June 1961

For Governor of Massachusetts: Long vs. Butler

James Humphry III

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, series 5, no.10, June 1961, p.267-276

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.
if by some turn of fortune he should accomplish some great thing and strike a very high mark!” There was talk of Long as candidate for Vice-President in 1900, but while he was solemnly pondering its possibilities, Roosevelt reluctantly accepted the nomination — and landed in the presidency upon McKinley’s assassination.

After his tiring stint in the capital, Long looked forward to spending half-years amid the rolling hills, cedar woods, and “original Maine men” of Buckfield, but he was not to return for more than two or three weeks at a stretch. He resumed the practice of law, found time to write or edit several books (most important, The New American Navy, 2 vols., New York, 1903), and puttered happily in his do-it-yourself carpenter shop. With a pert nod to incongruity, he consented to the presidency of Harvard’s Alumni Association and in the same year was elected president of its Board of Overseers.

On August 28, 1915, in his “maritime Buckfield” — the village of Hingham, Massachusetts, where he had made his home for more than four decades — death came to Johnny Long. Where might life have taken him had he followed Apollo instead of Bentham? In the deepest recesses of his being, how often had he confronted that gnawing query?

FOR GOVERNOR OF MASSACHUSETTS:
LONG vs. BUTLER

By James Humphry III

Benjamin Franklin, in Poor Richard’s Almanac, wrote that “the first mistake in public business is the going into it.” The truth of these words is especially applicable to the Massachusetts gubernatorial campaign of 1879. Even if contrived, the nominations of the opposing parties could not have brought face to face two candidates more diverse in both temperament and reputation. Viewing the experience in retrospect, John Davis Long — caught in a vise to “save” his party, like many another candidate of present-day vintage — might well have
vetoed the "going into it" rather than do political battle with his opponent, Benjamin Franklin Butler. An introduction to each of these principal candidates for the governorship may serve to set the stage for a better understanding of the Massachusetts political scene in the autumn of 1879.

John Davis Long was born in Buckfield, Maine, October 27, 1838, the son of one of the town's leading families. John's respect for his father's well-principled and useful life in the town's affairs is reflected in his own later years, for his reputation was unblemished and his public service distinguished. After graduation from Harvard College in 1857, Long taught school for two years, and then entered Harvard Law School. Following a year of formal study he turned to the "reading" of law, and was admitted to the bar in 1861. After practicing law in a "desultory way" for a short time in Buckfield, he returned to Boston where he followed "the usual course of a young lawyer working his way." As time went on, Long built up a large practice, principally in the field of criminal law, and eventually became senior partner in the firm of Long and Hemenway, in which he remained active, except for the period of his public service, until his death.

The natural affinity between law and politics soon brought him into the political arena; as Long himself wrote: "I switched off upon the track of political life, on the ragged edge of which I have been hanging ever since." The switch from law to politics resulted in his becoming Lieutenant-Governor of Massachusetts in 1878 on the Republican ticket.

In 1879 (the election campaign referred to above and to be discussed at length later) Long ran successfully for governor. His record of service to the people was rewarded by reelection to the highest office in the Commonwealth for two more terms — 1881 and 1882. In 1882 he was elected to the United States House of Representatives, where he served with distinction until 1889. In 1897 he was appointed Secretary of the Navy by President McKinley. He held this office through the Spanish-American War, conducting its affairs with marked ability. In 1902 he resigned from the Cabinet and returned to Boston to

1 John Davis Long, "Reminiscences of My Seventy Years' Education." Massachusetts Historical Society, Proceedings, XLII (1908-1909), 356, 357.
2 Ibid., 357.
resume the practice of law. With more time to pursue his literary interests which began early in life, he compiled a history of the Republican Party which was first published in 1889, and also authored *The New American Navy* in 1903. He died in Hingham, Massachusetts, in August of 1915. A man of great dignity, honesty and devotion, he was admirably qualified to "look back upon my public life with satisfaction, and I am glad to say, without regret."

Benjamin Franklin Butler was born in Deerfield, New Hampshire, November 5, 1818, the son of a soldier who had deserted his family for the glamor of fighting with Andrew Jackson and, later, indulging in the West Indies trade as a privateer. Ben’s mother, without means of supporting her two sons, moved to Lowell, Massachusetts, where she opened a boarding house as a way of providing Ben with a college education. Ben, who from childhood had taken “naturally to books,” entered Waterville (now Colby) College at the age of sixteen. He was endowed with a peculiar capacity for “espousing and advocating the unpopular side of a question,” and as a result was almost constantly in trouble with the college authorities. This role of devil’s advocate he pursued diligently throughout his stormy career. After graduating from college in 1838, he read law in the office of a Boston attorney, and in 1840 was admitted to the bar. His special interest was criminal law. His quick wit, amazing memory and courtroom agility soon brought him fame as one of the state’s most successful lawyers.

During the Civil War Butler, originally a member of the militia, attained the rank of Major General. He served successively in the Eastern Department of Virginia, in the invasion of the southern coast of Louisiana, and in the capture of New Orleans, which he and his troops occupied. It was the harsh and arbitrary treatment of his “subjects” that prompted Jefferson Davis to label him “The Beast.” His confiscation of large sums of money deposited by foreign governments in New Orleans banks for the use of the Confederacy would have been both tolerated and understood if Butler had sent the money to Washington instead of depositing it in his personal accounts. Although Butler eventually returned the money after lengthy litigation at the highest government levels, these circumstances

---

brought severe discredit to him and the Union forces, and instigated his relief from active service prior to the termination of hostilities.

On his return to Lowell and Boston and the practice of law, the Massachusetts Republicans elected him to Congress where he served in the House of Representatives from 1867 to 1875, and again from 1877 to 1879. Six different times he presented himself to the people of Massachusetts as a candidate for the office of governor. In the campaigns of 1871 and 1872 he was a Republican candidate; in 1878 and 1879 an Independent. In 1882, because of a split in the Republican Party, he was finally elected on the Democratic ticket. After serving one year, he was defeated for reelection in the campaign of 1883. Butler's career as a public servant of the Commonwealth at an end, he reverted once again to his lucrative law practice, and embarked on the writing of his memoirs, a lengthy autobiography published in Boston in 1892. Butler's Book was in fact an undisguised attempt to vindicate himself in the public eye. It was during this period of authorship that Butler returned to his alma mater where, at the invitation of the college, he joined in the July 1889 graduation ceremonies by reciting a long defense of his equally long career. Three and a half years later Butler died in Washington (January 1893).

Our attention now shifts to the political developments in Massachusetts in the latter part of 1879, when Long found himself face to face with "that most corrupting demagogue" Butler. In 1871, at the tender age of 33 and a newcomer to politics, Long had endorsed Butler's unsuccessful candidacy for the Republican nomination for governor. But now in 1879, having observed Butler and his tactics during the intervening years, Long's position was diametrically reversed. Small wonder that Long did not relish a campaign fight with Butler. The fact that Long was Lieutenant-Governor and the natural choice of his party to succeed Governor Talbot (who had overridden Ben Butler's bid for governor the year before by 25,000 votes) made Long a victim of circumstances over which he had little control. He sacrificed his personal feelings in favor of his beloved

---

4 Waterville College, the name Butler remembered, was now Colby University. Butler had vowed that he would never return because of this change in name, but obviously he recanted his decision.
Republican Party — and by so doing, deprived Butler of the office. Perhaps, as the slate took shape at the nominating conventions, Long wished he had accepted Butler’s proposition of two and a half years earlier; he might not now have to run against Butler. “Today, General Butler offered, through an emissary, to help me to be Governor, if I will help him to U. S. Senate. I decline.” ⁵ This passage dated January 9, 1877, from Long’s journals (more than twenty volumes of which he wrote during his lifetime, and of which excerpts only have been published) was a clear indication of the nature of things to come. Butler was unforgetting and unforgiving of those who failed to “cooperate” as he attempted to scale the political ladder. He could be expected to pull no punches in his unrelenting plan to be Governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. As already alluded to, Butler had forsaken the Republican Party which failed twice to elect him, had adopted the Independent (Greenback) Party in 1878 and lost, and now in 1879 was running again as an Independent. Further complication in the 1879 campaign was the emergence of a Prohibitionist candidate and a Democratic candidate, neither of whom was ever a threat. Each served as a target for Butler’s campaign of vilification, and perhaps helped to divert some of the mud from Long’s direction. The Democratic candidate was John Quincy Adams, great-grandson of John Adams and grandson of John Quincy Adams — hardly worthy of the first “Adam,” as Butler pointedly and gleefully informed the huge audiences that flocked to see him, not apparently to listen.

Aside from the pageantry which accompanied Butler’s 1879 campaign, the electorate showed comparatively little interest in the contest. Butler was making his fourth bid for the governorship — a situation with which the voters were now overly familiar. Governor Talbot, whom Long hoped to succeed, had proved honest if not colorful; there was no need for a change and no significant threat in the name of Butler. The people of Massachusetts, like the rest of the country, were still feeling the effects of the panic of 1873, and their interest was one of holding the line in costs of government and taxes on the individual.

One newspaper editorial astutely dissected the Massachusetts political situation in the fall of 1879.

The unsatisfactory character of Gen. Butler's claims to public honors impresses itself more and more upon people the longer his candidacy runs. . . . Now a personal campaign must be one of 'enthusiasm'. There is no enthusiasm for Mr. Long, because Long's personality does not enter into the canvass to the degree necessary to make people 'go wild' over him. It is not the fashion in Massachusetts to cultivate the personal idolatry of candidates. A man is nominated for governor, not because he is idolized, but because, being a man of integrity and experience in public affairs, people believe he can be trusted to make a safe, efficient and economical administration. . . .

Fortunately Mr. Long's campaign does not rest on 'enthusiasm,' and goes on just as well with out as with it, because he is known to be a clean man, without a blemish on his record, with an excellent head for the practical duties of administration, and a determination to carry on the policy of retrenchment. Gen. Butler's campaign rests, on the other hand, entirely on his demand for a vindication,—a demand that has been before the people of this commonwealth this ten years. That is why his campaign flags, when he steps off the platform. People know from his speeches how flashy and unreliable are the tricks of argument by which he seeks support; they know from his own admissions how richly he has profited in purse by his public opportunities, and from what is known they infer darkly as to the jobbery that is not confessed. Without doubt he has collected soldier's claims gratuitously; he is generous to men who vote, but he takes his pay from the opportunities voted to him. This union of personal generosity and political corruption is one of the most insidious forms of evil. Tweed was always open-handed to beggars with the money he had stolen. So was Jim Fisk. The trait comes down in a straight line from Robin Hood. 6

A previous account in the October 27 Republican aptly depicted the political climate as the contest reached a frenzied pitch.

A week from to-morrow Massachusetts elects a new state government and fills certain county offices. The last week of the campaign will be devoted to the manufacture of enthusiasm, and to getting in the final rousements. . . . We all take our politics easier than last year. This operates both ways, but the discontent that breeds Butler voters is not abroad to any great extent, and Gov. Talbot has abated the disposition to 'smash things'. The most independent and best posted observers are confident that Butler's sun is already declining again. . . .

The stumpers tours of Long and Butler have sharply contrasted the two candidates. Butler has lost votes before the footlights, as always.

6 Springfield (Mass.) Republican, October 30, 1879, p. 4, col. 2.
Instances in plenty might be quoted to illustrate how faith is lost in Butler's honesty in public life by his truckling speeches. He bids for personal advancement on any platform, and seeks to be everything to all men with that habitual disregard of consistency which has left him no past worth pointing to. . . . Candidate Long certainly pleases the countrymen. If less ready than Butler, he is more reliable and 'solid'.

An interesting and instructive letter in the Republican of October 18, 1879, is cited here, not only for its content, but for its association; the letter was written by Julius Hawley Seelye, the grandfather of Colby President-Emeritus J. Seelye Bixler. Mr. Seelye, at that time President of Amherst College, a member of Congress from Massachusetts as well, and long interested in public affairs, gives some sound advice to a former student.

I have received your letter, in which you ask my judgment about the duty of a voter in an election like that now pending in New York. I cannot ignore such an inquiry from a former pupil, any more than I can be indifferent to the political issues which it involves. I take it your query relates to general principles, and to these only will I briefly refer, without attempting to give— as I do not suppose you expect me to give— particular advice respecting individual candidates.

It ought to be before us all that political office is not a dignity to be enjoyed, but a sacred trust to be administered. It is not to be given to any man because he deserves it as a reward for service rendered his party or his country. No man can ever deserve an office, for the moment we speak of deserve here, we are treating the office as though it were a boon to the person filling it, rather than a blessing to the people for whom it should be filled. Hence, we should discard from our considerations all question of claims of office. No man has, no man can have, any such claims. The office may claim him, but he never it. Hence, when a man puts forth any such claims we should discard him. It shows that he does not even know what office means. You yourself know that it means literally and in the first place obligation and duty, but obligation and duty require a service which we are to do, and are in no sense a reward for any service we have done. They lay their claim upon us, not we upon them.

Now it is possible that a man may advocate his own election to office without any selfishness on his part, being actuated solely by just considerations for the public good, but in the actual condition, this would at least be difficult, and when we see a man seeking office, we may be pardoned for the query whether he is not more likely to be thinking of the prize which he would clutch for his own aggrandizement than of the power which he would use for the public good. The habitual office-seeker, the constant claimant for office, we shall doubtless act wisely when we discard. . . . We should never be afraid of freedom. We should fearlessly defend it for another, we should unflinchingly demand it for ourselves, and we should not only deem it our disgrace and loss to be
deprived of it but the disgrace and loss of any party which disowns it in its members. It is true, we need caution — we must not confound liberty with license — but we need courage also, and our wisest and best political action has always come from men who have been as fearless as they have been free.

The wise observations and admonitions of President Seelye appear peculiarly appropriate to Butler and his candidacy. The "habitual office seeker" was "discarded," but not without a fight, for witness one sample of the skullduggery that was brought into play. A Boston newspaper reported that "an ardent Butler worker at Gloucester dropped printed notices of last night's Butler rally in the pews of the local Universalist Church Sunday morning, while the sexton was ringing the bell, and the society are very mad about it." Butler's lieutenants stopped at nothing; but by way of reciprocity his opponents employed equally direct and stinging tactics. One of a great number of political tracts calling Butler to task, entitled Nuts for Butler to Crack (Boston, 1879), addressed the General directly: "Gen. Butler, you can now step down and out, though you may not realize how completely you are out. . . . Go, and sin no more; and that you may be the more free from temptation, the people of Massachusetts will kindly excuse you from serving them as Governor." As for Long, his opponents could think of nothing more vindictive than to point to his translation of the Aeneid (which he put into blank verse during his term as Lieutenant-Governor and published just prior to his election as Governor) as his sole qualification for public office.

After the polls closed and the ballots were counted, John D. Long had won with more votes than his three opponents combined. "In Massachusetts," the New York Times reported on November 5, 1879, "General Butler, with his motley staff of followers drawn from both parties, has again failed to grasp the prize for which he has so long struggled and plotted." The fact that Butler wrote in his autobiography but one sentence on the 1879 campaign is probably a great tribute to Long — and perhaps to Butler as well: "I was again a candidate for governor . . . and I was again defeated." In his Journal for November 16, 1879, Long wrote: "I am elected Governor of Massachusetts, Nov. 4. It was a terrible campaign." And on November 18, he reports: "I am in my depths. My campaign, vin-
dictive, personal, bitter beyond example in Massachusetts, and
the terrible strain of . . . leadership upon me, has left me nerv-
osely prostrated and weak.” However, Long did survive, and
served not one term as Governor, but three. As 1882 came to
a close, he was doubly rewarded — by his election to the United
States House of Representatives before the expiration of his
term as Governor, and by being spared the ordeal of campaign-
ing against Butler for a second time. As the pièce de résistance,
General Butler was elected Governor in November of 1882 on
the Democratic ticket — his third party affiliation and his fifth
attempt! Long must have had a particularly happy feeling of re-
lief when he addressed the Colby audience in 1883 — his term
as Governor was behind him, Butler at a safe distance managing
the affairs of state in Boston, and his own future in Congress
safely assured by an appreciative Massachusetts elector­ate.

One cannot help noting the markedly similar patterns which
characterized the course of events in the lives of Long and But­
er. Both were sons of New England, sons of Massachusetts by
adoption, successful lawyers, representatives of the Common-
wealth in Congress, and Governors of the state. Both took
pen in hand after their careers as public servants ended, but Long’s
was a literary and kindly “hand,” while Butler’s remained heavy
and with the taint of politics.

But, in spite of the fact that their lives followed several com-
mon courses, there was a decided contrast in their characters,
their accomplishments and their corresponding places in history.
Long was a gentlemanly, unassuming, quiet and efficient man
who served his constituents with responsibility of the highest
order — politics in the strict sense. Butler, on the other hand,
was gruff, brilliant, noisy and quite ready to sacrifice principle
for self-aggrandizement — politics in the all too familiar sense.

The citizens of Buckfield honored Long’s memory by a cen-
tenial pageant in 1938, a tribute to a distinguished citizen who
served “in the Mother Commonwealth as its beloved Governor,”
and who was “for almost two generations a favorite figure in the
life of New England.”7

Butler’s political career is best described in his own words,
“I never knew what true happiness was until I lost my char-

7 Lawrence Shaw Mayo, America of Yesterday (Boston, 1923), 2.
character.” And if Boswell had been Butler’s biographer as well as Johnson’s, he would have repeated emphatically his truism that “politics are now nothing more than a means of rising in the world.”

PRESIDENT PEPPER’S SCRAPBOOK

By John R. McKenna

One of the functions of a college library is to collect and preserve materials that are related to the history of the institution and its members. Over the years, the Colby Library has built up a substantial documentary history of the college in its Colbiana Collection which now consists of more than 6000 items including books, pamphlets, letters, pictures, and other memorabilia. Among the notable recent acquisitions is a two-volume scrapbook that belonged to Colby’s ninth president, George Dana Boardman Pepper. It was given to the library by his daughter, Mrs. Frederick Morgan Padelford of Seattle, Washington, a member of the class of 1896. The two fragile folio volumes that make up the scrapbook contain numerous clippings, letters, memoranda and other documents that reflect the interests and important events in the life of its compiler.

George Dana Boardman Pepper was born in Ware, Massachusetts, in 1833. He prepared for college at Williston Academy and entered Amherst as a member of the class of 1857. During his college years, he distinguished himself as a student and was chosen as a speaker at his graduation exercises. One of the earliest items in the scrapbook is the program of these proceedings, upon which is listed the fact that young Pepper delivered a philosophical oration entitled “The Formation of National Character.”

In the fall of 1857 he entered Newton Theological Seminary to study for the ministry. Upon graduation from this institution...