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A Fractured Party

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A Fractured Party

Abstract

The Republican party was fractured and in tatters. Warring factions could barely decide the most important issues of the day, let alone rally around a candidate. A decade of fractious politics within the party left no true power brokers. The former Republican president was less than enthusiastic about the tickets his party fielded. America was faced with deciding between two candidates plagued by scandal. And a man from Adams County was not above trying to stir up even more trouble. [excerpt]

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Comments

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A fractured party

The Republican party was fractured and in tatters. Warring factions could barely decide the most important issues of the day, let alone rally around a candidate. A decade of fractious politics within the party left no true power brokers. The former Republican president was less than enthusiastic about the tickets his party fielded. America was faced with deciding between two candidates plagued by scandal. And a man from Adams County was not above trying to stir up even more trouble.

The year was 1884, and the Republican Party was in an odd place. At the Republican National Convention in Chicago, the polar wings of the party battled for control; the Stalwarts and the Half-Breeds were at each other's throats. Gettysburg's Jacob A. Kitzmiller was at the center of the maelstrom, sending telegrams back to local lawyer John L. Hill. Keeping his friends apprised of the state of affairs, Kitzmiller wrote back to Gettysburg, "It will be Blaine or a dark horse. No chance for Arthur."

President Chester A. Arthur was facing a challenge from his own party. Arthur was once the champion of the Stalwarts – the wing of the party that wanted to maintain patronage. Since America began, politicians had used cushy government positions to repay their political operatives. Ending the system should have been impossible. But after the death of his boss, former-Vice-President Arthur betrayed his supporters and made Civil Service Reform a way of memorializing the dead James Garfield. Stalwarts turned to James G. Blaine.

Blaine had his own problems, chiefly a huge scandal around leaked letters which had haunted him for decades. Blaine was

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so untrustworthy to his fellow Republicans that a third faction, the Mugwumps, headed by New York newspaper editor George Curtis. The Mugwumps – self-styled independents – bolted from the party and faced off against Blaine on moral grounds: government jobs should not be for sale and candidates should be trustworthy.

It was into this crack that Jacob Kitzmiller inserted himself, trying to help the Republican establishment as best he could – using the same weapon Blaine's enemies were using. Kitzmiller deployed a trumped-up letter from George Curtis, impugning the New York publisher's honor and chalking up his opposition to Blaine to blind avarice.

"The independents of New York hold the balance of power, and no man more obnoxious to them than Mr. Blaine could be nominated," Curtis purportedly wrote to Kitzmiller in the widely published letter, "The independents are anti-protection, and whoever we elect must be for revenue reform." New York, hub of international trade, could never survive stifled imports and choked money markets.

Syndicated stories around the country credited Kitzmiller with the damning letter. "Kitzmiller says that he was not a Blaine man originally," the stories reported, "but finding at Chicago that the whole country wanted Blaine, he waived his personal preferences and went to work enthusiastically for the nominee." Jacob Kitzmiller himself was proud, noting in his biography in the 1886 history of the county that, "he is one of the subjects of the famous Curtis-Kitzmiller letter during the Blaine and Cleveland campaign."

But the Curtis-Kitzmiller letter scandal was only really famous in Kitzmiller's own mind. The scandal gained no traction. Blaine gained no support thanks to Kitzmiller's flash-in-the-pan effort. And in spite of the fact that Kitzmiller believed, "the whole country wanted Blaine," Grover Cleveland won Adams County by 450 votes and was swept into the White House.

Politics has always been messy. The evidence left behind from political battles lingers for a long time. Though his bid at political fame was fleeting, you can still find the evidence of Jacob A. Kitzmiller's scramble for a legacy. The telegrams from the Republican Convention of 1884, where Kitzmiller first circulated the Curtis letter, sit nestled in a folder in the research files of the Adams County Historical Society just like countless other treasures waiting to be discovered.

John M. Rudy is a volunteer researcher at the Adams County Historical Society in Gettysburg. More information can be found at achs-pa.org.