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## The Truth Untold: The Compromised Election of 1876

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## The Truth Untold: The Compromised Election of 1876

### Writing Process

My writing process always begins with a slow start. The first steps of this historiography were spread over a long period of time, with a majority of the essay being written within a couple of weeks. I begin by choosing a topic for my paper which I selected from a list of options collected during the preliminary research period. Once I decided on the Election of 1876 and the Compromise of 1877, I drafted a topic proposal and a list of sixteen potential research sources from online databases and the library. From the potential sources, I narrowed my research to nine, keeping in mind when they were written and their cohesiveness. With these nine sources, I summarized them and sorted them into interpretive categories as I created an annotated bibliography. After the completion of my annotated bibliography, the writing of my paper gained momentum. In the next step, I transformed my annotative bibliography into a draft of my complete historiography by revising my introduction, formulating a thesis, expanding on my interpretive categories, and developing an argumentative conclusion. Between each step of this process I met with my professor to improve my writing and with her support and guidance, I was able to successfully complete my historiography.

### Course

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### Semester

Spring

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Dr. Elizabeth Ann Mackay

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# The Truth Untold: The Compromised Election of 1876

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*Julie Pugh*

The election of 1876 came at a tumultuous time in American history characterized by a deep partisan divide between Republicans and Democrats, intense regional differences, and diverging goals for Reconstruction, as both parties wanted control of the White House. The events following the election, which spanned from what was widely accepted to be Democratic candidate Samuel J. Tilden's victory to Republican candidate Rutherford B. Hayes's assumption of the presidency, are collectively known as the Compromise of 1877. Historians have studied this topic both for the lasting implications it has on the end of Reconstruction and for how it affected American perceptions of elections. There is particular interest in this topic in light of more recent election controversies, notably those of 2000 and 2016—for the discrepancies between the electoral and popular votes—and, most recently, that of 2020—for the resulting partisan polarization and intense debate. In reading the accounts and interpretations of historians ranging from 1929 to 2008 on the events surrounding the centennial election, the audience should note the changes and continuities among these interpretations. They should also attend to evaluations of the Democratic response to Republican claims of victory, the motivations driving the actions taken by both parties, and the electoral events used as support for those actions. These works have been categorized by their interpretations specifically in relation to C. Vann Woodward's work, *Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction*, which marks a turning point in the study of the events of 1876-1877. The categories follow the traditional interpretations often discussed prior to Woodward's work, with Woodward's work itself deviating from those interpretations, and the interpretations afterward, which return to the traditional view while acknowledging Woodward's contributions. The third interpretative category, containing those works written after *Reunion and Reaction*, is the most ideal category for analyzing this topic because. In light of the drastic changes Woodward brings to the discussion, the historians after him take a more nuanced

approaches in their examination of the events from 1876-1877, considering more factors in addition to the traditional ones discussed in the category prior to Woodward's work.

### **Sources Following the Conventional Interpretation Prior to *Reunion and Reaction***

Sources in this category focus their examinations of the events from 1876-1877 on traditional political tactics used in response to a Republican claim to victory, with an emphasis on negotiations and the legal routes taken. These works center their analysis solely on the political aspects of the events while acknowledging the crucial role of the *New York Times* in reporting election results.

As an example of this, in his book, *The Tragic Era: The Revolution after Lincoln*, Claude G. Bowers examines the events surrounding the election of 1876, placing great emphasis on the role of the electoral college and highlighting the *New York Times*'s critical contribution of suggesting the possibility of a win in favor of Hayes.<sup>1</sup> By beginning his report of the events in this way, Bowers sets a precedent for both Woodward and Allan Nevins. Additionally, Bowers suggests an amount of power in the hands of the Democrats as they enjoyed a certain legitimacy granted from their share of electoral votes, widespread belief in Tilden's victory, and control of the House.<sup>2</sup> Although this legitimacy was not seen with the Republicans, the Republicans held key positions and possessed political clout through which the conflict continued. In response to the Democrats' power, Republicans relied largely on tactics involving the electoral board, the actions of individuals engaging in secret politics and negotiations, and the threat of conflict reminiscent of the Civil War to secure Hayes's presidency.<sup>3</sup> Bower's interpretation of the events surrounding the election remains consistent with the views of a majority of the sources from around his time while also clearly laying out a detailed account of the events.

Following the model of Bowers and consistent with what Woodward acknowledges as the traditional historical perspective, Allan Nevins emphasizes the electoral count and the role of the *New York Times* in reviving hope in the possibility of a Republican victory. He presents the details of the events before, during, and after the election of 1876 through the lens of Abram S. Hewitt, chairman of the Democratic National Committee in his book, *Abram S. Hewitt*,

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<sup>1</sup> Claude G. Bowers, *The Tragic Era: The Revolution after Lincoln* (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1929), 522-525.

<sup>2</sup> Bowers, 525-532.

<sup>3</sup> Bowers, 532-533.

*With Some Account of Peter Cooper.*<sup>4</sup> Told from the perspective of Hewitt, Nevins presents the Democrats' response as a reaction to the Republicans' overturning of what was commonly acknowledged as Tilden's victory. Pointing to their reaction, Nevins notes that Democrats yielded substantial power both in securing the initial victory through the electoral college, but also in pursuing every possible legal means to fight for a Democratic president. This decisive action contradicted the passive concession of the Democrats detailed in other accounts, which lack a specific perspective. Nevins's is an account often referenced by later historians, specifically Woodward, and it uniquely lends much more power to the Democratic party and the legal processes of fighting election results.

### **Sources Diverging from the Conventional Interpretation, *Reunion and Reaction***

Sources in this category divert from the traditional interpretation focusing on reactionary, political actions concerning the events and, instead, introduce other elements, such as economics, as playing more important roles. These sources also go so far as to suggest that the events are part of a larger scheme, disconnected from the election itself, and explore alternative narratives concerning the relationship between the election and the end of Reconstruction.

In proposing an alternative interpretation, C. Vann Woodward presents the Compromise of 1877 as the result of months-long negotiations between parties weighing the interests of the North, in preserving the progress of Reconstruction and in retaining their economic control, with the interests of the South, in the reinstatement of Southerners in Southern power and a return to life more closely resembling that before the Civil War.<sup>5</sup> Woodward also presents the Compromise as comparable to other compromises in the nineteenth century, both in that it engaged a nationwide response, as opposed to the focus on states with electoral disparities, and that it involved a large number of influential characters participating in numerous negotiations.<sup>6</sup> Woodward acknowledges the traditional interpretations of the events of 1876-1877, but he disregards them, instead, presenting the Compromise as a part of a series of secret political dealings beginning before the election and continuing after its conclusion.<sup>7</sup> Woodward's

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<sup>4</sup> Allan Nevins, *Abram S. Hewitt, With Some Account of Peter Cooper* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935), 305-399.

<sup>5</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction*, 2nd ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), 9-13.

<sup>6</sup> Woodward, 10-11.

<sup>7</sup> Woodward, 1-22.

work is vital to the interpretation of the majority of works written afterward as it changed the traditional interpretation of the events in critical ways.

Richard O. Curry focuses on the work of Woodward as he examines various interpretations of prominent historians concerning both the Civil War and Reconstruction in his article, “The Civil War and Reconstruction, 1861-1877: A Critical Overview of Recent Trends and Interpretations.”<sup>8</sup> In his examination, Curry agrees with Woodward that the Compromise of 1877 that resulted in Hayes’s presidency was separate from the electoral events of the election which resulted in Tilden’s victory. Curry disagrees with Woodward, however, in the role the Compromise played in bringing about the end of Reconstruction, instead asserting the opinion that Reconstruction’s demise was inevitable, and that the Compromise solely succeeded in allowing Hayes to assume the office of the president. Curry’s view of the inevitability of Reconstruction mirrors that of Keith Ian Polakoff., which is discussed below. As Curry’s opinion, although limited in detail, is unique in being a more contemporary opinion that agrees with Woodward, this source highlights the importance of *Reunion and Reaction* from the perspective of an interpretation that believes in the legitimacy of Woodward’s argument.

### **Sources Following the Conventional Interpretation, Post *Reunion and Reaction***

Sources in this category return to the traditional interpretation the works in the first category follow in highlighting the role of politics while also providing a deeper examination of the deviation from traditional political trends and patterns and introducing new elements of political analysis that expand the scope of the investigation and place the events in the wider context of American politics at the time. Works in this category, like those in the second, take a more nuanced approach but, like those in the first, limit this approach to politics and no other factors. Works in this category also introduce alternative approaches to the role of the election and Compromise in bringing about the end of Reconstruction, a trend also visible in the second category.

For example, in his book, *The Politics of Inertia: The Election of 1876 and the End of Reconstruction*, Keith Ian Polakoff focuses on the interactions between and within parties and party members as part of a larger trend of disunion and decentralization among the political groups.<sup>9</sup> Polakoff highlights the lack of

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<sup>8</sup> Richard O. Curry, “The Civil War and Reconstruction, 1861-1877: A Critical Overview of Recent Trends and Interpretations,” *Civil War History* 20, no. 3 (1974): 234-235, doi.org/10.1353/cwh.1974.0089.

<sup>9</sup> Keith Ian Polakoff, *The Politics of Inertia: The Election of 1876 and the End of Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), x-xii.

known party leaders and the ununified efforts on both the Republican and Democratic sides as hindering both sides' ability to combat the electoral crisis. A distinguishing argument in Polakoff's writing, however, is his assertion that it was through the decentralization and uncoordinated efforts that the eventual results of the election came about. Polakoff makes the argument that the notions of a fixed, purposeful compromise simply coincided with events already in motion leading to the mere illusion of something purposeful which the reality contradicted. In his focus on political power dynamics, Polakoff dissents from Woodward's view of purposeful negotiations centering around economic policies being the driving factor of any compromise and resolution.<sup>10</sup> Polakoff's work is one of the first of many works to dissent from Woodward's interpretation while also introducing a distinctive opinion in his suggestion that any apparent compromise was less of a formal negotiation and more of an inevitable conclusion.

Following Polakoff's lead in examining the political parties at the time of the election, William Gillette provides a deeper political analysis in his book, *Retreat from Reconstruction, 1869-1879*.<sup>11</sup> Gillette acknowledges the disunited efforts of the political parties as well as a particular inability among the Democratic party to appeal to a large audience.<sup>12</sup> Concerning that inability, Gillette notes the Republican gains in votes despite conditions that would suggest unlikely success for the party.<sup>13</sup> Gillette presents the election as one in which both parties claim victory, with the Democrats refusing to concede until dwindling congressional solutions dissuaded them. Unique to Gillette, however, is the notion that the election played no role in ending Reconstruction; rather, Gillette suggests, the end of Reconstruction shaped the end of the election.<sup>14</sup> In holding this position, Gillette concurs with Polakoff in that the outcome of the election was inevitable, but dissents in going so far as say the election was insignificant. Gillette holds a minority opinion that Reconstruction influenced the election and not the other way around and he presents an argument rarely seen and different from others.

In line with the other works in this category, Michael Les Benedict centers his own historical analysis of the events of 1876-1877 around the analysis of Woodward while also introducing a divergent interpretation of the relationship between the election and the end of Reconstruction in his article, "Southern

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<sup>10</sup> Polakoff, x.

<sup>11</sup> William Gillette, *Retreat from Reconstruction, 1869-1879* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 321-334.

<sup>12</sup> Gillette, 322.

<sup>13</sup> Gillette, 320-321.

<sup>14</sup> Gillette, 333-334.

Democrats in the Crisis of 1876-1877.”<sup>15</sup> Les Benedict disagrees with the weight Woodward gives to economic motivations in driving the Compromise, as well as disagreeing with Woodward’s portrayal of certain individuals with what he believes is a disproportionate degree of influence in determining the outcome of the election.<sup>16</sup> Apart from his analysis of Woodward, Les Benedict follows the idea of multiple historians that Democrats had a weak position with few options in attempting to secure the election.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, Les Benedict agrees to an extent with Polakoff that there was an inevitability to the outcome of the election as a Republican victory was first secured and then followed by negotiations that would have occurred regardless.<sup>18</sup> As Les Benedict both acknowledges the importance of Woodward, especially in his ability to contribute historical arguments centered around economics, and develops arguments specifically targeting Woodward, his work suggests the important influence Woodward’s writing had on subsequent interpretations of these events despite being widely discredited by later historians.

Similar to many other works in this category that relate their interpretations to Woodward, in his article, “Southern Interests and the Election of 1876: A Reappraisal,” George C. Rable examines the election of 1876 largely in comparison to the popular interpretation of *Reunion and Reaction*.<sup>19</sup> For Rable, the driving factor behind the events surrounding the election was the South’s desire to once again have control over their local and state governments and to remove Northern power from their region.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, Rable believes the concession of the Democrats in the presidential election was done openly and from a position of little influence as the Republicans yielded more power and control over national affairs.<sup>21</sup> This contrasts Woodward’s fixation on economic factors as motivation for compromise and secret dealings among parties as the channel through which compromise was reached. Rable also devotes little attention to the role of the electoral vote in the resolution, claiming that the system did not reflect the reality of the political landscape at the time.<sup>22</sup> Rable’s work furthers the exploration of Woodward’s influence on interpretations of this

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Les Benedict, “Southern Democrats in the Crisis of 1876-1877: A Reconsideration of *Reunion and Reaction*,” *The Journal of Southern History* 46, no. 4 (1980): 439, doi.org/10.2307/2207200.

<sup>16</sup> Les Benedict, 493-497.

<sup>17</sup> Les Benedict, 498-503.

<sup>18</sup> Les Benedict, 518-520.

<sup>19</sup> George C. Rable, “Southern Interests and the Election of 1876: A Reappraisal,” *Civil War History* 26, no. 4 (1980): 347, *Project Muse*.

<sup>20</sup> Rable, 347-350.

<sup>21</sup> Rable, 351-352.

<sup>22</sup> Rable, 361.



topic but also includes a differing opinion on the electoral vote which contrasts with most interpretations.

In another work that undertakes the application of modern election trends to the analysis of the events of 1876-1877, Michael F. Holt seeks to bring a new perspective to the election of 1876 in his book, *By One Vote: The Disputed Presidential Election of 1876*.<sup>23</sup> Holt analyzes the election while paying particular attention to the ability of the Republican party to withstand the trend of electing the out-of-office party in response to economic crises.<sup>24</sup> In doing this, Holt notes the popularity of the Republican party, the admission of Colorado as the Centennial State, as well as the prominent corruption among both parties at the time. Holt's focus on election trends mirrors Gillette's work as it examined the curious Republican gains in votes. Additionally, Holt follows the argument that the Republican party was able to make a legitimate claim to the presidency and it was through the acquiescence of the Democrats that Hayes was able to assume the position.<sup>25</sup> Holt's work is an almost deliberate deviation from the common trends among interpretations and attempts to apply modern concepts in politics to the political events of the late nineteenth century.

### Conclusion

When analyzing the events of 1876-1877, the third interpretive category, with the works written after *Reunion and Reaction*, is the best possible category to do so in light of the more nuanced approaches historians take in their examinations, while still considering the conventional interpretation of events and following the drastic changes Woodward brings to the discussion of this topic. These more complex approaches can be measured through an examination of the variety and cohesiveness of the events and the decisions to which they ultimately lead. In the first category, for example, the works focus on a more simplistic form of politics, with opposing parties working with fellow politicians to accomplish their independently motivated goals through negotiations that range from over-the-table to secret schemes as a part of a reaction to the election results. Woodward, writing some time later, suggests that the events were part of a more complicated level of politics that intertwined long-term political goals with economic interests in negotiations that developed over time and better reflected earlier compromises of the nineteenth century, rather than the reactionary politics discussed in earlier interpretations. Through his book, Woodward abandons much of the conventional interpretation and alters the accepted terms upon which the Compromise was

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<sup>23</sup> Michael F. Holt, *By One Vote: The Disputed Presidential Election of 1876* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), xi-xiv.

<sup>24</sup> Holt, xii.

<sup>25</sup> Holt, xii-xiii.

built, thus, reviving interest in the events of 1876-1877 and eliciting other historians to reconsider the election and the Compromise as well as the larger impact they had on Reconstruction and its end.

Importantly, the most recent interpretations, written after Woodward, are superior to those in both the previous categories in that they acknowledge the most basic facts of the election and the Compromise and they examine the events in further detail, in response to the skepticism raised by Woodward. Although this group of interpretations includes a diversity of opinions among the historians, it gives the history a complex layer that suggests many more factors were at play and introduces a variety of interpretations concerning the relationship between Reconstruction and the election. This variety is more effective in accepting Woodward's proposition that the events were neither clear-cut nor simple but does not shroud them in a layer of, widely believed, fabricated realities. Instead, they present the reality as it was originally written while introducing the complexity using wider trends in politics to demonstrate the unique characteristics of 1876-1877. This analysis, in using wider trends, emphasizes what makes the election of 1876 unique and a necessary point of study. This third category also places more complex political analysis in the context of Reconstruction, and in light of these complexities, re-examines the election's relationship with Reconstruction. The works in the third category presents numerous possibilities that suggest Reconstruction's end was not as abrupt as previously thought and that many factors accumulated to influence the outcome. Depending on the historian, the election had an impact, of ranging importance, on the end of Reconstruction. Nearly all of them, however, acknowledge the consequential relationship between the two in some form, suggesting that studying the Compromise of 1877 provides insight into the tumultuous period of Reconstruction and the intricate relationship between the two primary political parties dominating that period. The interpretations that suggest the outcome of the election impacted the end of Reconstruction assign a powerful role to the election in influencing the course of American history. On the other hand, the interpretations that suggest the end of Reconstruction impacted the outcome of the election introduce the idea that politics are largely a reflection of wider events and studying politics can provide insight into our past.

This topic was not only relevant for the period of Reconstruction, which continues to affect us today, but also has direct correlations to the elections of the twenty-first century. Noting the controversial elections of 2000, 2016, and, most importantly, 2020, the election of 1876 provides insight into broader American politics with themes of lobbying, corruption, party loyalty, and electoral vote disputes. These elections reflect the theme of wavering politics in the United

States, tainted by personal interest and party loyalty. That these themes persist in our political process today suggests that the election of 1876 is not alone in its peculiarities and that these aspects are an enduring part of the American political process. Ultimately, the election of 1876 suggests that these things are part of our political process, have persisted, and will continue to persist, if undisturbed, as part of our elections. Whether Americans embrace that or reject it in seeking larger change is up to us and will determine the course of the electoral process in the future.

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