

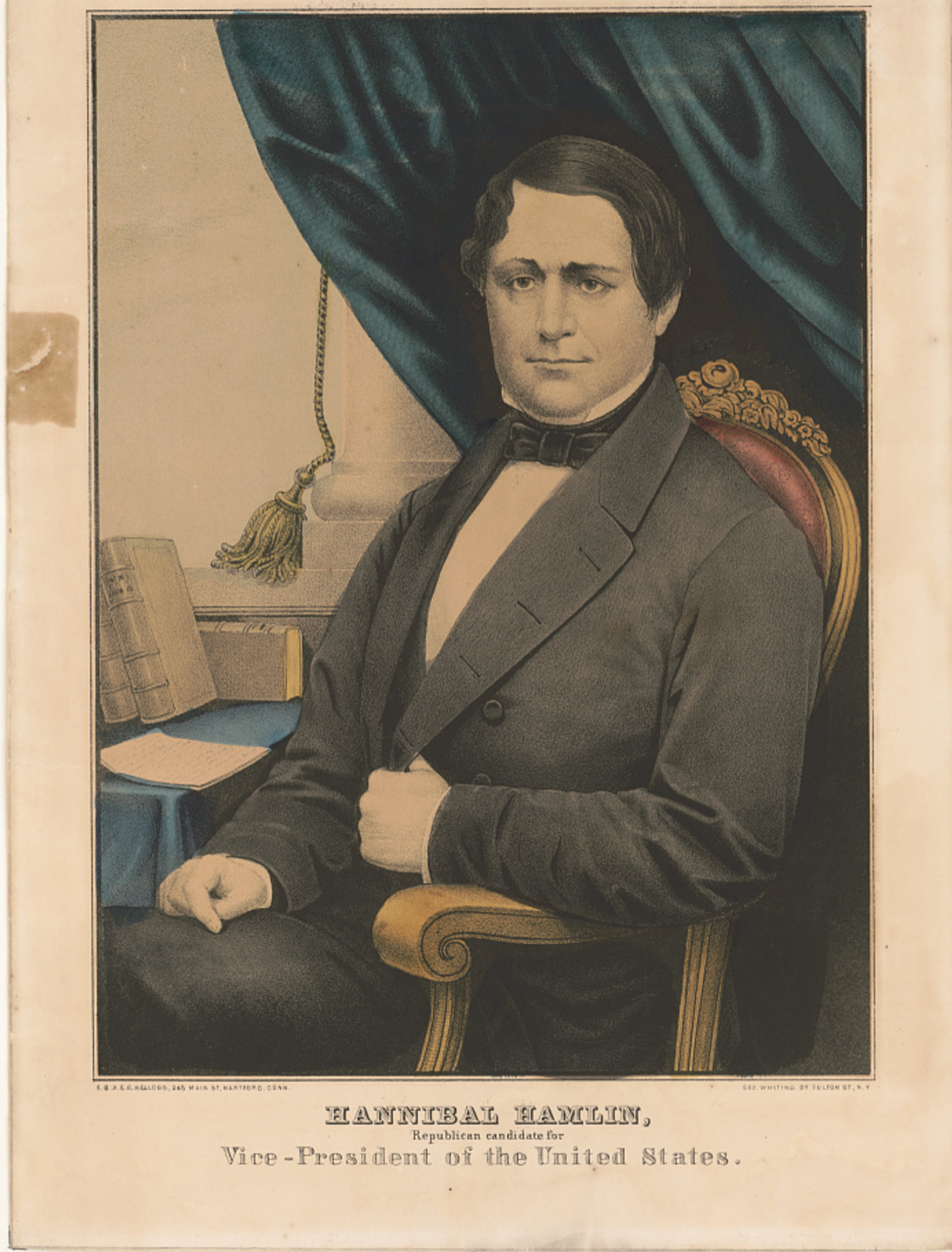


# BLUE AND GRAY DISPATCH

## The Man Who Might Have Been President

Fergus M. Bordewich, September 4, 2020

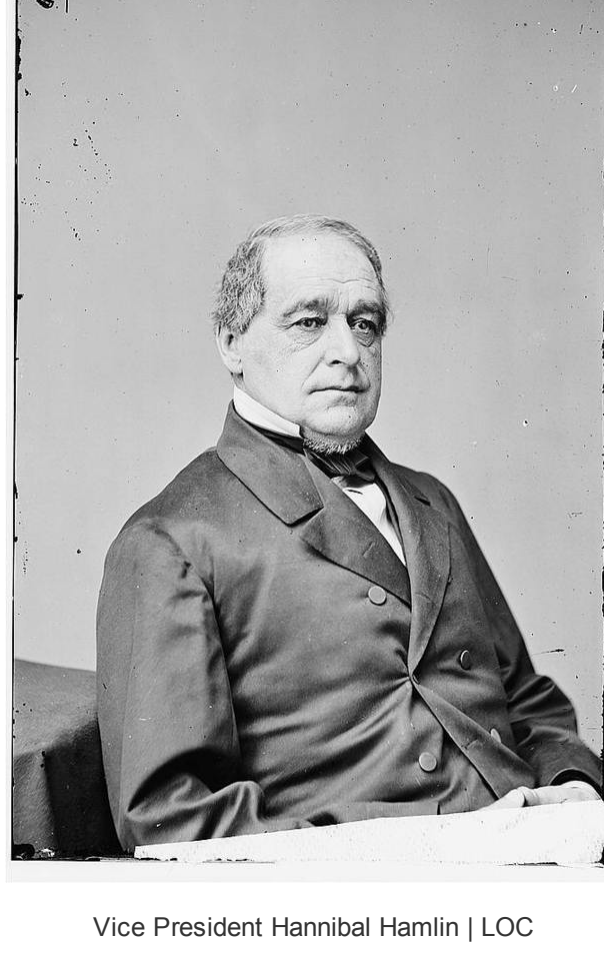
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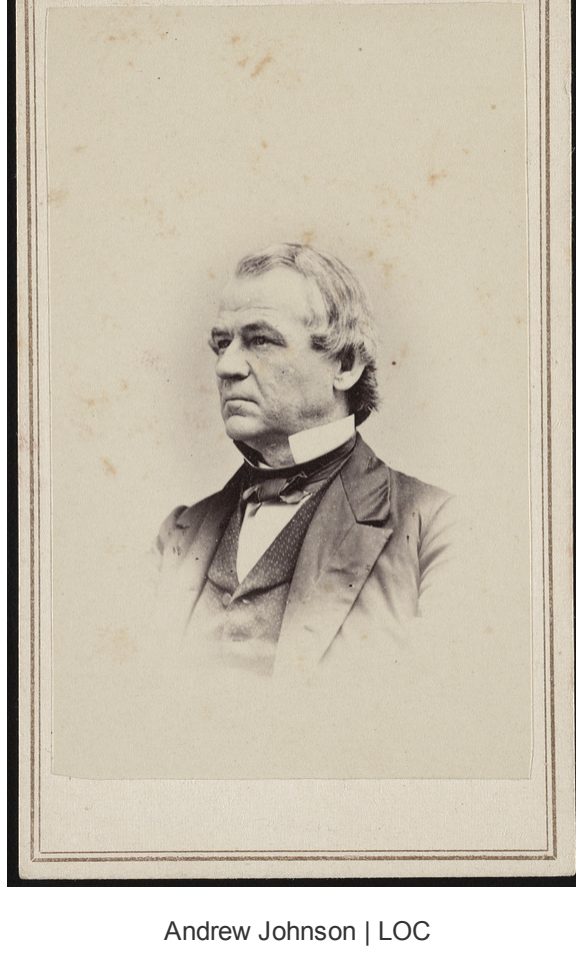
Hannibal Hamlin, Vice President of the United States in 1860 | LOC

Vice President Hannibal Hamlin had every reason to assume that he would be renominated for reelection along with Abraham Lincoln in 1864, as the candidates of the Republican-controlled National Union Party. For nearly four years, he had performed his duties with modesty and skill. It was said that the former Maine senator was Lincoln's best insurance against assassination, since the South knew that if he was killed it would face something much worse: a staunch abolitionist, who had long pushed the president forward on emancipation, equal rights for black Americans, and forceful postwar Reconstruction. Wise in the ways of Washington, and close to the Radicals in Congress, no one doubted that Hamlin was fully prepared to step into the presidency if Lincoln died in office.

Hamlin had been assured by James G. Blaine, Lincoln's point man for Maine, that rumors of replacing him were baseless. In later years, Lincoln's secretaries John Nicolay and John Hay asserted that the president had passively left the choice of his vice president up to the convention. (In a brief note to them, Lincoln indicated that he didn't wish to "interfere" in the choice of a vice president, but his choice of words made clear that he would not fight to keep Hamlin.) They also believed that Lincoln thought it would be good strategy to select a war Democrat. However, Alexander McClure, a powerful Pennsylvania politician who had been instrumental in Lincoln's nomination in 1860, maintained that behind the scenes the president had acted "with masterly sagacity" to reshape the ticket. Four years earlier, Lincoln had selected Hamlin largely to win support among abolitionists and in New England. Now, worried about reelection, McClure said, Lincoln wanted a man who would win over Democrats.



Vice President Hannibal Hamlin | LOC



Andrew Johnson | LOC

There were few who expected that man to be Andrew Johnson. A lifelong Democrat, he was the only senator from a slave state to remain loyal to the Union, and he had successfully led Tennessee as its stubbornly Unionist wartime governor. In addition, according to McClure, should the election prove close, Lincoln believed that the electoral votes from newly reorganized states such as Louisiana and Arkansas led by conservative Unionists such as Johnson could ensure his victory. And, significantly, he enjoyed the support of Henry J. Raymond, the party's chairman and editor of the *New York Times*.

In later years, Hamlin insisted that Lincoln really had wanted him all along but had been blindsided by a Machiavellian intrigue masterminded by Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner, who Hamlin had thought to be a personal friend. According to this scenario, Sumner was eager to see his rival Senator William Pitt Fessenden of Maine ousted from the Senate, and he believed that the most efficient way to do it would be to encourage a newly jobless Hamlin to run against him. To this end, Sumner allegedly lobbied New England delegates on behalf of Senator Daniel Dickinson of New York, a War Democrat known for his long silvery locks and his fondness for quoting the Bible. (Some called him "Scripture Dick.") However, Lincoln's powerful secretary of state William H. Seward was determined to thwart Dickinson because his selection would mean that Seward would have to resign from his job since, according to the custom of the time, two men from the same state could not occupy senior executive offices simultaneously. Seward, therefore, threw his weight behind Johnson. Whatever the truth may have been, the trusting Hamlin was completely unaware of all these behind-the-scenes machinations.



Grand national union banner for 1864 by Currier & Ives | LOC

The party gathered in Baltimore for its convention on June 7. When the roll was called in the congested hall, Lincoln was renominated almost without dissent. With the exception of Missouri's disaffected Radical delegation, which cast its 22 votes for Ulysses S. Grant. When Hamlin's name was put into nomination, however, cries of "No! No!" rose above the tumult on the floor. A simple statement from the president would have ensured Hamlin's renomination: his silence was eloquent. According to McClure, Lincoln's agents arranged for a "complimentary" vote for Hamlin on the first ballot, so as not to humiliate him, although he received only 150 votes to Johnson's 200 and 120 for Dickinson. Sixty-one votes were scattered among other candidates. On the second ballot, Simon Cameron of Pennsylvania, who had put Hamlin's name in nomination, threw that state's 55 votes to Johnson. Finally, even Hamlin's own state of Maine abandoned him. In the end, Johnson swamped him with nearly 500 votes to 17 for Hamlin, and 9 for Dickinson. Bands played, delegates cheered lustily for the new ticket, flags were waved, and instead of a lifelong abolitionist the party's choice would be one of the most Negrophobic men in high government office.

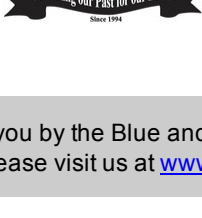
Johnson, who had owned slaves as recently as 1862, endorsed the platform's emancipation plank, and asserted his support for federal supremacy over the states. Hamlin, falling on his sword for the ticket, praised Johnson as an "incorruptible patriot." But not all Republicans were pleased with the choice. Some Radicals were apoplectic, among them Thaddeus Stevens, the most outspoken abolitionist in Congress, who regarded Johnson as a "rank demagogue." Sensing the catastrophe that might be in store, he stalked the convention floor, muttering angrily, "Can't you get a candidate for vice president without going down into a damned rebel province for one?"

Had Lincoln kept Hamlin on the ticket, John Wilkes Booth might have thought twice. That can't be known. But what seemed like a clever vice-presidential switcheroo in 1864 unquestionably changed the course of postwar Reconstruction, and much of the nation's history that followed.



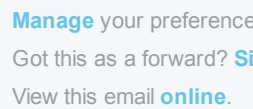
Grand reception for the second inauguration of Abraham Lincoln, with President Lincoln bowing slightly to greet Mrs. Grant and Gen. U.S. Grant; and Vice President Andrew Johnson to Lincoln's right. | LOC

This dispatch is excerpted from Mr. Bordewich's most recent book, *Congress at War: How Republican Reformers Fought the Civil War, Defied Lincoln, Ended Slavery, and Remade America*.



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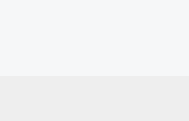
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