

Amy Klobuchar recently joined the roster of Minnesota elected officials—Tim Pawlenty, Michelle Bachmann, Walter Mondale, Hubert Humphrey, Eugene McCarthy, Harold Stassen—who have aspired to the presidency. To that list of presidential hopefuls, add a figure little-remembered today: Cushman K. Davis.

The Presidency or Nothing

Cushman K. Davis
and the Campaign of 1896

Kent Kreuter and Gretchen Kreuter

IN JULY, 1896, free silverite William Jennings Bryan of Nebraska electrified the Democratic national convention in Chicago with the climax of his eloquent attack upon the single gold standard: “You shall not press down upon labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.”¹ The address brought Bryan national prominence, his party’s nomination for president, and an honored place in the memory of a country that had long loved orators and oratory.

Although the story of the “Cross of Gold” speech is familiar, a somewhat similar phenomenon within the Republican party is hardly known at all. Senator Cushman K. Davis of Minnesota, for years an able but relatively inconspicuous politician, managed through a single speech to launch himself briefly upon the tides of presidential politics.

Davis was not nearly as successful as Bryan, of course, but his failure to secure the Republican nomination is a revealing chapter in the history of the 1890s. It tells much



Senator Cushman K. Davis around the time of his bid for the 1896 Republican nomination for president.

about the nature of the paths to power and about the character of Minnesota Republicanism. The political capital that Davis invested in his presidential boom before the election of 1896 did not bear him the dividends he hoped for. They might have come later, though, for at the time of his death in 1900 he was again considered a power to be reckoned with—a political figure who had served his country in a spirit of “manly patriotism,” as a popular phrase of the day had it, and who had emerged from obscurity to capture, for a time at least, the imagination of many respectable Americans.

The speech that brought fame to Davis was delivered on the floor of the Senate in July, 1894. Against a background of economic depression, the Pullman strike, which had begun a few weeks earlier, was entering a crucial period. A sweeping government injunction threatened the arrest of all who blocked the movement of mail



From the Archives

This article is first in an occasional series spotlighting captivating and relevant scholarship from back issues of *Minnesota History*. Originally published in the Fall 1969 issue, “The Presidency or Nothing” was the cowinner of the 1969 Solon J. Buck Award for best article published in the quarterly.

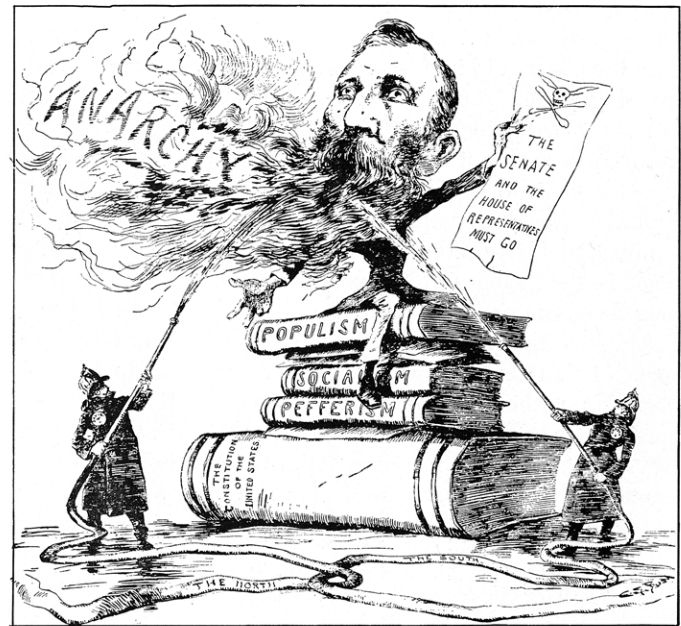


trains or interstate commerce. In the hope of helping the strikers in some way, Populist Senator James H. Kyle of South Dakota introduced a resolution that would have limited the scope of the injunction.²

The times, however, were not propitious for the success of even so modest a proposal. To a great many Americans anarchy appeared to be near. Armed disturbances had already broken out in the Chicago area, and mobs of strikers had swarmed over the railroad tracks there. Eugene Debs, head of the striking American Railway Union (ARU), had issued a belligerent statement regarding the intervention of federal troops: "The first shot fired by the regular soldiers at the mobs here," Debs had declared, "will be the signal for a civil war."³

It was amid such mounting passions and growing public alarm that the Senate began its debate on the Kyle resolution. As it did so, union leaders across the nation sought the political support necessary to pass the resolution. J. J. McInnis, president of the Duluth, Minnesota, local of the ARU, had sent a telegram to Davis asking his aid. The senator's reply was swift and unmistakable: "I will not support Senator Kyle's resolution. . . . My duty to the constitution and the laws forbids me to sustain a resolution to legalize lawlessness. The same duty rests upon yourself and your associates. . . . You are rapidly approaching the overt act of levying war against the United States. . . . You might as well ask me to vote to dissolve this government."⁴

These were exactly the sentiments that Davis elaborated in his address to the Senate shortly thereafter. Lawlessness and bloodshed, he insisted, would spread over the nation if the Kyle resolution passed. Worse yet—and here Davis made an ominous prediction—the Pullman strike contained all the elements that might produce another Civil War. If labor were not restrained, the country would be divided once more. Now, said Davis, it was not the South that preached disloyalty and disunion, but his own Middle West: "The laboring men of the great States of the East are not engaged in it [the Pullman strike]. South of the Potomac and the Ohio law and order reign supreme. I am ashamed as a Northern man to invite the contrast, but it is true; and if the time shall come for the strength of this nation to be put forth to put down the



Cushman K. Davis of the North joined with John B. Gordon of the South in battling anarchy in this cartoon from the *New York Evening Telegram* of July 12, 1894.

rising tide of anarchy . . . the nation can call with equal confidence upon the people of the South and of the North for that purpose."⁵

Himself a veteran of the Civil War, Davis was waving the bloody shirt in a new direction. He did not mistake his audience, for the Senate floor and galleries were charged with emotion when he finished. Senator John B. Gordon of Georgia, a former Confederate general, was heard next. He played upon the same theme: If anarchy were indeed imminent, he announced, "The men who wore the gray from 1861 to 1865 . . . will be found side by side with the men who wore the blue, following the same flag, in upholding the dignity of the Republic over which it floats, and in enforcing every law upon its statute books."⁶

Applause swept the chamber again, and down the aisle hobbled Daniel E. Sickles, who had lost a leg as a Union general at Gettysburg. He clasped the hand of his onetime adversary Gordon and pressed it to his heart. It was a moving moment.⁷ It was also the moment that spelled doom for the Kyle resolution. The effort to shape some small legal protection for the strikers was dead.

New life, however, had come to Davis. He was catapulted into the national limelight. His analogy between labor strife and southern secession had a powerful impact on both press and public, and his appeals for sectional harmony were widely admired. Newspapers in every part of the country were suddenly filled with flattering references to the senator from Minnesota.⁸ To a conservative press, loyalty and a sense of national duty seemed just what were

needed in this time of trouble, and Davis seemed to be their very embodiment. Many were, in fact, prepared to go a good deal further in their admiration of Davis.

Throughout the nation people began to talk and write of him as a candidate for the Republican presidential nomination in 1896. Sections of the country which had scarcely known Davis' name a week earlier now heard it linked with aspirations to the highest office in the land. The idea was so often and so urgently expressed⁹ that Davis himself began to take it quite seriously. Perhaps he could make a try for the nomination. At once he ordered twenty thousand copies of his Senate speech printed, confiding to a close friend as he did so, "I am overwhelmed with astonishment at its reception throughout the country."¹⁰

WHEN THE SENATE SESSION ENDED, Davis returned home to St. Paul, newly knighted with national prominence. There, in a wide-ranging interview given to a sympathetic reporter, he expressed himself soberly on the issues of the day. There was no need for pessimism about the country, he insisted, for the industry of the American people would surely triumph over temporary economic dislocations. The history of the world was full of difficulties of this sort and of recoveries from them. Davis was fond of wrapping himself in the mantle of history and proud of his lifelong study of the past. [. . .]¹¹

In that summer of 1894, Davis had good reason to believe in the power of a single speech, for his political career had been launched in Minnesota in 1870 by just such a performance. "Modern Feudalism," an attack upon the growing power of the corporation in American life, had been so well received that Davis was convinced the address had been chiefly responsible for his election as governor in 1874.¹² He served one term.

It seemed clear, too, that new forces were at work in American political life. The appearance of the People's, or Populist, party in 1891 and its strong showing in the presidential election of 1892 caused Democratic and Republican leaders alike to explore ways of neutralizing the appeal of their new competition. But rifts in the old parties, besides giving the Populists and other third parties hope of winning advantages, also made it unlikely that a majority of either the Republicans or Democrats could be easily commanded by any single group or individual. Historically, such conditions had favored the emergence of a dark horse.¹³

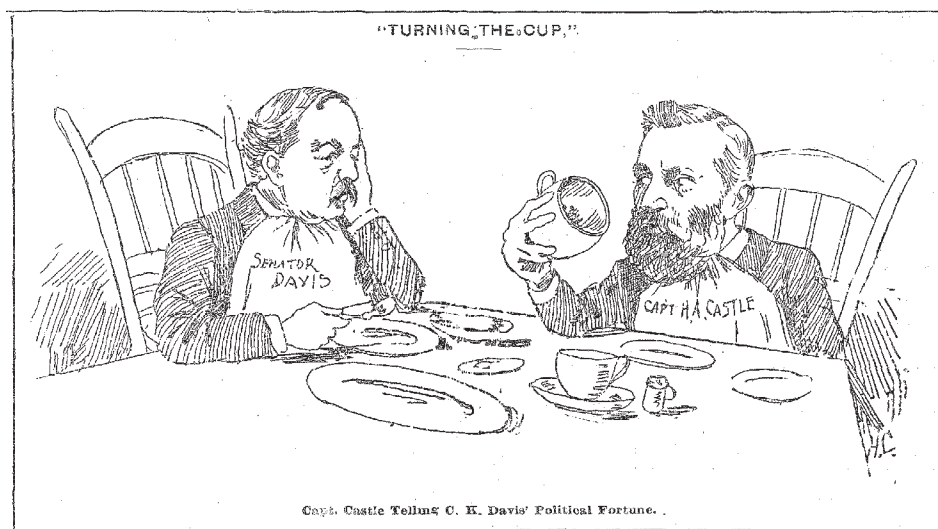
The Republican national convention, however, was nearly two years away. If Davis were to be considered a candidate for the nomination, he needed somehow to keep refueling the enthusiasm generated by his oration.

He also had to convince politicians across the nation that he was a potential winner and, most important in those early stages, he had to secure the loyal support of Republicans in his home state. These far from simple tasks were further complicated by a variety of suspicions and apprehensions that arose concerning his possible candidacy. There was, first of all, a widespread assumption that Davis was not truly in search of the presidency but merely wanted a bloc of delegates he could trade at the proper moment for an offer to be named secretary of state.¹⁴ His frequent criticisms of Democratic foreign policy lent some credence to that suspicion.

In some respects, though, Davis' pronouncements on foreign affairs served as a counter to another of his handicaps—one of considerable magnitude in a period of hard times, unemployment, and depression. He was the lawyer for James J. Hill, president of the Great Northern Railway Company. Farmers and laboring men were bound to despise this association when their own fate seemed so painfully but inevitably bound to the whims of such men of great wealth. Davis had converted that handicap into his major asset in 1894, but only because many Americans were genuinely fearful of civil disorder or even civil war. If no further labor troubles should erupt before the nominating convention, Davis would have to develop other means of commanding public attention and neutralizing the unpopular effects of his own corporate ties. Foreign policy offered one way of minimizing class antagonism to his candidacy. Prosperity through economic expansion and penetration abroad could be a feasible alternative to prosperity through domestic reform.¹⁵

Another problem Davis faced was that he represented a relatively unimportant state whose population total in the 1890 census was only 1,310,283. He would have to attract support from outside Minnesota in order to gain even a toehold on the nomination. Many Minnesota Republicans still remembered the sad story of the "Windom Ten," the delegation to the Republican convention of 1880 which had remained hopelessly pledged to its favorite son, William Windom, to the bitter end. In doing so the Minnesotans had earned the enmity of party leaders, and the rivers of patronage had dried up—a circumstance no party regular wanted to see repeated.¹⁶

Finally, Davis had to contend with the fact that Minnesota Republicans were a fractious lot. He could not count on the automatic approval and aid of party leaders in the state. His own re-election to the Senate in 1893 had been momentarily placed in doubt by what he considered to be the machinations of former Governor William R. Merriam. And in January, 1895, when Senator William D. Washburn expected to be returned to office by the vote



Henry A. Castle "turned the political teacup" to tell Davis' fortune in this cartoon published in the Duluth News Tribune, August 19, 1895.

Henry A. Castle

of the Minnesota legislature, Governor Knute Nelson, another Republican, suddenly announced that he was a candidate. Nelson was elected amid bitter acrimony, as Davis stood neutrally on the sidelines, declining to risk his own new ambitions so soon.¹⁷

NONE OF THESE DIFFICULTIES seemed insurmountable to Davis. In the spring of 1895 he began to set up the organizational structure necessary to win Republican favor. Congressman James A. Tawney of Winona, Captain Henry A. Castle of St. Paul, and Davis' law partners, Cordenio A. Severance and Frank B. Kellogg, were to marshal support in Minnesota. Senators Richard Pettigrew of South Dakota and Elisha Keyes of Wisconsin were to do the same in their states, while Samuel E. Thayer, a Minneapolis lawyer, traveled about seeking support in the East.

No time was lost. An editorial in the *New York Times* of April 14, 1895, proclaimed, for example, that the reasons for Davis' nomination were better than those given for any other candidate during the last decade. Hot on the heels of the *Times* endorsement came a letter to Davis from Thayer, explaining that the piece had been written by "Mr. Edward Cary, a warm personal friend of mine whom I have been visiting. We have been talking much about you and he seems greatly interested in what your friends are doing and told me he would [be] extremely glad to aid them in any way he could consistently." [. . .]¹⁸

Three days later the *New York Tribune* announced "A Presidential Preference" in its editorial columns. Davis, it declared, "has an ample stock of moral courage behind his sound convictions on public questions, and the people of his own State honor themselves when they honor him." As

if all this were not enough, Thayer reported to Davis with enticing mystery, "There are influences at work that manifest themselves later on & in good season."¹⁹

Henry Castle was busy, too. In July he sent a confidential letter to many of "Senator Davis' friends throughout the State" which sought to advise them "as to what action is judicious at this time with regard to holding the field open for him next year in case his Presidential prospects continue to improve." Castle urged adoption of "a waiting attitude" for the present. "But it should be agreed," he continued, "that if he wants it and asks it, he should have the delegation at large from this State, and the delegations from all the Congressional districts. And they should be composed of influential men without exception, tried friends of his, with no other object and no second choice."²⁰

Attached to each letter was a copy of an editorial from the *Sentinel* of North St. Paul which echoed Castle's advice and observed: "So far as we know Senator Davis has not a single enemy: in this candidacy he is beyond and above rivalry or jealousy in all the borders of the State. So let us all unite and make it unanimous!" If the *Sentinel's* characterization had been accurate, then Davis would have been unique in the annals of American politics.²¹

In August, 1895, it was decided that the auguries were favorable for public announcement of Davis' candidacy. The happy task fell to Castle who declared to a *St. Paul Dispatch* reporter summoned for the occasion that his "intimate friend" for nearly thirty years was now throwing his hat into the ring—not just to gain a cabinet position, or something else, but to "be president or nothing." Lest anyone had forgotten the senator's claim to fame, the reporter obligingly asked Castle to repeat

the text of the message that Davis had sent to McInnis during the Pullman strike. Castle, after reciting it apparently from memory, hinted that Davis' telegram deserved mention on the same level as the Sermon on the Mount or the Gettysburg Address. Though he did not press the idea that Davis might be justly compared to the sermon's author, Castle did seek to portray his candidate as sharing vital qualities with Abraham Lincoln.²²

In September Castle delivered a public estimate of Davis' prospects. Party members throughout the country, he contended, were greatly interested in Davis. The "great Eastern newspapers" were constantly seeking more information about him, and "if the convention were held tomorrow, he would have votes from ten or twelve states, at least." As for the senator's popular support, Castle continued his assurances that the plain people—or at least those who were Union veterans of the Civil War—were devoted to him. "Senator Davis is everywhere recognized," he explained, "as the legitimate successor to John A. Logan as the champion of the Union veterans in congress. His service of six years as chairman of the senate pension committee, and his authorship of the pension law of 1890 . . . have given him a hold upon the affections of the veteran which nothing can shake."²³

The effort to portray Davis as a friend of the people was made more difficult by the senator's professional activities at the time. In an autumn of unemployment and depression, of growing anticorporate sentiment, and of increasing radicalism in the Midwest, Davis was appearing daily before the federal court in St. Paul arguing a litigation for his client James J. Hill. Worse yet, what Hill sought to accomplish by this legal action was to protect a merger of the Great Northern with the Northern Pacific railroad.²⁴ Monopoly was rearing its head, aided and abetted by Counselor Davis. "Can the Republican state convention," the *Minneapolis Times* demanded, "consistently send to the national convention a delegation instructed to demand the nomination for the presidency of a railroad attorney, the creature of James J. Hill—a Democrat, and a monopolist of the monopolists?"²⁵

Clearly, if Davis were to become in any sense a popular candidate, he would need either issues or events that would restore to him the heroic stature he had so suddenly assumed a year before.

IN DECEMBER, 1895, the Fifty-fourth Congress convened in Washington for its last session before the nominating conventions of 1896. Davis made a special effort to place both himself and his fellow Minnesota senator, Knute Nelson, on important congressional committees. As Davis

explained, "If present arrangements respecting this which I have brought about hold good he ought to, and I think will, feel under great obligation to me."²⁶

Fortunately, there was a handy foreign policy issue awaiting the return of Congress. Foreign affairs offered Davis the safest and most fruitful means of making himself appealing to politicians and voters who were suspicious of his domestic policies. The Venezuelan boundary dispute presented an opportunity for him to develop such an appeal. The boundary between Venezuela and British Guiana had never been clearly defined, but the discovery of gold in the area of controversy lent a rather acute interest to the problem. Britain seemed inclined to claim increasing amounts of Venezuelan territory, and in 1894 President Cleveland had recommended that the issue be submitted to arbitration. Until Richard Olney became secretary of state, however, the whole controversy as well as its bearing upon the Monroe Doctrine was regarded with caution and moderation in the United States.

On December 17, 1895, the president announced to Congress that England had refused to submit the dispute to arbitration. He requested authority to appoint a commission that would determine the exact boundary. Once that report was made, Cleveland said, the United States must be willing to uphold it with force if necessary. Even the most ardent jingo would have been hard put to fault the president's firmness in this matter. Republicans and Democrats alike hastened to pass the bill that sanctioned the appointment of such a commission. A mere four days after the president's address, the bill had been passed unanimously and signed into law. It seemed there was little room left in which any Republican could develop a "strong" stand on Venezuela.²⁷

Davis, however, was resourceful. At once he prepared a resolution on the Monroe Doctrine that went even further than the stand of the president and his secretary of state. The Davis resolution declared that the Monroe Doctrine should be enforced at all times to its fullest extent and that no European country should be permitted to acquire any South American territory, *even by purchase or concession*. The resolution also insisted that the provisions of the doctrine should apply likewise to the islands lying off the South American mainland. Davis and other foreign relations committee members explained that the Monroe Doctrine needed some specific legislative sanction to transform it from an executive declaration into the law of the land. Once this had been done, the nation need not fear that the great doctrine would be at the mercy of whoever happened to be secretary of state at a given time.²⁸

Although the resolution won wide support within Congress, it was more cynically regarded elsewhere. "Evi-

dently Mr. Davis felt that it was time to be 'up and doing'," the *New York Evening Post* observed, "if he was to get the support of even his own state in the national convention." The *Post* made other charges that were more serious: It claimed that Davis was a shareholder in a Minnesota syndicate to which the Venezuelan government had given concessions in the disputed territory. According to the newspaper, which based its account on poorly defined sources in Minneapolis, the syndicate planned to develop coffee plantations and gold mines and use its political contacts in Washington to ensure that it would be safe against British interference in the area. The *Post* said that "the political support relied upon was in part at least that of Senator Davis of St. Paul who is one of the stockholders in the company."²⁹

Davis hotly denied the allegation that he was whipping up a war scare merely to line his own pocketbook. It was asserted that only a small and insignificant part of the Minnesota syndicate's holdings was in the disputed territory.³⁰

Newspaper opinion was also skeptical about the resolution simply upon its merits. To some it seemed as though Davis were proposing the establishment of a United States protectorate over all of South America, and this appeared dangerously imprudent. The nation might be brought to the brink of war over every dispute that agitated the Western Hemisphere.³¹



The caption for this cartoon in the January 24, 1896, *Cleveland Press* had Davis say: "You fellows can scramble for the eastern half, but we'll take care of this half."

President Cleveland soon made his objections heard, too. "I regard the Davis resolution," he declared, "as mischievous, inopportune and unfortunate."³²

VOICES CLOSER TO HOME were friendlier to the Davis resolution. The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* of January 25, 1896, its enthusiasm for Davis' candidacy still high, explained to its readers that the senator's proposal was in truth a conservative one, a "modern restatement" of the Monroe Doctrine, not a new and extreme form of it. [. . .]

Among Davis' political backers the critical responses were noted with concern but not panic. Tawney was concerned that the press coverage of Davis' activities in Washington continued to be very poor, and Kellogg was disturbed that the coverage had been so critical. The Monroe Doctrine resolution had, by and large, not been well received. "The opposition from the papers in the country," Kellogg wrote his law partner, "seems to be quite considerable, especially the New York, Philadelphia and Boston papers, but there is some considerable kicking throughout the west."³³

Davis had already taken pains to allay fears that his construction of the doctrine meant war over Venezuela. In an interview in St. Louis he pointed out that Britain was so concerned over the reported treaty between Turkey and Russia that "she will let us alone in the Venezuela matter." He assured his young interviewer, too, that his own resolution, far from being an effort to out-jingo the Democratic administration, "was based upon the President's message regarding the Venezuela boundary dispute."³⁴

He also wrote optimistically to Henry Castle that not all reaction to his resolution had been hostile: "I sent an old and judicious friend of mine some weeks ago into N. Carolina, Tenn. Ala. and Georgia. He returned yesterday. His report is that the feeling there universally towards me is enthusiastic—especially on account of what they style my 'Americanism' as to the Monroe Doctrine." And, to the great relief of his managers, Davis scheduled another address to the Senate, in which he would try to emphasize the moderation of his stand. [. . .]³⁵

The speech was delivered on February 17, 1896, and the faithful *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, professing to see this issue as "by far the most important proposition coming before Congress this session," declared on February 18, 1896, that the senator's performance was "unequalled in many a day in the Senate chamber." Kellogg said that he was "exceedingly pleased over your speech and so is everyone I have seen. Very excellent accounts appeared in the Minneapolis Tribune, the Globe, Pioneer Press and other papers. A remarkably good one in the Dispatch last night but you

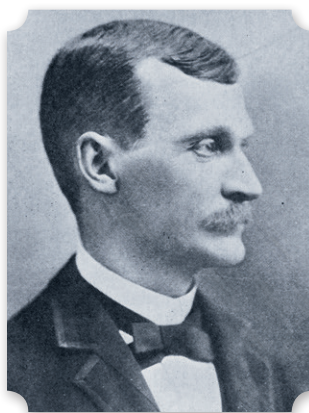
will see them, of course. . . . It seems to be admitted that you made the greatest speech that has been made in the U.S. Senate for years.”³⁶

Davis was happy with the response and urged his friends back home to see that the speech was given the widest possible circulation. “The Eastern papers are changing their tune concerning the Davis resolutions,” he gloated. His own office in Washington was busily franking fifteen thousand copies of the speech to be sent out to potential supporters. “I want every newspaper in the State to have one right off,” he instructed Castle. “Then every member of the bar in St. Paul, Minneapolis, and in the considerable places.”³⁷ There was no time to delay, for a new complication had been added to Davis’ campaign. By February 1896, it had become clear that a “McKinley fever” was sweeping the land.

WILLIAM MCKINLEY was no stranger to Minnesota. He had visited the state in 1894 to help campaign for Republican candidates and had reminded his audiences of the prosperity of the good old Republican days of high tariffs and full employment. Now, in 1896, Minnesotans were beginning to think of McKinley as the man who could bring back that golden age. There were widespread reports of McKinley clubs springing up throughout the state. “In a month from now,” one of Davis’ friends wrote from Crookston, “the McKinley sentiment will be so strong in this end of the state that nothing in the world can overturn it except the withdrawal of Mr. McKinley from the race.” [. . .]³⁸

In the face of this new threat, Davis and his supporters decided that the state Republican convention, which would select delegates to the nominating convention, should be held as early as possible before there could be any further slippage of support from Davis to McKinley. “Let us hope, pray and organize,” said one sympathetic Davis backer from Chicago. An early convention was arranged without difficulty. It was to be held on March 24 and, as Severance telegraphed Davis, “Opposition found they were defeated and made no Contest. Everything was smooth.”³⁹

Already, however, the outlines of the enemy were looming larger each passing day. The most serious and omnipresent threat seemed to be posed by John F. Goodnow. A Minneapolis lawyer and member of the Republican state committee, Goodnow was one of the earliest Minnesota politicians to declare for McKinley. To Kellogg and Severance, reporting to their partner and candidate, Goodnow seemed truly a viper in their midst: “Severance . . . saw Col. Dodge of the Great Northern,” Kellogg reported to the senator [. . .] and found him with a McKinley button in



John F. Goodnow was one of the earliest Minnesota politicians to declare for McKinley.

his coat; he apologized for having it on, and said that he had met John Goodnow on the street this morning. . . . It afterwards transpired that it was yesterday morning this button was put on Mr. Dodge and he had been

wearing it since that time, although he was very profuse in the expression of his desire to aid you.” The mark of Goodnow was also perceived in the Red River Valley district of Minnesota, where he was furnishing “the sinews of war” and was “trying to get speakers to go up there.” The senator’s chickens were coming home to roost in the valley, for Goodnow was exploiting the antipathy to Davis that had existed there since he had won Great Northern litigation as Hill’s lawyer.⁴⁰

If the farmers and small businessmen of that area could have scanned the correspondence of Davis’ managers, they would have been even more convinced that he was their enemy and that their suspicions about the linkage between railroads and politics were absolutely correct. “Between the N.P. [Northern Pacific] and the Great Northern influence,” Kellogg confidently assured Davis, “every prominent politician in North Dakota ought to be controlled, and if we can have the active support of those two interests there is no reason why we should not carry the state.” And when adverse publicity threatened, it was often possible to dispatch a Davis loyalist to indulge in some friendly persuasion. [. . .]⁴¹

Goodnow’s position, however, seemed adamant. Not even Hill, Kellogg reported, could “do anything with Goodnow.” Kellogg’s anger mounted as he perceived the McKinley boom that was taking place, and the increasing role of Goodnow in its success in Minnesota: “He [Goodnow] just got back from New York where he met Mark Hanna’s[*] partner and I presume got a supply of money. I am certain that money is being used.” Even trusted political friends were beginning to drop away: “Frank Mead is opposed to you. Ye Gods! Did you ever hear the equal of that? . . . to think of your standing up for that man not only as his lawyer but his friend when he had

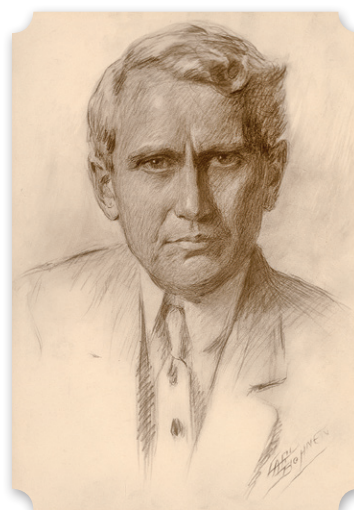
*Mark Hanna was a US senator from Ohio as well as chairman of the Republican National Committee. He used his wealth and political influence to successfully manage McKinley’s presidential campaigns in 1896 and 1900.

none, it makes my blood boil." Merriam's support, Kellogg continued, could no longer be depended upon either: "I am afraid McK will be nominated, but don't know, if he is M[erriam] will be chief eunuch in the Royal Harem."⁴²

In Washington, far from the scenes of personal and party strife, Davis was still taking the long view and still radiating encouragement and confidence. "I tell you," he wrote Castle, "that McK was never so far from nomination as he is today." At the same time Davis continued to write letters of encouragement to his supporters throughout the various districts of Minnesota, for the time of county and district elections to the state convention was approaching. Nevertheless, the news from loyal friends in Minnesota grew darker as party politicians came nearer and nearer to the awful specter of being on the losing end of a party split. [. . .]⁴³

In Minneapolis political annihilation seemed a very real possibility for Davis men. Charles A. Pillsbury and Robert G. Evans, long-time Republican leaders in Hennepin County and once optimistic Davis supporters, found that their friends would not support them unless they pledged themselves to McKinley. On March 13 Pillsbury and Evans met with Severance and other leading Davis men and suggested that the senator prepare a statement that would release his supporters in the interests of party unity.⁴⁴

This suggestion shattered Davis' empyrean calm at last. He scribbled a furious reply: "To comply would destroy me in Minnesota for all time and disvalue me throughout the country. . . . I can stand defeat, but I will henceforth preserve my self respect. If Evans and Pillsbury cannot afford to stand a reverse in a situation into which they encouraged me I am very sorry but have no other



Frank B. Kellogg, one of Davis' law partners, and his political ally,

feeling. I most positively refuse to make the declaration."⁴⁵

Less than a week later Kellogg and Severance were obliged to wire a sad prognosis to their chief: "We think no hope in Minneapolis. . . . Pillsbury has abandoned you."

Hennepin County sent one hundred sixteen delegates to the state convention and adopted resolutions in favor of McKinley. Ramsey County's delegation was in favor of Davis but declared that McKinley was its second choice. Davis' presidential hopes were foundering in heavy seas, but he still had a handful of faithful crew members aboard who were trying to keep the frail craft afloat. His law partners thought a sound money declaration might help: "If you could send a telegram . . . to the chairman of the state convention giving a clean cut declaration opposed to the free coinage of silver, . . . and also embodying a statement upon the tariff and Monroe doctrine . . . we believe it would carry the state convention of Minnesota by storm. Our case is desperate."⁴⁶

When the Minnesota state convention opened on March 24 it was ready to instruct for McKinley. "It is [the] greatest political cyclone ever known in [the] history of America [sic] politics," said Tawney. Davis would have to withdraw his name from consideration at once, or, as Tawney observed in his hasty wire to Davis, "your enemies will have won with the people the greatest victory over you they have ever achieved." The same reluctant word came from Kellogg and Severance: "It has been an uphill fight all the time. Occasionally we have had encouragement and hoped to get through alive, but it is absolutely certain that you will be overwhelmingly defeated tomorrow. Your political enemies are looking forward to this with delight. Your friends are coming to us tonight begging that you withdraw for purpose of averting that defeat. . . . It breaks our hearts to send you this message but we know it is for your best interest."⁴⁷

Davis replied at once. He requested that his name be withdrawn and came out foursquare for sound money, the Monroe Doctrine, and high tariffs to protect the wage earner. The senator's presidential boom was over despite his own labors and those of his friends. [. . .]⁴⁸

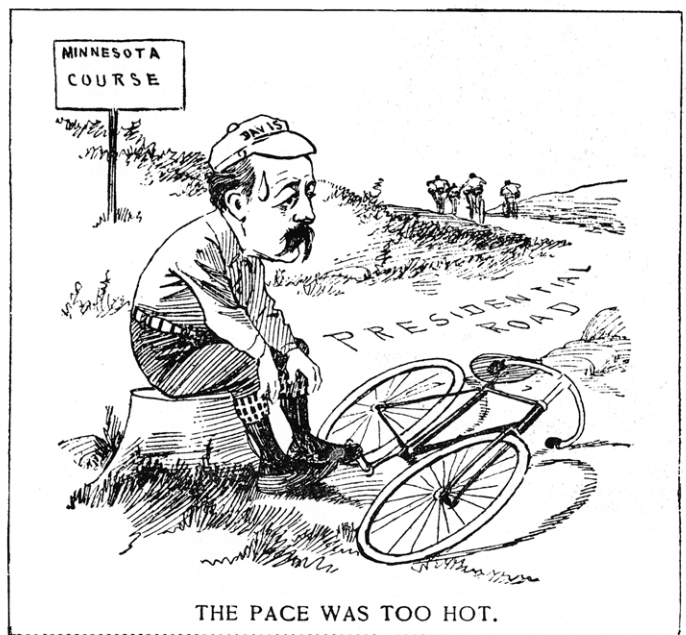


Davis booster Henry Castle in his office.

In the immediate aftermath of the state convention fight, Kellogg and Severance wrote Davis careful analyses of how the defeat had occurred and—more important for the future—discussed who had proven loyal and who disloyal. Kellogg in particular was full of indignation at the collapse of the senator's hopes, but he managed nonetheless to make his post-mortem careful and cool. Most of all Kellogg felt it important to let Davis know just exactly how strong was the grass roots support for McKinley: "... people who have never taken any interest in politics before, except to vote, who have never attempted to control conventions have come out with their teeth set for McKinley without stopping to consider anything only that they were poor and under the McKinley tariff bill they were prosperous." Despite his own disappointment, Kellogg resisted the temptation to find any specific villains responsible for this boom: "You need not lay this result to that wise guy John Goodnow or any other pluggers for McKinley. Of course they drifted with the tide, and they did a great deal of talking and all that, but it was simply a cyclone and they happened to be carried along with the current."⁴⁹

Some men, thought Kellogg, had behaved with exceptional loyalty in the face of the McKinley cyclone, and they deserved special thanks. Others had been revealed as fair-weather friends and backstage traitors. The *Pioneer Press*, Kellogg and Severance concluded, "started out deliberately, under the guise of friendship, to cut your throat" and that it did in a diabolical way. This they attributed in part to the fact that control of the newspaper was "in the hands of E. M. Saunders, a cousin of Mark Hannas [sic]."⁵⁰

When the Republican national convention met in St. Louis in June, it repeated Minnesota's experience. McKinley won the nomination handily on a platform that promised hard money and prosperity. A brief flurry of interest in the candidacy of Davis for vice-president inspired some satirical observations from the *Minneapolis Times*: "The convention steered safely past another Davis boom. The heartiness with which our senior senator is not nominated for places within the gift of the republican party [sic] is evidence that he is reserved for some mighty purpose in the nation." [. . .]⁵¹



This is how the *Philadelphia Inquirer* of March 25, 1896, commented on Davis' defeat.

That he could be considered for the vice-presidency, if only briefly, was an indication that Davis had quit his presidential effort soon enough to keep from alienating the backers of McKinley. Davis' brief candidacy, though extinguished in Minnesota, had received favorable notice throughout the nation and had indicated that he was a man to reckon with in Republican party circles. Indeed, both Davis and his friends believed that their management of his candidacy might well win him a bid to become secretary of state in McKinley's cabinet—a post that Davis probably would have welcomed.⁵² When the rewards of victory were handed out, however, no laurels went to Davis. Other Minnesotans, in fact, fared better than he as they had seen the political wave of the future earlier than he had.⁵³

What began with mighty words in 1894 ended with early defeat in 1896. Davis' failure demonstrated once again how rare is that precise moment when the unknown man from the unimportant region can rise to great power. Perhaps Castle, Davis' ally through it all, finally mused that his candidate had not shared enough similarities with Abraham Lincoln after all. ▣

Notes

This article has been slightly condensed. Original style of text and notes has been preserved.

1. The speech is published in full in William J. Bryan, *The First Battle: A Story of the Campaign of 1896*, 199–206 (Chicago: 1896).

2. *Congressional Record*, 53 Congress, 2 session, 7041.

3. *New York Times*, July 5, 1894, p. 2, quoted in Almont Lindsey, *The Pullman Strike*, 175 (Chicago, 1942).

4. Davis to McInnis, July 2, 1894, Cushman

Kellogg Davis Papers (hereafter cited as Davis Papers), in the Minnesota Historical Society.

5. *Congressional Record*, 53 Congress, 2 session, 7239.

6. *Congressional Record*, 53 Congress, 2 session, 7240. Davis served nearly two years in the

South as an officer of the Twenty-eighth Wisconsin Infantry Regiment.

7. *Chicago Tribune*, July 11, 1894, clipping in Davis Papers.

8. In the collection made by Davis' clipping service, sixty newspapers commented specifically on the Civil War analogy. See Davis Papers.

9. By ninety newspapers in thirty-three states, according to clippings in the Davis Papers.

10. Davis to Henry A. Castle, July 16, 1894, Henry A. Castle Papers (hereafter cited as Castle Papers), in the Minnesota Historical Society.

11. "C. K. Davis at Home," in *St. Paul Dispatch*, September 15, 1894, p. 1.

12. See Henry A. Castle, *History of St. Paul and Vicinity*, 3:1186 (Chicago, 1912). Scribbled on a copy of the speech in the Davis Papers are the author's own words: "Benedictus! for it was the most filial of all the children of my thought. It made me Governor of Minnesota."

13. Stanley L. Jones, *The Presidential Election of 1896*, 3-6 (Madison, 1964). In 1892 the Populist presidential candidate, James B. Weaver, received an impressive 1,040,886 popular votes. Other vote totals were 5,556,543 for the winner, Democrat Grover Cleveland, and 5,175,582 for Republican Benjamin Harrison.

14. See, for example, *Chicago Record*, undated clipping attached to March 27, 1895, letter from W. Gage Miller of Nebraska, Davis Papers; *Boston Herald*, March 27, 1895, and *Buffalo Express*, March 24, 26, 1895, clippings in the Castle Papers; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, April 5, 1895, p. 4.

15. Cushman K. Davis, "Two Years of Democratic Diplomacy," in *North American Review*, 160:270-284 (March, 1895).

16. W. D. Davis (a nephew) to Davis, September 10, 1895, Davis Papers; E. C. Huntington to Castle, July 11, 1895; F. T. Drebert to Castle, August 17, 1895, Castle Papers; *Minneapolis Tribune*, undated clipping from 1895 or 1896, Davis Papers (box 13).

17. William Watts Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 3:203, 489-498 (St. Paul, 1969). Folwell claims (p. 494) that it was "common knowledge that James J. Hill was not friendly to Washburn" and repeats the allegation that Hill "'contributed freely' to the aid of Nelson."

18. Thayer to Davis, April 17, 1895, Davis Papers.

19. *New York Tribune*, April 20, 1895, clipping in Castle Papers; Thayer to Davis, April 22, 1895, Davis Papers.

20. Castle to W. E. Lee, July 3, 1895, Castle Papers. Copies of the letter were sent to newspaper editors such as E. C. Huntington of the *Windom Reporter*; businessmen such as F. S. Christensen, president of the Bank of Rush City; lawyers such as George W. Buswell of Blue Earth City; and politicians such as E. C. Baird of Graceville, chairman of the Republican party of Big Stone County.

21. Clipping of editorial, "Senator Davis and the Presidency," in Castle Papers.

22. *St. Paul Dispatch*, August 17, 1895, p. 1. The

interview was reprinted nearly in full in the *Sentinel* of North St. Paul, August 23, 1895, p. 1.

23. *St. Paul Dispatch*, September 28, 1895, p. 10.

24. The case was *Pearsall v. Great Northern*, 73 *Federal Reporter* 933. Davis won, but the decision was reversed six months later by the Supreme Court. See 161 *United States Supreme Court Reports* 646.

25. *Minneapolis Times*, August 31, 1895, p. 4, and *Waseca Herald*, September 20, 1895, p. 2. See also the *St. Paul Dispatch*, August 21, 1895, p. 1, and the *Freeborn County Standard* (Albert Lea), September 18, 1895, p. 4.

26. Davis to Castle, December 15, 1895, Castle Papers.

27. For background on the Venezuelan boundary controversy, see Julius W. Pratt, *A History of United States Foreign Policy*, 186-189 (2nd edition, Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1965) and Walter LaFeber, *The New American Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898*, 242-283. (Ithaca, N.Y., 1963).

28. See, for example, the account in the *New York World* of January 18, 1896, clipping in Castle Papers.

29. See clippings from the *Post* for January 24, 1896 (first quote), December 28, 1895 (second quote), and January 21, 1896, as well as from the *New York World*, January 21, 1896, all in Castle Papers.

30. Clipping of Davis telegram to *New York Herald*, January 23, 1896, in Castle Papers. See also *Faribault Pilot*, January 2, 1896, p. 4. The president of the Orinoco Company, the Minnesota syndicate involved, was Donald Grant of Faribault.

31. See, for example, *New York Herald*, January 21, 1896, clipping in Castle Papers.

32. Quoted in *New York World*, January 23, 1896, clipping in Castle Papers.

33. Tawney to Castle, January 10, 1896, Castle Papers; Kellogg to Davis, February 4, 1896, Davis Papers.

34. *St. Louis Republic*, January 26, 1896, clipping in Castle Papers.

35. Davis to Castle, February 9, 1896, Castle Papers; Severance to Davis, February 14, 1896, and Kellogg to Davis, February 4, 1896, both in Davis Papers.

36. Kellogg to Davis, February 18, 1896, Davis Papers. The text of the speech was reprinted in the *Minneapolis Tribune*, March 1, 1896, p. 17, copy in Castle Papers.

37. Davis to Castle, February 25, 1896, Castle Papers.

38. Jones, *Election of 1896*, 112; W. A. Hammond of Crookston to Castle (quote), February 19, 1896, and William E. Culkin of Buffalo to Davis (quote), February 25, 1896 (enclosed with Davis to Castle, February 28, 1896), all in Castle Papers. See also O. L. Cutter of Anoka to Castle, February 6, 1896, Castle Papers; and Kellogg to Davis, February 24, 1896, Davis Papers.

39. Kellogg to Davis, February 8, 1896, and Severance to Davis, February 14, 1896, Davis

Papers; D. H. Pinney to Castle (first quote), February 3, 1896, Castle Papers; Severance to Davis, February (undated), 1896, Davis Papers; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, February 13, 1896, p. 8.

40. Kellogg to Davis, February 24, 1896, and Kellogg and Severance to Davis, March 5, 1896, Davis Papers.

41. Kellogg to Davis (quotes), February 24, 1896. Hill declined to exert his influence with the North Dakota politicians but offered free transportation for Davis delegates to the Minnesota convention. Severance to Davis, March 5, 1896, Davis Papers.

42. Kellogg to Davis, March 1, 1896, Davis Papers.

43. Davis to Castle, March 7, 1896, Castle Papers; Severance to Davis, undated, probably March 9, 1896, Davis Papers.

44. Telegram, Severance to Davis, March 13, 1896, Davis Papers.

45. Davis to Severance, March 13, 1896, Davis Papers.

46. Kellogg and Severance to Davis, March 18, March 20, 1896, Davis Papers.

47. Tawney to Davis, March 24, 1896; Kellogg and Severance to Davis, March 24, 1896, Davis Papers.

48. Davis to Kellogg, Castle, Tawney, and Severance, March 24, 1896, Davis Papers; Davis to Castle, March 23, 1896, Castle Papers.

49. Kellogg and Severance to Davis, March 25, 1896, Davis Papers.

50. Kellogg and Severance to Davis, April 2, 1896, Davis Papers.

51. *Minneapolis Times*, June 19, 1896, p. 4.

52. Nils T. Haugen, a Wisconsin lawyer, congressman, and state public servant, claimed that Davis "frankly stated" to him that "he had the ambition to become secretary of state." In Haugen's reminiscences, however, he does not indicate just when this conversation took place, only that it was during the 1896 campaign. Nils T. Haugen, "Pioneer and Political Reminiscences: 1895-1901," in *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 12:51 (September, 1928).

53. John Goodnow, for instance, was appointed consul general to Shanghai. See *Minneapolis Journal*, June 22, 1897, p. 1.

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