which had made him one of the great merchants and foremost bankers." In 1896, Platt put the seventy-two-year-old Governor Morton forward as New York's favorite son for the Republican presidential nomination, to stop the nomination of Ohio Governor William McKinley, whose past flirtation with free silver worried the gold standard men of the East. Platt organized banquets and planted newspaper editorials that encouraged Morton to envision himself in the White House. But these efforts were routed by the campaign strategies of the brilliant businessman-tactician Mark Hanna, who engineered McKinley's nomination.¹⁹

Morton retired from politics and returned to his banking career, organizing the Morton Trust Company. In 1909, when Morton was in his eighties, an offer came from J.P. Morgan to merge the Morton bank into the Morgan Guaranty Trust Company. Morton deeply regretted that, as a result of the merger, the company bearing his name

was retired from the business world. L.P. Morton died on his ninety-sixth birthday in 1920, already a long-forgotten name in both banking and politics.²⁰

Notes:

1. Robert McNutt McElroy, *Levi Parsons Morton: Banker, Diplomat and Statesman* (New York, 1975; reprint of 1930 edition), pp. 25-26.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 20-37, 39; George Alfred Townsend, "Levi P. Morton: A Biography," in Lew Wallace, *Life of Gen. Ben Harrison* (Philadelphia, 1888), p. 361.
3. McElroy, pp. 42, 51.
4. David M. Jordan, *Roscoe Conkling of New York: Voice in the Senate* (Ithaca, NY, 1971), pp. 151-52; William S. McFeely, *Grant, A Biography* (New York, 1981), pp. 333, 336, 355.
5. Royal Cortissoz, *The Life of Whitelaw Reid* (New York, 1921), 1:351; McElroy, pp. 71-74.
6. McElroy, pp. 84-88, 97; Townsend, pp. 354-55, 372.
7. Theodore Clarke Smith, *The Life and Letters of James Abram Garfield* (New Haven, CT, 1925), 2:1047, 1055; Louis J. Lang, ed., *The Autobiography of Thomas Collier Platt* (New York, 1910), pp. 128, 131-32. See also Chapter 20 of this volume, "Chester Alan Arthur," pp. 4-6.
8. Smith, pp. 1074, 1078, 1083-84.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 1090-91; Harry James Brown and Frederick D. Williams, *The Diary of James A. Garfield* (East Lansing, MI, 1981), 4:552; Jordan, p. 376.
10. Smith, p. 1072; Justus D. Doenecke, *The Presidencies of James A. Garfield & Chester A. Arthur* (Lawrence, KS, 1981), pp. 20-21, 30, 95.
11. Lang, ed., p. 181; Jordan, pp. 416-17.
12. Chester L. Barrows, *William M. Evarts: Lawyer, Diplomat, Statesman* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1941), pp. 436-37; Lang, ed., pp. 187-92; Paul Lancaster, *Gentleman of the Press: The Life and Times of an Early Reporter, Julian Ralph of the Sun* (Syracuse, NY, 1992), p. 141.
13. Robert F. Wesser, "Election of 1888," in *History of American Presidential Elections, 1789-1968*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and Fred L. Israel (New York, 1969), 2:1635; Arthur Wallace Dunn, *From Harrison to Harding: A Personal Narrative, Covering a Third of a Century, 1888-1921* (Port Washington, NY, 1972; reprint of 1922 edition), 1:8.
14. Homer Socolofsky and Allan B. Spetter, *The Presidency of Benjamin Harrison* (Lawrence, KS, 1987), pp. 19-45; Frank Carpenter, *Carp's Washington* (New York, 1960), p. 305; Chauncey M. Depew, *My Memories of Eighty Years* (New York, 1924), p. 220; Herbert Adams Gibbons, *John Wanamaker* (New York, 1926), 1:328.
15. *Great Leaders and National Issues of 1896* (New York, 1896), p. 287.
16. Thomas C. Corchran and William Miller, *The Age of Enterprise: A Social History of Industrial America* (New York, 1942), pp. 162-64.
17. McElroy, pp. 188-91; Socolofsky and Spetter, pp. 64-65; Charles W. Calhoun, "Civil Religion and the Gilded Age Presidency: The Case of Benjamin Harrison," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 23 (Fall 1993): 658; George F. Hoar, *Autobiography of Seventy Years* (New York, 1903), 2:68.
18. McElroy, pp. 194-205; H. Wayne Morgan, *From Hayes to McKinley: National Party Politics, 1877-1896* (Syracuse, NY, 1969), p. 415.
19. Lang, ed., pp. 332-33; Depew, pp. 147, 218, 220; James A. Kehl, *Boss Rule in the Gilded Age: Matt Quay of Pennsylvania* (Pittsburgh, 1981), pp. 199-203; Morgan, p. 491.
20. McElroy, p. 320.