

Vice Presidents of the United States Adlai E. Stevenson (1893-1897)

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Introduction by Mark O. Hatfield.



"Has Mr. Cleveland yet consulted you to that extent?" Vice President Stevenson was once asked. "Not yet," he replied. "But, there are still a few weeks of my term remaining."

In February 1900, the *Chicago American* ran a photograph of former Vice President Adlai Stevenson holding his new grandson, Adlai Ewing Stevenson II. That year the grandfather was again nominated to run for vice president on the Democratic ticket. A half century later, the grandson would run twice as the Democratic nominee for president and gain even greater national and international prominence. Yet it was the grandfather who came closest to becoming president of the United States—when President Grover Cleveland underwent critical surgery.¹

Youth

The Stevenson family were Presbyterians from Northern Ireland who migrated first to Pennsylvania and then to North Carolina and Kentucky. Adlai E. Stevenson, son of John Turner Stevenson and Eliza Ewing Stevenson, was born on the family farm in Christian County, Kentucky, on October 23, 1835. He attended the common school in Blue Water, Kentucky, presided over by a "dreaded schoolmaster," Mr. Caskie. Years later, when as vice-presidential candidate Stevenson was about to speak at a barbecue in Kentucky, the elderly schoolmaster approached the platform and inquired, "Adlai, I came twenty miles to hear you speak; don't you remember me?" Stevenson instantly replied, "Yes, Mr. Caskie, I still have a few marks left to remember you by!"²

In 1852, when Adlai was sixteen, frost killed the family's tobacco crop. His father set free their few slaves and moved to Bloomington, Illinois, where he operated a sawmill. Adlai worked in the mill and taught school, earning money for college. He attended the Presbyterian-run Centre College in Danville, Kentucky, headed by the Reverend Lewis Warner Green. Adlai fell in love with Green's daughter Letitia, but family problems delayed their marriage for nine years. His father's death prompted Adlai to return to Bloomington to run the sawmill; then, when the

Reverend Green died, Letitia and her mother moved near Bloomington. Mrs. Green considered the Stevensons socially inferior and did not favor a marriage between the young people, even though Adlai had studied law and had been admitted to the bar in 1858. Not until 1866 did Adlai and Letitia finally marry. They had three daughters and a son, Lewis, who became father to the later presidential candidate.³

A Democrat in Republican Territory

As a young lawyer, Stevenson encountered such celebrated Illinois attorneys as Stephen A. Douglas and Abraham Lincoln, campaigning for Douglas in his 1858 Senate race against Lincoln. Stevenson also made speeches against the "Know-Nothing" movement, a nativist group opposed to immigrants and Catholics. That stand helped cement his support in Illinois' large German and Irish communities. In a predominantly Republican area, the Democratic Stevenson won friends through his storytelling and his warm and engaging personality. In 1860 at the age of twenty-five, he was appointed master in chancery (an aide in a court of equity), his first public office, which he held during the Civil War. In 1864 Stevenson was elected district attorney, and at the end of his term in 1868 he entered law practice with his cousin, James S. Ewing. Stevenson & Ewing became one of the state's most prominent law firms.⁴ In 1874, when Stevenson ran for the House of Representatives as a Democrat, local Republican newspapers painted him as a "vile secessionist," but the continuing hardships from the economic panic of 1873 caused voters to sweep him into office with the first Democratic congressional majority since the Civil War. In the presidential election year of 1876, however, the Republican ticket headed by Rutherford B. Hayes carried his district, and Stevenson was narrowly defeated for reelection, taking 49.6 percent of the vote. Then, in 1878, he ran on both the Democratic and Greenback tickets and won. Returning to a House from which one-third of his earlier colleagues had either voluntarily retired or been retired by the voters gave Stevenson a sense of the swiftly changing tides of politics. In 1880, again a presidential election year, he once more lost narrowly, and he was defeated in his final race for Congress in 1882.⁵

The Headsman of the Post Office

Stevenson served as a delegate to the Democratic convention of 1884 that nominated Grover Cleveland for president. Cleveland's reform record as governor of New York helped win over Republican reformers, the mugwumps, who enabled him to defeat the popular but scandal-ridden Republican candidate James G. Blaine. When Cleveland took office as president, the mugwumps expected him to carry out the goals of civil service reform rather than return to the spoilsmanship of Jacksonian Democracy. They felt reassured at first when Cleveland appointed an able Republican as postmaster of New York City. But job-hungry Democrats besieged the administration for patronage, and the president had to respond to the angry rumblings from his party on Capitol Hill.

Particularly at stake were the 55,000 fourth-class postmasters. Although paying just a thousand dollars a year, these offices were critically important to local political operations. In small towns, the postmaster knew everyone, as well as the mail they received and the newspapers and magazines they read. This knowledge placed the postmasters in an excellent position to keep the national party organization informed on public opinion. The local postmasters would also distribute party literature in bulk more cheaply than if it were individually addressed. Former Democratic nominee Samuel J. Tilden, a master political organizer, reminded the Cleveland administration that these rural post offices essentially served as their party's local headquarters. To leave them in the hands of Republicans would be "infidelity to the principles and causes of the Administration."⁶

When First Assistant Postmaster General Malcolm Hay, a civil service reformer, resigned due to ill health after only three months in office, Cleveland appointed the more partisan Adlai Stevenson to succeed him. Given free rein to remove Republican officeholders, Stevenson thoroughly enjoyed swinging the axe. One Republican journalist described Stevenson as "an official axman who beheaded Republican officeholders with the precision and dispatch of the French guillotine in the days of the Revolution." Dubbed "the Headsman" for replacing some 40,000 Republicans with deserving Democrats, he once "decapitated sixty-five Republican postmasters in two minutes." Republicans protested but recognized that they had swung the same axe, and even the mugwumps realized that true civil service reform probably could not be achieved until greater balance was achieved between Democratic and Republican officeholders.⁷

Cleveland rewarded Stevenson with a judicial nomination to the supreme court of the District of Columbia, but Senate Republicans refused to confirm the man who had discharged so many of their postmasters. When Cleveland was defeated for reelection in 1888, President Benjamin Harrison appointed James S. Clarkson as first assistant postmaster general, and Clarkson promptly undid Stevenson's handiwork by replacing 32,335 of the fourth-class postmasters. When the Democrats chose Cleveland once again as their standard bearer in 1892, they appeased party regulars by the nomination of the "headsman of the post-office," Adlai Stevenson, for vice president. As a supporter of using greenbacks and free silver to inflate the currency and alleviate economic distress in the rural districts, Stevenson balanced the ticket headed by Cleveland, the hard-money, gold-standard supporter. Just before the election, Cleveland learned that Republicans were planning a lurid exposé of Stevenson's soft-money record. Cleveland's campaign manager caught Stevenson at a speaking engagement in West Virginia and handed him a letter endorsing sound money. Stevenson signed the letter and released it to the press, thus defusing the issue. The winning Cleveland-Stevenson ticket carried Illinois, although not Stevenson's home district.⁸

Civil service reformers held out hope for the second Cleveland administration but saw Vice President Stevenson as a symbol of the spoils system. He never hesitated to feed names of Democrats to the Post Office Department. Once he called at the Treasury Department to protest against an appointment and was shown a letter he had written endorsing the candidate. Stevenson told the treasury officials not to pay attention to any of his written endorsements; if he really favored someone he would tell them personally.⁹

Silver and Gold

While such stories about "Uncle Adlai" brought smiles around Washington, Stevenson's presence as next in line to the presidency frightened Cleveland's more conservative supporters. Just before Cleveland took office, a financial panic on Wall Street had plunged the nation into depression. As a staunch advocate of limited government, Cleveland disapproved of any government program to reduce economic suffering. By contrast, Vice President Stevenson represented the "populist doctrines" of currency reform that were creeping into the Democratic party. In June 1893, after Cleveland proposed repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act and a return to the gold standard, one of his hard-money supporters wrote Cleveland saying: "I wish you had Congress in session *now*. You may not be alive in September. It would make a vast difference to the United States if you were not." The writer did not know that Cleveland faced a potentially fatal operation. A habitual cigar-smoker, Cleveland had developed cancer of the mouth that required immediate surgery. The president insisted that the surgery be kept secret to avoid another panic on Wall Street over the thought of a silverite like Stevenson in the White House. While on a yacht in New York harbor that summer, Cleveland had his entire upper jaw removed and replaced with an artificial device, an operation that left no outward scar. The cancer surgery remained secret for another quarter century. Cleveland's aides explained that he had merely had dental work. His vice president little realized how close he came to the presidency that summer.¹⁰

Meanwhile, a major battle loomed in the Senate over currency reform. In 1890, the Republican President Harrison had supported the Sherman Silver Purchase Act in return for silver Republicans' support of the protective tariff named after Ohio Representative—and future President—William McKinley. But in the 1890 elections the unpopular McKinley tariff defeated many Republicans, including McKinley, restored Democratic majorities in Congress, and bolstered the populist movement that was demanding more government intervention in railroad regulation, currency reform, and farm relief. Disdainful of the populists, Cleveland interpreted the Republican defeat as vindication of his policies. Upon reentering the White House in 1893, he was determined to repeal the Sherman Act to restore business confidence and therefore called Congress into extraordinary session in August to consider the issue.¹¹

In October 1893, efforts to repeal the Sherman Silver Purchase Act met with a filibuster in the Senate. Indiana Senator Daniel Voorhees, leader of the Cleveland Democrats, announced that the Senate would remain in continuous session until a vote was taken. Opponents made repeated calls for quorums, feigned illness, and refused to appear even when summoned by the Senate sergeant at arms. Those conducting the filibuster benefitted from the cooperation of the presiding officer. Vice President Stevenson refused to turn his back on the silverites, who had helped to nominate him, and gave no aid to the administration in whipping the dissenters into line. The prominent Washington correspondent Julian Ralph knew that the Senate had no formal cloture procedure but heard that it

might be possible for the vice president to cut off debate by simply ordering a vote. Ralph asked the opinion of former House Speaker Thomas B. Reed, who had broken similar dilatory actions in the House by counting the minority as present even if they failed to answer the roll. Reed asserted that the vice president "could do whatever he pleased if he had a majority behind him." But Democrat Isham G. Harris of Tennessee, the president pro tempore, strongly disagreed. "Why, sir, I don't believe he would live to accomplish it," said Harris (who later repudiated the threatening quote when it appeared in the Ralph story).¹²

New York Democratic Senator David Hill followed Ralph's suggestion by circulating a petition to force the vice president to overrule all dilatory motions, but it failed to attract many signers. Nor were Democrats able to agree on adoption of a cloture rule. Finally, the Senate accepted a compromise arranged by Maryland Democratic Senator Arthur Pue Gorman that established a gradual reduction of silver purchases over a three-year period. Although this agreement made possible passage of the repeal, President Cleveland never forgave Gorman for his compromise and thereafter rarely consulted this important Democratic leader. Repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act only contracted the currency and further weakened the economy. Silverites called it the "Crime of 1893." The Democrats became tagged as the party of the "empty dinnerpail" and suffered sweeping congressional defeats in 1894.¹³

A Notable Sense of Humor

Adlai Stevenson enjoyed his role as vice president, presiding over "the most august legislative assembly known to men." He won praise for ruling in a dignified, nonpartisan manner. In personal appearance he stood six feet tall and was "of fine personal bearing and uniformly courteous to all." Although he was often a guest at the White House, Stevenson admitted that he was less an adviser to the president than "the neighbor to his counsels." He credited the president with being "courteous at all times" but noted that "no guards were necessary to the preservation of his dignity. No one would have thought of undue familiarity." For his part, President Cleveland snorted that his vice president had surrounded himself with a coterie of free-silver men dubbed the "Stevenson cabinet." The president even mused that the economy had gotten so bad and the Democratic party so divided that "the logical thing for me to do . . . was to resign and hand the Executive branch to Mr. Stevenson," joking that he would try to get his friends jobs in Stevenson's new cabinet.¹⁴

Toward the end of his term, "Uncle Adlai" was a dinner guest at the home of Senator Gorman. The vice president had a strong sense of humor, which he suppressed while presiding over the Senate but let loose in private. At dinner, Stevenson said he resented the familiar charge that vice presidents were never consulted by the president and told a story about Vice President John Breckinridge once being consulted by President James Buchanan—about the wording of his Thanksgiving message. "Has Mr. Cleveland yet consulted you to that extent?" Senator Gorman asked. "Not yet," Stevenson replied. "But, there are still a few weeks of my term remaining."¹⁵

Stevenson was mentioned as a candidate to succeed Cleveland in 1896. Although he chaired the Illinois delegation to the Democratic National Convention, he gained little support. As one Democrat noted, "the young men of the country are determined to have something to say during the next election, and are tired of these old hacks." Stevenson received a smattering of votes, but the convention was taken by storm by a thirty-six-year-old former representative from Nebraska, William Jennings Bryan, who delivered his fiery "Cross of Gold" speech in favor of a free-silver plank in the platform. Not only did the Democrats repudiate Cleveland by embracing free silver, but they also nominated Bryan for president. Many Cleveland Democrats, including most Democratic newspapers, refused to support Bryan, but Vice President Stevenson loyally endorsed the ticket. In the fall, Bryan conducted the nation's first whistle-stop campaign, traveling extensively around the country and capturing people's imaginations. Although he did far better than expected, he lost the election to Ohio's Republican governor, William McKinley.¹⁶

A bimetalist himself, McKinley ran on a gold-standard platform. But McKinley wanted to enact a protective tariff, and, to win support from silver Republicans, he promised to appoint a bipartisan commission to negotiate an international agreement on bimetallism. Silverites hoped that a prominent Democrat might be appointed, but when their leading candidates declined they settled for "a man of no particular weight," the former vice president. The work of the commission came to naught. Stevenson found more satisfaction as a political speaker, addressing all things "purely and absolutely Democratic."¹⁷

After the 1896 election, Bryan became the titular leader of the Democrats and frontrunner for the nomination in 1900. Much of the newspaper speculation about who would run as the party's vice-presidential candidate centered on Indiana Senator Benjamin Shively. But when reporter Arthur Wallace Dunn interviewed Shively at the convention, the senator said he "did not want the glory of a defeat as a vice presidential candidate." A disappointed Dunn said that he still had to file a story on the vice-presidential nomination, and then added: "I believe I'll write a piece about old Uncle Adlai." "That's a good idea," said Shively. "Stevenson is just the man. There you have it. Uniting the old Cleveland element with the new Bryan Democracy. You've got enough for one story. But say, this is more than a joke. Stevenson is just the man." For the rest of the day, Dunn heard other favorable remarks about Stevenson, and by that night the former vice president was the leading contender, since no one else was "very anxious to be the tail of what they considered was a forlorn hope ticket."¹⁸

The Populists had already nominated the ticket of Bryan and Charles A. Towne, a silver Republican from Minnesota, with the tacit understanding that Towne would step aside if the Democrats nominated someone else. Bryan preferred his good friend Towne, but Democrats wanted one of their own, and the regular element of the party felt comfortable with Stevenson. Towne withdrew and campaigned for Bryan and Stevenson. As a result, Stevenson, who had run with Cleveland in 1892, now ran with his nemesis Bryan in 1900. Twenty-five years senior to Bryan, Stevenson added age and experience to the ticket. Nevertheless, their effort never stood a chance against the Republican ticket of McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt. Stevenson returned again to private practice in Illinois, making one last attempt at office in an unsuccessful race for governor in 1908. After that, he retired to Bloomington, where his Republican neighbors described him as "windy but amusing."¹⁹

Grandfather and Grandson

Through Stevenson's long career, his wife Letitia was a "keen observer and judge of people, and a charming hostess." Although suffering from migraine headaches and severe rheumatism that forced her to wear leg braces when standing at receptions, she dutifully supported his many political campaigns. Letitia also helped establish the Daughters of the American Revolution as a way of healing the divisions between the North and South after the Civil War. She succeeded Mrs. Benjamin Harrison as the DAR's second president-general. Adlai Stevenson II remembered his grandparents' home as "a very formal household." The vice president addressed his wife as "Mrs. Stevenson" and she called him "Mr. Stevenson." Young Adlai considered his grandfather "one of the great raconteurs of his day" and learned much about American history and politics from him. At his grandfather's house in Bloomington he met many "distinguished Democrats" from around the land, including William Jennings Bryan. He recalled that hanging on the wall was a lithograph, "The Lost Bet," depicting a gentleman in top hat and frock coat paying off an election bet by pulling a wagon down a street beneath a banner that read: "Grover Cleveland and Adlai E. Stevenson."²⁰

Adlai Stevenson died in Bloomington on June 14, 1914. Thirty-eight years later, his grandson and namesake, then serving as governor of Illinois, agonized over whether to make himself available for the Democratic nomination for president. When Adlai E. Stevenson II appeared on the television news show *Meet the Press*, a reporter from the *Chicago Daily News* pressed him for a commitment by saying: "Wouldn't your grandfather, Vice President Stevenson, twirl in his grave if he saw you running away from a chance to be the Democratic nominee in 1952?" Stevenson, who loathed giving up his governorship for what most likely would be a futile campaign against the war hero Dwight Eisenhower, blanched at the comparison and replied, "I think we have to leave Grandfather lie."²¹

Notes:

1. Jeff Broadwater, *Adlai Stevenson and American Politics: The Odyssey of a Cold War Liberal* (New York, 1994), p. 1.
2. Adlai E. Stevenson, *Something Of Men I Have Known* (Chicago, 1909), p. 47.
3. Porter McKeever, *Adlai Stevenson: His Life and Legacy* (New York, 1989), pp. 15-18; Jean H. Baker, *The Stevensons: A Biography of an American Family* (New York, 1996), pp. 82-95.
4. George Spiel, *The Battle of 1900* (Chicago, 1900), p. 475; Broadwater, p. 1.
5. McKeever, p. 17; Stevenson, p. 47; Baker, pp. 112-22.
6. Horace Samuel Merrill, *William Freeman Vilas, Doctrinaire Democrat* (Madison, WI, 1954), pp. 100, 102-3.
7. David S. Barry, *Forty Years in Washington* (Boston, 1924), p. 191; Solomon X. Griffin, *People and Politics:*

- Observations by a Massachusetts Editor* (Boston, 1923), p. 307; Wayne Morgan, *From Hayes to McKinley: National Party Politics, 1877-1896* (Syracuse, NY, 1969), p. 446; Merrill, *William Freeman Vilas*, p. 105.
8. Griffin, pp. 307, 327; McKeever, p. 17; Herbert Eaton, *Presidential Timer: A History of Nominating Conventions, 1868-1960* (New York, 1964), pp. 145-47; Allan Nevins, *Grover Cleveland, A Study in Courage* (New York, 1932), pp. 504-5.
9. Nevins, p. 518.
10. Horace Samuel Merrill, *Bourbon Democracy of the Middle West, 1865-1896* Seattle, 1967; reprint of 1953 edition), pp. 216, 237; Morgan, p. 450; Richard E. Welch, Jr., *The Presidencies of Grover Cleveland* (Lawrence, KS, 1988), pp. 60, 106, 119; Robert H. Ferrell, *Ill-Advised: Presidential Health and Public Trust* (Columbia, MO, 1992), pp. 3-11.
11. Paolo E. Coletta, "The Democratic Party, 1884-1910," in *History of U.S. Political Parties*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (New York, 1980), 2:996.
12. Paul Lancaster, *Gentleman of the Press: The Life and Times of an Early Reporter, Julian Ralph of the Sun* (Syracuse, NY, 1992), p. 221.
13. John R. Lambert, *Arthur Pue Gorman* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1953), pp. 193, 195, 199; Baker, pp. 163-71.
14. Stevenson, pp. 63, 243-44; Spiel, p. 477; Allan Nevins, ed., *Letters of Grover Cleveland, 1850-1908* (Boston, 1933), p. 380.
15. David S. Barry, *Forty Years in Washington* (Boston, 1924), pp. 191-92.
16. Merrill, *William Freeman Vilas*, p. 198.
17. Leon Burr Richardson, *William E. Chandler, Republican* (New York, 1940), p. 551; Spiel, p. 477.
18. 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), 1:344; Baker, pp. 174-77.
19. Louis W. Koenig, *Bryan: A Political Biography of William Jennings Bryan* (New York, 1971), p. 324; Broadwater, p. 2.
20. McKeever, p. 18; John Bartlow Martin, *Adlai Stevenson* (New York, 1952), p. 41; Baker, pp. 154-63.
21. McKeever, p. 185.