Alumni

Abram Hewitt and the Disputed Election of 1876

As the campaign manager for Democratic nominee Samuel J. Tilden, Abram Stevens Hewitt 1842CC helped keep a contested presidential race from turning violent.

By
Paul Hond
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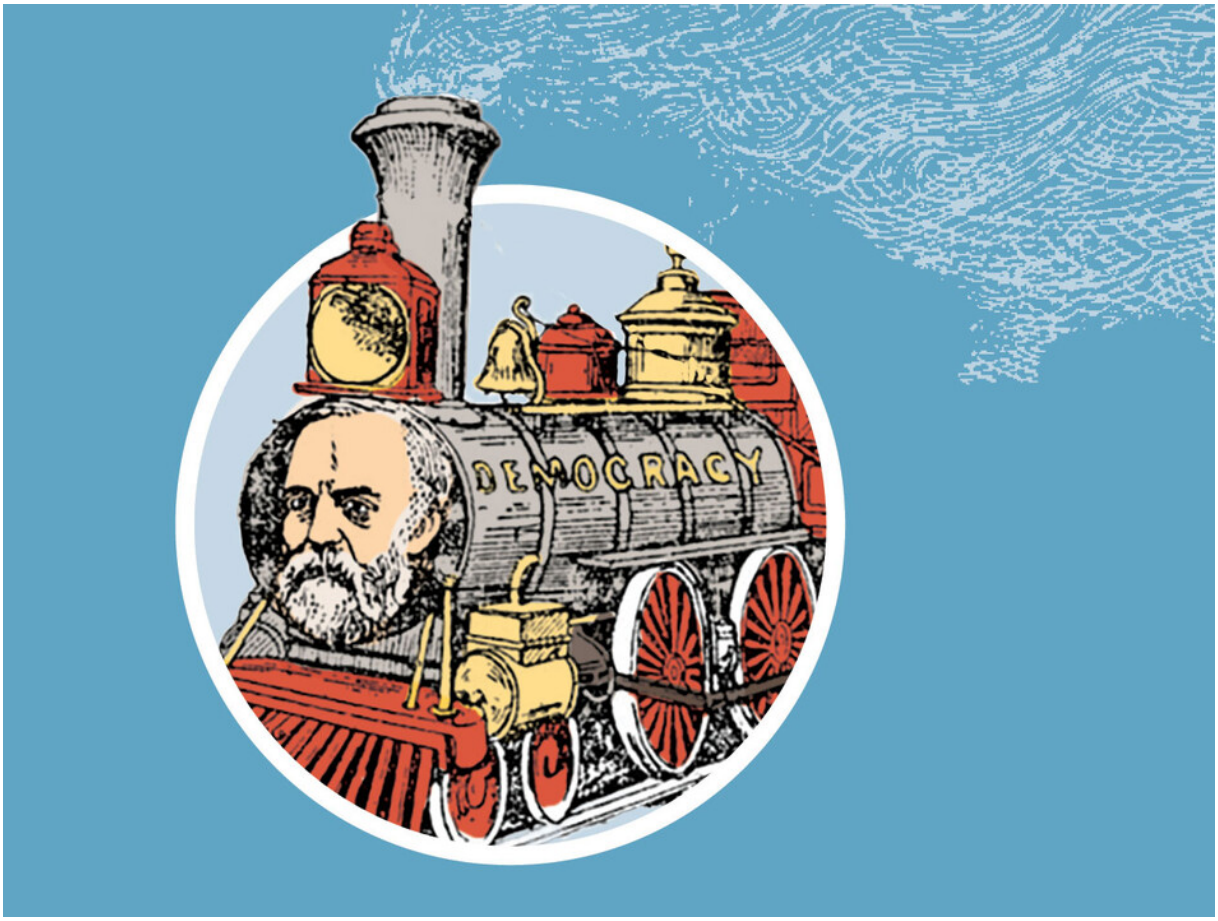

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He was an industrialist, a congressman, an anti-corruption crusader, the mayor of New York, a cofounder of the Cooper Union (named for his father-in-law, Peter Cooper), and a Columbia trustee. But for Abram Stevens Hewitt 1842CC, no role in public life was more pivotal than the one he played during the disputed presidential election held 150 years ago, a decade after the Civil War — a dispute so bitter that many people, including Hewitt, feared it would reignite the conflict.

Hewitt, who had made his name fighting the graft of New York Democratic machine boss William Tweed, was chairman of the Democratic National Committee and campaign manager for New York governor Samuel J. Tilden, the 1876 Democratic nominee for president. Tilden's opponent was the Republican Rutherford B. Hayes, governor of Ohio. A big issue that year was Reconstruction. Republicans wanted to continue this postwar effort to redress the injustices of slavery; Democrats sought to end it. Though Tilden ran chiefly on a platform of civil-service reform and lower taxes, Republicans charged that as president, he would empty the treasury to repay white property owners in the former Confederacy for their losses.

Days before the election, Hewitt told Tilden to issue a letter promising that, if elected, he would *not* pay dispossessed white Southerners. Tilden reluctantly yielded. By the end of Election Day, Tilden had won 184 of the required 185 electoral votes, to Hayes's 165.

But in Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina — the only Southern states with Republican-led, pro-Reconstruction governments — as well as in Oregon, the electoral votes were in dispute. Twenty votes were at stake, and Hayes needed all of them. Both sides claimed fraud, and Republicans accused Democrats of suppressing the Black vote (gained with the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870) through intimidation.

To break the stalemate, Congress convened a bipartisan electoral commission in January 1877, consisting of five senators, five congressmen, and four Supreme Court justices, evenly divided between parties. A fifth justice was needed to avert a tie, and the four justices chose Joseph P. Bradley, a Republican known for his nonpartisanship. Hewitt accepted Bradley — a move that Tilden considered "surrender," leading him to accuse Hewitt, who had his own political ambitions, of trying to sink his candidacy. And just as Tilden had feared, the commission voted along party lines, 8–7, giving all twenty outstanding electoral votes to the Republican Hayes.

Democrats were outraged, and threatened to filibuster the electoral vote count. With partisans screaming for blood, the two parties met in February in Washington to cut a deal. As historian C. Vann Woodward 1932GSAS wrote in his 1951 book *Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction*, “There was something else at stake, and it was probably of more consequence in the long run than any of the previous considerations. This was the question of whether the country could regain the ability to settle Presidential elections without the resort to force.”

In exchange for their acceptance of a Hayes victory, the Democrats demanded the withdrawal of federal troops from the South, where they’d been stationed since the war’s end. The Republicans assented. No sooner had the troops left than the three Republican governments in the South collapsed. Reconstruction was over, and Jim Crow began.

In his 1940 autobiography, Columbia president Nicholas Murray Butler recounted the 1876 campaign. Hewitt, he wrote, defended the electoral commission, and saw Tilden as dangerously power hungry: “Mr. Hewitt insisted that Mr. Tilden would, at that time, have gone to any lengths to obtain the Presidency and that he, Mr. Hewitt, was one of the powerful restraining forces which kept Mr. Tilden from precipitating a conflict and perhaps bringing on a new Civil War.”

Hewitt became mayor of New York City in 1887, and his plans for rapid transit earned him the moniker the Father of the New York Subway. On May 2, 1896, he helped dedicate the new Columbia campus in Morningside Heights. His most famous speech came in 1883, when, as a congressman, he spoke at the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge. In his remarks, Hewitt exalted the bridge as a symbol of civic virtue over the corruption embodied by “Boss” Tweed.

“But what man is fit to hold office?” Hewitt said to the crowd of thousands, which included President Chester A. Arthur. “Only he who regards political office as a public trust, and not as a private perquisite to be used for the pecuniary advantage of himself or his family, or even his party. Is there intelligence enough in these cities, if thus organized within the parties, to produce the result which we desire?”

This article appears in the Fall 2026 print edition of Columbia Magazine *with the title* "*Electoral Dysfunction.*"

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