

Vice Presidents of the United States Garret A. Hobart (1897-1899)

Citation: Mark O. Hatfield, with the Senate Historical Office. *Vice Presidents of the United States, 1789-1993* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1997), pp. 289-293.

Introduction by Mark O. Hatfield.



For the first time in my recollection, and the last for that matter, the Vice President was recognized as somebody, as a part of the Administration, as a part of the body over which he presided.

—Veteran newspaper correspondent

It seems startling that someone who never held prior office outside of a state legislature could be nominated and elected Vice President of the United States, as was Garret Augustus Hobart in 1896. By the time convention delegates chose the last nineteenth-century vice president, they had come to regard that office as little more than a "fifth wheel to the executive coach." The nomination was in their view simply a device for balancing the ticket, either by ideology or by region. "Gus" Hobart, an easterner chosen to run with a middle westerner, William McKinley of Ohio, completely shared McKinley's conservative political philosophy. With warm feelings for Hobart, President McKinley decided to rescue the vice-presidency from its low estate. McKinley so embraced the vice president as his friend, associate, and confidant that Hobart's home on Lafayette Square became known as the "Little Cream White House," and Hobart as the "Assistant President."¹

Youth

Hobart was the descendant of a long line of clergymen, with a family tree that dated back to the Massachusetts Bay Colony of the early seventeenth century. In 1841 his father had left New England to open a primary school in Long Branch, New Jersey. There, on June 3, 1844, Garret Augustus Hobart was born. Young Hobart attended his father's school and then went to boarding school. As a member of the Reformed Church, he attended Rutgers College, which was then under that church's control. He graduated at the top of his class in 1863. Although the nation was deeply engaged in the Civil War, Hobart did not join the Union army. Instead, he studied law in Paterson, New Jersey, under the tutelage of Socrates Tuttle, a childhood friend of his father's. He became a lawyer in 1866, and on July 21,

1869, married Tuttle's daughter, Jennie. Hobart's family had long been Democrats, but marriage into the Republican Tuttle household converted the young man to the Grand Old Party.²

Not a Conventional Politician

After service as clerk of a grand jury, Hobart was elected a judge in Paterson in 1868. In 1871, after his father-in-law became mayor, Hobart was appointed to the post of city counsel. The following year he went to the state assembly, rising speedily to become speaker in 1874. In 1876 he won election to the state senate, which chose him as senate president in 1881 according him the distinction of being the first person to head both houses of the New Jersey legislature. Despite these achievements, Hobart was no politician in the conventional sense. "He was not fond of standing in the public eye," a friend later assessed. "He did not seek popularity by those methods which usually evoke the applause and admiration of the multitude. He was not spectacular."³

A rotund, jovial, hospitable man, Hobart displayed much tact, charm, and ability to work with other people. These qualities, which made him an outstanding state legislator, should have helped him move up to the national legislature, if it had not been for his increasingly lucrative law practice in New Jersey. The many banks and railroads among his clients made him wealthy, and he was loath to abandon his comfortable family life in New Jersey for the demands of a political career in Washington. (The Hobart home, "Carroll Hall," was reputedly the "largest and most sumptuous in Paterson.") Several times Hobart stood for the United States Senate but never fought hard enough to win election from a state legislature in which he was immensely popular. He served instead as chairman of the State Republican Committee from 1880 to 1891 and as a member of the party's national committee.⁴

A Homesick Candidate

Since the Civil War, New Jersey had leaned toward Democratic presidential candidates. President Grover Cleveland had carried the state in 1892, but, during the economic depression that followed, both houses of the legislature and the governorship of New Jersey went Republican, suggesting that the state could be taken by the national ticket in 1896. Looking over the scene, the Democratic *New York Graphic* noted that there was no other Republican in New Jersey as strong as this "sturdy, bright faced, genial gentleman."⁵

In 1896, the New Jersey delegation went to the Republican convention in St. Louis determined to nominate Hobart for vice president, as a way of consolidating the party's recent gains within their state. When Ohio Governor McKinley defeated House Speaker Thomas Reed and several other prominent candidates for the presidential nomination, newspapers identified some twenty potential candidates for the vice-presidency. All of them were governors, cabinet members, senators, and representatives, with the exception of Hobart, who remained unknown outside of his state. Yet when the vote was taken, Hobart, who had attended the convention as a delegate, emerged the nominee. Hobart insisted that he had not sought the nomination but that it was handed to him as "a tribute from my friends." It came equally as a tribute from Marcus A. Hanna, the Cleveland industrialist and political strategist who masterminded McKinley's nomination. Hanna wanted a ticket to satisfy the business interests of America, and Hobart, a corporate lawyer, fit that requirement perfectly. Hanna's biographer noted that, even if Hobart did little to strengthen the ticket, "he did nothing to weaken it."⁶

Hobart himself felt ambivalent about the honor. Ambitious for national office, he was realistic enough to know what it would ultimately cost him. From the convention, he wrote to his wife:

I have been too busy to be homesick, but, to tell the honest truth, I am heart-sick over my own prospects. It looks to me I will be nominated for Vice-President whether I want it or not, and as I get nearer to the point where I may, I am dismayed at the thought. . . . If I want a nomination, everything is going my way. But when I realize all that it means in work, worry, and loss of home and bliss, I am overcome, so overcome I am simply miserable.⁷

Unlike the Democratic presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan, who barnstormed the country making speeches, William McKinley stayed at home in Canton, Ohio, running his campaign from his front porch. Hobart similarly limited his speaking to his portico in New Jersey. McKinley and Hobart stood firm for the gold standard and the protective tariff. Bryan, for his part, ran on a "Free Silver" platform and attracted many desperate farmers

and debtors to his crusade. But economic conditions—and corporate interests—favored the Republicans. McKinley won by a half million votes, or 51 percent of the total cast. His Republican ticket carried 23 of the 45 states, including Hobart's New Jersey.

The Little Cream White House

For a running mate, McKinley had preferred Speaker Thomas B. Reed, with whom he had worked for many years in the House, but Reed would accept only the top spot on the ticket. Although McKinley and Hobart were strangers by comparison, the president had no difficulty warming up to Gus Hobart. The wealthy Hobarts leased a house at 21 Lafayette Square, which became known as the "Little Cream White House." Built in 1828 by Col. Ogle Tayloe, the house had hosted Washington's high society during the antebellum years. At the outset of the Civil War, General George McClellan had taken it as his headquarters. After the war, Pennsylvania Senator Don Cameron had remodeled and restored the old house. The Hobarts used it to entertain lavishly—particularly because President McKinley's wife was an invalid who could not shoulder the traditional social burdens of the White House. The president frequently attended Hobart's dinners and afternoon smokers, where he could meet informally with party leaders from Capitol Hill.⁸

No previous vice president had visited the White House as often as Gus Hobart, due in part to the warm friendship that developed between Ida McKinley and Jennie Hobart. Mrs. McKinley suffered from epilepsy, which left her a recluse in the White House. President McKinley doted on his wife and grew to depend on Jennie Hobart, who visited Ida daily. "The President constantly turned to me to help her wherever I could," Mrs. Hobart wrote in her memoirs, "—not because I was Second Lady, but because I was their good friend." Whenever McKinley had to be away from his wife in the evenings, he would entrust her to Jennie Hobart's care. He also invited Mrs. Hobart to White House social functions because her presence "gave him confidence." In addition to seeing each other in Washington, the McKinleys and Hobarts vacationed together at Bluff Point on Lake Champlain.⁹

McKinley looked on Hobart as a trusted adviser. Although the vice president was not invited to join meetings of the cabinet, the president and cabinet members consulted with him freely. The mutual regard between the two men made them, in the words of one acquaintance, "coadjutors in the fixing of the policies of the Administration to an extent never before known." Arthur Wallace Dunn, a newspaper correspondent who covered presidents from Benjamin Harrison to Warren Harding, marveled that "for the first time in my recollection, and the last for that matter, the Vice President was recognized as somebody, as a part of the Administration, and as a part of the body over which he presided." Dunn described Hobart as a "business politician," whose knowledge of the "relations between business and politics" made his judgments extremely useful. McKinley even turned to his vice president for personal financial advice. Having once suffered the embarrassment of declaring personal bankruptcy, McKinley turned over a portion of his monthly presidential salary, which Vice President Hobart invested for him.¹⁰

The Splendid Little War

Although Hobart socialized more frequently and worked more closely with the president than had most of his predecessors, his primary function remained that of presiding over the Senate. In his brief, self-deprecatory inaugural address, Hobart had told the senators that, while he was unfamiliar with their rules and procedures, he would work to the best of his abilities, feeling confident that they would indulge him as considerably as they had all of the previous occupants of the chair. Hobart's experiences presiding over the New Jersey assembly and state senate served him well, and he soon won favorable notices for impartial and informed rulings. Massachusetts Senator Henry Cabot Lodge applauded Hobart for abandoning his predecessors' habit of "submitting nearly every question of order to the Senate," and instead ruling promptly on these points himself, "as every presiding officer ought to do." One newspaper correspondent wrote that, initially, Hobart's "business-like advice and warning intimations rather nettled many of the Senators," but that over time he appeared to captivate the Senate with his genial good nature.¹¹ Hobart settled comfortably into the job. Senate vouchers show that he purchased for the Vice President's Room in the Capitol silk mohair carpeting, Neapolitan silk curtains, Persian throw rugs, and "a silk velour slumber robe" made to match the velour cushions on his sofa. Hobart also ordered the grandfather clock and the imposing mahogany desk that his successors continue to use.¹² Presiding over the Senate was no easy task, however. In 1898,

following the unexplained sinking of the U.S. battleship *Maine* in Havana harbor, sentiment in the Senate swung sharply toward war with Spain, which at that time still ruled Cuba as a colony. President McKinley's cautious attempts to avoid going to war made him seem indecisive. When McKinley's friend Senator William Mason of Illinois announced in favor of war, a demonstration broke out on the Senate floor that Hobart found impossible to quiet. As Mrs. Hobart recalled, the vice president was "worried to desperation" over the rising rebelliousness of the Senate, and took his concerns to McKinley. "Mr. President, I can no longer hold back the Senate," he warned. "They will act without you if you do not act at once." Accepting the inevitable, McKinley called on Congress to declare that a state of war existed with Spain. Hobart sent the president a pen to sign the declaration.¹³

The "splendid little war" with Spain was fought and won within a six-month period. At the conclusion of the Fifty-fifth Congress, Vice President Hobart congratulated the Senate on this remarkable achievement, noting that "unlike any other session in the history of our country, this Congress has witnessed the inception, prosecution, and conclusion of a war." More than just a war Congress, it had also been a peace Congress, having approved the ratification of the Treaty of Paris that ended the Spanish-American War. The vice president played a significant part in one aspect of that peace treaty. Although the United States had pledged not to take Cuba as its own territory, it did decide to hold the Philippine Islands, unexpectedly acquired from Spain. After the Senate had approved the peace treaty by the necessary two-thirds vote, Georgia Democrat Augustus O. Bacon had sponsored an amendment promising independence to the Philippines if it established a stable government. Due to the absence of several administration supporters, the vote was tied at 29 to 29. Hobart assured the taking of the territory for the United States by casting the deciding vote against Bacon's amendment.¹⁴

The Vice President's Valedictory

The vice president's speech concluding the second session of the Fifty-fifth Congress was in fact his valedictory, for he would die before the next Congress convened. In addressing the senators for the last time, he noted that "the Senate of the United States is a peculiar body. . . . made up, as you know of many elements, and in its membership you will find not only straight and stalwart Republicans, to whose active efforts the country is now looking for relief, but Bimetallists, Populists, Silverites—both Republican and Democratic—and a few gold Democrats." Despite the senators' many differences, Hobart as presiding officer observed that each of them stood on the common ground of patriotism, pride in the nation's history, zealotry for its Constitution, and devotion to its flag. For a generation old enough to remember the Civil War, the Spanish-American War appeared to represent the end of the old divisions that had led to secession. Former Union and Confederate soldiers supported a common war effort, with some from both sides donning uniforms once again.¹⁵

Beginning in early 1899, Hobart suffered from fainting spells triggered by serious heart problems. He never fully recovered. Yet that summer he performed a last major service for the McKinley administration when he helped the gentle president to fire his secretary of war, General Russell A. Alger. A large, affable man with presidential ambitions, Alger had become tarred by scandals that emerged during the Spanish-American war—particularly charges that unscrupulous war suppliers had fed "embalmed beef" to American soldiers. McKinley saw the need to sacrifice his secretary of war to the demands of public opinion, but could not bring himself to fire a friend. When Secretary of State John Hay declined to deliver the bad news, the task fell to Hobart. That summer, Alger and his wife regularly spent weekends with the Hobarts at their summer house at Norwood Park, New Jersey. One evening, Hobart took Alger into the smoking room and suggested that he find some excuse for retiring from the cabinet. During the next week, newspapers published stories that Alger had been pressured to step down but that the president was standing loyally by him. The oblivious Alger returned to Hobart's seaside home the next weekend and insisted that in light of the president's loyal backing he had no reason to leave the cabinet. Now Hobart bluntly explained that the president would feel "very much relieved" if the secretary would resign. Alger could not believe what he was hearing until Hobart admitted that he was speaking with the president's authorization. The shaken secretary of war hurried back to Washington and at nine o'clock on Monday morning handed his resignation to President McKinley.¹⁶

As Hobart suffered increasingly debilitating attacks and his strength declined, rumors spread that his illness would keep him from running again for vice president. In the fall of 1899, as McKinley was preparing a grand reception to

honor the return of Admiral George Dewey from the Philippines, he invited the Hobarts to stay at the White House. "I can imagine no place where you will be more comfortable than here." But Hobart declined. He conceded that he must remain in Paterson and could not return to Washington either for the Dewey reception or to preside again over the Senate when it reconvened that December. This public announcement was an admission that the vice president was "in virtual retirement," with no hope of recovery. Hobart died on November 21, 1899. Arriving at the Hobart home in Paterson for the funeral, President McKinley told the family, "No one outside of this home feels this loss more deeply than I do."¹⁷

History has remembered Garret Hobart less for his life than for his death. The void he left was quickly filled. The powerful Senator Mark Hanna moved into the "Little Cream White House," and the vacant vice-presidency was soon occupied by one of America's most dynamic political leaders, Theodore Roosevelt. McKinley's second running mate in 1900 bore little resemblance to the man he succeeded. In short order the young, energetic Roosevelt—and the progressive reform movement he embodied—eclipsed not only Hobart but McKinley as well, as the United States entered the twentieth century.

Notes:

1. David S. Barry, *Forty Years in Washington* (Boston, 1924), p. 246; David Magie, *Life of Garret Augustus Hobart, Twenty-fourth Vice-President of the United States* (New York, 1910), p. 169.
2. Magie, pp. 1-26, 42; Jennie Tuttle Hobart, *Memories* (Paterson, NJ., 1930), p. 3.
3. *Address of Honorable John W. Griggs at the Unveiling of the Statue of Garret Augustus Hobart, Late Vice-President of the United States at Paterson, New Jersey, June 3, 1903* (Paterson, NJ, 1903), p. 4
4. Magie, pp. 27-57; Edward S. Ellis, et al, *Great Leaders and National Issues of 1896* (William Ellis Scull, 1896), p. 542.
5. Magie, p. 50.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 58, 74; Margaret Leech, *In The Days of McKinley* (New York, 1959), p. 83; Herbert D. Croly, *Marcus Alonzo Hanna* (New York, 1912), p. 191.
7. Magie, p. 79.
8. Barry, pp. 245-46; Magie, pp. 116-17; H. Wayne Morgan, *William McKinley and His America* (Syracuse, NY, 1963), pp. 220, 274.
9. Leech, p. 435; Magie, p. 170; Hobart, pp. 13-14, 19, 29.
10. *Address of Honorable John W. Griggs*, p. 9; 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), 1:224-25; Morgan, p. 321.
11. U.S., Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record*, 55th Cong., special session, p. 1; Magie, pp. 151-52, 156.
12. Hobart's purchases are documented in the reports of the Secretary of the Senate and in a booklet published by the Office of the Senate Curator, *The Vice President's Room*.
13. Horace Samuel Merrill and Marion Galbraith Merrill, *The Republican Command, 1897-1913* (Lexington, KY, 1971), p. 49; Leech, pp. 184-85, 193; Hobart, pp. 58-60.
14. Harold U. Faulkner, *Politics, Reform and Expansion, 1890-1900* (New York, 1959), p. 258; Lewis L. Gould, *The Presidency of William McKinley* (Lawrence, KY, 1980), p. 150.
15. Magie, pp. 162-63.
16. Barry, pp. 256-59; Magie, pp. 209-11.
17. Magie, pp. 176, 212-17, 231; Hobart, p. 68.