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Ben Butler's Last Hurrah: The Presidential Campaign of 1884

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In 1884 a sixty-six-year-old veteran of four years of Civil War battles and decades of political conflict finally achieved a lifelong ambition. He was nominated as a candidate for the presidency of the United States. Like so many other incidents in Benjamin Butler's career his presidential candidacy combined seeming fulfillment with bitter disappointment and melodramatic heroics with sordid farce. Twenty years earlier Major General Butler had seemed close to leading his army into Richmond; the campaign ended in a humiliating defeat at Bermuda Hundred. As recently as 1880 he had confounded his enemies and achieved what he regarded as political vindication by finally winning the governorship of Massachusetts. His term had however been full of disappointments, noisy controversy, and an unexpected defeat for reelection. In 1884 this pattern of achievement and frustration occurred again. The aging politician who had once been seriously considered as the running mate and successor of Abraham Lincoln was the nominee of two hopelessly weak splinter groups—the Anti-Monopoly and Greenback parties. For over forty years, Ben Butler's name had been linked with ferocious political feuds, rumors of scandal, and the bold support of unpopular causes. Much of his reputation had been unfairly distorted but his massive contempt for what more orthodox politicians might think of his conduct had lost Butler any real influence with party regulars. The fact that he had twice changed parties and was obviously quite ready to do so again deprived him of support among both Republicans and Democrats.

When the maneuvering for the 1884 election began Butler was nominally a Democrat with a rather quixotic hope that he might somehow secure that party's nomination. In reality he had so alienated orthodox politicians that his only constituency was among the radicals and discontented who had rejected the old party ties in favor of a variety of third party movements. Butler's long record as a champion of paper currency and the obvious relish with which he baited what a later generation
would call “the establishment” made the Massachusetts politician an almost inevitable choice of the labor reformers and agrarian radicals. For many years, Butler had been urged by admirers to run for president. In both 1876 and 1880, he had been considered by the Greenback Convention and in the latter year he had received 95 votes in spite of the fact that he had never joined the party or supported its ticket. In 1884 the Greenbackers opened negotiations with the general as early as March, and in May the Anti-Monopoly party and shortly afterward the Greenback Convention nominated Butler for president. Their nominee was, however, slow to either accept or refuse these honors and for some time would do nothing but issue ambiguous general statements. It was only on August 12 that he finally accepted the nomination and proposed a short and intensive campaign beginning in September.

Butler’s presidential bid, like so many other aspects of his career, involved complex motives and can be interpreted in several different ways. He was certainly engaged in elaborate intrigues while at the same time boldly proclaiming his independence of all special interests and party bosses. Until the Democratic Convention met in July he apparently clung to the fantastic hope that he would be its nominee. It was only after the Democrats had nominated Grover Cleveland and turned down Butler’s radical amendments to the party platform that the General seriously took up the alternative of running as a third party candidate. As soon as Cleveland and James G. Blaine received their party’s nominations it became apparent that the election of 1884 would be an exceedingly close one and a few thousand votes in key states might well decide the issue. The part played by a third party candidate, even one who polled a tiny fraction of the total vote, might be crucial. Butler, as the recipient of the Greenback nomination was in position to be what the politicians called a “spoiler.” By campaigning or withdrawing from the race he might be able to influence tens of thousands of protest votes and throw the election to either one of the major party nominees.

2 Hayes, 148-150, 283-290.
3 West, 383-388; H. Wayne Morgan, *From Hayes to McKinley* (Syracuse, 1969), 204-206.
In the weeks immediately following the Democratic Convention, Butler was approached by representatives of both major parties. It was later claimed that the Democrats offered him the Attorney Generalship, a foreign mission, or the control of New England patronage if he would withdraw and support Cleveland. Butler rejected these offers as unsatisfactory in terms of political advantage and as contrary to his principles. He strongly disliked Cleveland and was far more sympathetic to Blaine’s views on the tariff question. The Republicans were as eager to keep Butler in the race as the Democrats were to get him out. In June and July he met with the Republican Secretary of Navy, William E. Chandler, who reported to Blaine that, “B. F. Butler is an important factor... His vanity, his desire to see how many votes he can get and his hope of getting enough electoral votes to hold the balance of power are all that I can think of to keep him firm.” The Republicans apparently agreed to subsidize the Greenback campaign at the rate of about $5,000 a week, but in September Butler wrote to Chandler requesting more money and assuring him an energetic effort was being put forward. Just how much money was provided and the precise nature of Butler’s arrangements with the Republicans has never been clarified. It was claimed that not all the promised subsidies were forthcoming. In any case, there can be little doubt that the Third Party was encouraged and partly financed by Blaine’s managers.

Most historians of the 1884 election have tended to dismiss Butler’s candidacy with the hostile verdict of contemporary newspaper reports; namely, that he was a mere stalking horse and decoy for Blaine. Like so much else in Butler’s turbulent career so simple a verdict is at best a half truth. The General had a long and consistent record in support of paper currency, labor legislation, and civil liberties. While he was quite willing to take campaign contributions where he could get them, he was determined to uphold his own candidacy and a program of radical reform. In spite of advanced years he flung himself into

4 West, 388-389.
5 Ibid., 390; Benjamin Butler, Butler’s Book (Boston, 1892), 983.
6 W. E. Chandler to James B. Blaine, June 8, 1884, in West, 394.
an exhausting round of campaigning that was almost unprece-
dented in nineteenth century presidential politics. As a shrewd
and experienced politician he must have known his campaign
was both hopeless and rather grotesque. He still cherished the
hope that by fusion with the Democrats in states where they
were weak and with Republicans in Democratic states a few
Greenback electors would be chosen and thus give him the
balance of power.\(^8\) Not only upon the stump but also in private
letters to his family Butler frequently stated his ambition to lay
the foundations of a new party and make a contribution to the
radical cause.\(^9\) After the election he wrote, “I did endeavor
to put before the Country a platform of principles and to inaug­
urate an organization which will sooner or later, succeed in
crushing out monopolies and the speculators in the necessities
of life such as grain, by whom the farmer, the producer and the
laboring men, the consumers are alike robbed.”\(^10\) Butler’s last
campaign combined Machiavellian intrigue with idealistic cham­
pionship of unpopular causes. He boldly attempted to manipu­
late the party system through his third party nomination and to
a large extent became himself the victim of those who hoped to
use his candidacy to serve their own ends.

As a result of his long and spectacular career in politics,
law, and business as well as his prominence in the Civil War,
Benjamin Butler was one of the best known public men of his
day. Year after year he received an extensive correspondence
from all kinds of people. His nomination as the Greenback
candidate brought a new flood of letters from politicians, per­
sons connected with various reform movements, and numerous
private citizens. This correspondence not only presents an inter­
esting cross-section of late nineteenth century radical opinion
but throws considerable light on the problems Butler faced in
running as a third party “people’s candidate.”

The Greenback Party was fairly well organized in a few
western states, but to a large extent its campaign seems to
have proceeded in a chaotic manner, with the party’s followers
contributing little but advice and enthusiasm. The presidential
nominee and his two or three secretaries were called upon to

\(^8\) West, 392-393.
\(^9\) Ibid., 397-399; Jessie Ames Marshall, Chronicles from the Nineteenth
Century (Clinton, Mass., 1957), II, 543.
\(^10\) Butler to I. E. Perkins, November 24, 1884, in West, 407.
organize the campaign and deal with all sorts of local problems and petty details. As early as July 29 Butler complained, "I am not allowed to enjoy a moment's vacation because my table is piled with letters from people wanting to know where the campaign is to begin, and every other question that can be asked. These men that write these letters are well meaning, earnest and honest men, but they have no more idea of conducting political campaigns than they have of the New Jerusalem."\(^{11}\) The campaign correspondence which Butler received from all parts of the country indicates that the Greenback Party organization was either feeble or virtually non-existent. It is perhaps to be expected that the General's partisans in New Orleans were so few and so devoid of either political organization or funds that they had to appeal directly to him for help in printing an electoral ticket.\(^{12}\) It is, however, surprising to find indications of similar disorganization in midwestern states where Greenback sympathizers were supposed to be strong. A harassed and angry supporter wrote from Ohio complaining that he could not find out about Butler's speaking schedule or even who the Greenback presidential electors and state candidates were.\(^{13}\) As late as October 25 Butler received another letter complaining that no one knew who the electors were and pointing out "We cannot vote for you without a ticket to vote."\(^{14}\) The candidate must have been made painfully aware of how thin his support was in many places. He could hardly have been encouraged by the letter of a man in Magnolia County, Mississippi, who wrote asking for money and explaining that there were two Butler supporters there, both of whom were former "rebel soldiers."\(^{15}\) From Ayer, Massachusetts, came an appeal for a political speaker on the rather dubious ground that there were only five men in the town who planned to vote for the Greenback candidate.\(^{16}\) Butler received a number of letters from people who claimed to wish him well but assured him he might have a better chance in 1888 than

\(^{11}\) Butler to J. F. Henry, July 29, 1884, ibid., 391-392.

\(^{12}\) "Labor Vindicator" to Butler, October 16, 1884, in Colby College Library. All subsequent letters documented as "in CCL" are from this collection which comprises over 800 letters written to Ben Butler between the years 1832 to 1890. This essay has utilized letters received during 1884.

\(^{13}\) F. W. Underhill to Butler, October 6, 1884, in CCL.

\(^{14}\) Ditto, October 25, 1884, in CCL.

\(^{15}\) J. F. Slade to Butler, June 9, 1884, in CCL.

\(^{16}\) E. S. Sullivan to Butler, October 27, 1884, in CCL.
in his present candidacy. In contrast to this he must have been heartened to receive a letter from an enthusiast in Moredon, New York, who wrote in a style popular with the authors of children's books of a later age, "Bold Ben don't give up... come, come, come, run, run, run," and assured him the town would give him one hundred votes.

Many accounts of the 1884 election have assumed that Butler rather cynically exploited his innocent and idealistic Greenback supporters by accepting their nomination and then following his own selfish intrigues. General Butler's motivation was seldom this simple. Throughout his career he usually seemed to act from a mixture of romantic idealism, a robust self-esteem, and a very practical concern for political and financial advantage. Whatever his own motives may have been, Butler's correspondence shows that while his radical followers may have been in some respects naive and idealistic they also expected their candidate to provide an ample supply of money, jobs, and other political favors. Butler was a wealthy man, although contemporaries tended to vastly exaggerate the size of his fortune. He was also known as a generous friend of the poor and exploited, and for years he had received numerous letters requesting aid. For example, a man wrote from the scene of Butler's wartime fame. "Ever mindful of your kindness to the poor people during your stay in New Orleans"; he would like the general to help him be restored to his job as a steamboat pilot. A veteran of the Army of the James appealed to his former commander for $250 to save his house from foreclosure. A man heard that the general had land in Virginia and wrote to see if Butler would let him have a homestead. A girl wrote that she had heard he was the poor man's friend and as she was poor would he buy her a Bible. The Secretary of the Butler Club in Melrose Highlands, Massachusetts, summed up the attitude of many of the General's correspondents. "I want aid. Will you out of your great wealth and in the kindness of your heart consent to loan me $100."

The attitude of many Greenback politicians and editors to-

17 Rev. Elijah Grocherhamer to Butler, November 1, 1884, in CCL.
18 Charles Enson to Butler, July 15, 1884, in CCL.
19 John Gorman to Butler, May 22, 1884, in CCL.
20 Nemo Taylor to Butler, July 14, 1884, in CCL.
21 John Tyler to Butler, March 14, 1884, in CCL.
ward their candidate seems to have been very similar. Among
the reasons for Butler’s nomination was his reputation as “the
poor man’s friend” and the expectation he would be able to
finance a movement which was generally short of the green­
backs it advocated. As early as February 1884 potential Green­
back delegates were writing to Butler in the hope of securing
his financial assistance in getting their party’s convention.22 As
long as he was still at least nominally a Democrat Butler re­
ceived similar letters from prospective delegates to that party’s
convention. One Pennsylvania politician guaranteed that “I
can talk Butler in several languages for 48 hours without
stopping... I am true blue and can wear a medal if neces­
sary.” He knew all the Pennsylvania delegates and could “do
more good at Chicago than three brass bands or a hundred
white-hatted shouting hoodlums.”23

The Nineteenth Century has often been romanticized as a
golden age of the small-town newspaper and its crusading
editor. In reality the local papers were often violently partisan,
shamelessly unoriginal in content, and almost invariably short
of funds. Papers which affiliated with the major parties could
count on advertisements, printing contracts, and other
favors from the local Democratic or Republican organizations.
The radical and third party press had little hope of sharing
these favors and usually led an impecunious and uncertain
existence. As soon as reports began to circulate that Butler
was likely to run as a third party candidate, a steady stream of
offers of support came in from editors of small radical and
Greenback papers. In almost every case they made it clear that
the candidate was also expected to make some contribution
toward supporting them. The editor of the King’s County
Anti Monopolist pointed out that there was no Butler paper in
Brooklyn and he was in need of financial help. He added,
“i can make other arrangements but I prefer to work out of
principle.”24 A Wisconsin editor offered a bargain: “For the
small sum of $500 you can have the support of the Wisconsin
Statesman during the presidential campaign and also an efficient
lecturer to travel in this state giving steady work until Novem­

22 Unsigned to Butler. February 23, 26, 1884, in CCL.
23 George Seltzer to Butler, June 13, 1884, in CCL.
24 R. H. Veritzen to Butler, June 6, 1884, in CCL.
An upstate New York paper wanted a subsidy of $150 for which it would not only guarantee an editorial a week but also an extra circulation of 600 copies. Some pleaded sacrifices made for the cause. The editor of the *True Democrat* of Cleburn claimed his paper had lost advertising because it came out for the Greenback candidate and asked him to send $600. Even the editor of a defunct Minnesota paper combined a pledge of support for both the 1884 and 1888 elections with a modest request for Butler’s aid in obtaining a railway pass to the “New Orleans World’s Fair.” A Mrs. Elinore pledged that her paper would do all it could because of Butler’s help on a pension case, but after the election she too wrote asking him to help on unpaid campaign bills.

The candidate was not only subject to the requests of Greenback politicians and editors for financial support but was also the recipient of numerous letters offering the services of self-appointed campaign workers. A book salesman wrote of his devotion to Butler’s candidacy but added, “if you want more of me than I can do in the course of business, send help.” Another applicant wanted not only money for his expenses but also a selection of speeches he could memorize. A Californian promised to rally the laboring men of Los Angeles to Butler and enclosed “samples of my awkward but pointed lubrications of the press.” He added that he spoke French and would be willing to come to New York and “stir up the French Canadians” there. Another amateur advisor suggested the formation of an alliance of northern labor, southern whites and negroes against the monopolies. To promote this coalition he wanted $100 for the first week and $20 for each subsequent week, otherwise he would have to offer his services to the Democrats. Some of these rather mercenary volunteers offered help of somewhat dubious value. One woman wrote to assure Butler that it was “time for every true American woman to lift up her voice” to get the males to vote for him. She was anxious that

25 D. C. Talbot to Butler, July 24, 1884, in CCL.
26 J. E. Scudder to Butler, August 18, 1884, in CCL.
27 Mrs. Raison to Butler, September 18, 1884, in CCL.
28 J. C. Smith to Butler, October 1, 1884, in CCL.
29 Mrs. Elinore to Butler, August 19, December 1, 1884, in CCL.
30 Wayne Damarens to Butler, June 1, 1884, in CCL.
31 Thomas Thompson to Butler, June 21, 1884, in CCL.
32 Arthur Vincent to Butler, August 7, 1884, in CCL.
33 C. B. Smith to Butler, September 24, 1884, in CCL.
Butler used his influence to get one of her relatives out of military prison as he was "a very popular person and could influence many votes."  

The candidate was not only expected to subsidize campaign workers, self-appointed agents, and newspapers, he was also called upon to provide all sorts of items such as pamphlets, copies of his biography, pictures, and flags. He was also invited to hire a glee club in New York and a "small band of music" from Gardiner, Maine, "to rally round the flag this fall."  

Even after the election was over, bills and demands for compensation for real or alleged services in the campaign continued to arrive. The New Jersey chairman of the Greenback party, for example, had many unpaid bills which he claimed Butler's agents had authorized. He insisted that rumors that the Republicans would pay them were false and Butler was obligated to do so. The *American Sentry*, which had supported the General's candidacy from early in the year, solicited him for money to pay off political debts after the election. When he declined to do so the paper criticized Butler's taking money from the Republicans and charged he had wrecked the Greenback party. The flood of requests for subsidies, campaign materials, and expense accounts goes far to explain Butler's constant concern with the financial side of the election. A few devoted friends and Greenback leaders made contributions or loans to finance the campaign and Noah Plympton, the chief campaign manager, estimated Butler paid $200,000 out of his own pocket. An energetic campaign on behalf of a party almost destitute of funds was possible only with some help from the more well-to-do major parties. Under these conditions it is not surprising that the Greenback candidate accepted a number of mysterious subsidies, most of which originated with the Republican managers but in a few states may have come from a local fusion with the Democrats. Until his

34 Ada Taylor to Butler, October 10, 1884, in CCL.  
35 James Vincent to Butler, August 8, 1884; H. P. Swain to Butler, July 29, 1884, in CCL.  
36 F. J. Tapley to Butler, August 15, 1884; William Spencer to Butler, June 17, 1884, in CCL.  
37 B. W. Terlinde to Butler, November 20, 1884, in CCL.  
38 Ditto, December 1, 2, 1884, in CCL.  
39 West, 393-394.
late and sudden acceptance of the Cleveland ticket, boss Kelly of Tammany Hall was a modest contributor to Butler's cause. At one point in the campaign, Butler impatiently told one of his supporters, "Perhaps I speak too strongly on this matter, but for weeks I have been thorned and prodded and goaded and pricked in every way by a thousand people, good and true men, who seem to think it was their mission to give me advice and direct me what to do. If I had been a drifting idiot I should not have been more thoroughly coached than I have been." A sampling of the candidate's voluminous incoming correspondence makes this outburst quite understandable. Besides numerous letters of advice from politicians, Butler was the recipient of plans and instructions from numerous self-appointed economists, philosophers, and prophets. Thomas Smith, who claimed to be a Scot gifted with the second sight, wrote several times to relate the visions in which he had seen Butler's nomination, acceptance of his mission, and triumphant election.

Mr. R. S. Thurin of South Carolina seemed to consider himself the candidate's chief advisor and manager in the South. He first wrote while the general was still nominally a Democrat offering either to force Butler's nomination or break up the Convention. This was to be achieved by revealing that the chairman of the South Carolina delegation had for some years been a British agent! Thurin soon wrote urging the adoption of his "exodus protection platform" which would combine a high protective tariff with colonization of all negroes somewhere outside the United States. Within a few days he wrote again to push his platform as the only one which would enable "Massachusetts and South Carolina to stand shoulder to shoulder." He now confidently explained that as General West, Butler's Greenback running mate, added little to the ticket he, Thurin, would be an ideal substitute as a vice-presidential candidate.

A man in St. Louis offered several ingenious suggestions. "Spoons has often been shouted in connection with your name..."

40 Ibid., 394.
41 Butler to J. E. Barrett, August 21, 1884, in West, 396.
42 Thomas Smith to Butler, June 19, August 26, 1884, in CCL.
43 R. S. Thurin to Butler, July 5, 1884, in CCL.
44 Ditto, July 28, 1884, in CCL.
45 Ditto, August 11, 13, 1884, in CCL.
and all sorts of bad jokes based on that word as connected with you have been made." He proposed that the true story of the spoons legend and a medal representing the spoons be circulated. His letter included a sample of the "true account" and a drawing of the medal. "Thus the cry of derision and insult should become like Yankee Doodle our cry of victory. Everyone will ask about the medal and soon people will buy them."46 This same Mr. Frederick, who it seems was a natural public relations man, also suggested a similar publicity drive in the form of a pamphlet, "Beast Butler and How he got the name." Almost uniquely among the amateur campaign advisors, he not only had no favors to ask but even offered to send $50 to wherever the campaign needed it most.47 Far less imaginative and altruistic was an insurance agent who sent the candidate a program centered around federal support for a permanent agricultural and industrial exhibit and the distribution of one hundred million dollars in prizes. This, he assured Butler, would win the election, meanwhile, as he was poor and the general had "an abundance of wealth; I will expect you to do something handsome for me and the sooner the better."48 There were some letters which simply expressed their admiration for Butler and offered support. There were also occasional pieces of political poetry, including "a sonnet on Iniquitous Speculations in the Articles of Food Necessary to All Alike,"49 and a long political poem entitled, "The Voyage of Life."50 Music was represented by a copy of the "General Butler Grand March" presented by its composer.51

Whatever his other failings General Butler proved to be an energetic campaigner in an age when presidential aspirants were traditionally supposed to stay at home and await the verdict of the people. The Greenback candidate was on the stump almost continually from early September until election day.

46 Eigner Frederick to Butler, August 15, 1884, in CCL. Butler had been the victim for years of the false legend that he had stolen the silver spoons from the houses of prominent Confederates while he was commanding general in New Orleans in 1862. He had presented a detailed and factual refutation of the charge but as the spoons continually followed him through his political career he generally showed an amused and bland indifference to the legend.

47 Eigner Frederick to Butler, August 29, 1884, in CCL.

48 James Thompson to Butler, August 13, 1884, in CCL.

49 William A. Stephens to Butler, October 3, 1884, in CCL.

50 Thomas Smith to Butler, October 31, 1884, in CCL.

51 Richard Sarafield to Butler, October 1, 1884, in CCL.
He made two swings through the Middle West and campaigned intensely in the crucial states of New York and New Jersey. He was the recipient of endless requests begging him to come to this or that town or to appear before various local gatherings. The appeals were sometimes based on assurances of the wide support that existed for the Butler ticket while at other times the candidate was warned that he must come because otherwise almost no votes would be cast for him. One local chairman invited Butler to address a meeting in an up-state New York town and then added a postscript that the suggested date was not suitable and the candidate had better send his picture instead.

The various populist factions who rallied to the Greenback cause were often bitterly jealous and suspicious of one another. The candidate was frequently requested to support one editor or local spokesman against another and warned about associating with the wrong elements. An example of this problem was a man in New York who had asked for copies of Butler's acceptance speech and had been referred to a Mr. Walter Scharpe. He promptly wrote an angry letter to Butler warning him that Scharpe was "a swindler in the Harlem Command circuit who should be in jail." The editor of the Portland Evening Record claimed that Maine might be won except that the Greenback party there was run by the "riff raff and tail end of all the old parties."

Election day in 1884 brought bitter disappointment to the Greenback party and its candidate. Butler's 133,000 votes were far behind the half million or even a million he had claimed and perhaps expected. His hopes for establishing a formidable new party could find little encouragement in the election returns. In the popular vote, the Greenback ticket did not even do as well as in 1880. Butler was equally unsuccessful in his bid for the role of kingmaker or spoiler as his complex maneuvers for fusion tickets failed to produce a single electoral vote. The heavy subsidies the Republicans had granted to the Greenback ticket were also in vain. Butler polled 17,004 votes in the crucial state of New York but they fell short of preventing

52 West, 396-403; Marshall, II, 545.
53 M. Ellis to Butler, September 25, 1884, in CCL.
54 Paul Toune to Butler, June 30, 1884, in CCL.
55 F. M. Linnette to Butler, September 30, 1884, in CCL.
Grover Cleveland from narrowly winning the state and with it the presidency.\textsuperscript{56}

Some of the reasons for Butler’s relatively poor showing are revealed by the correspondence he received during the campaign. The Greenback party and other radical groups which supported him seem to have been largely devoid of organization or political realism. This situation threw the burden of planning and financing the campaign largely on the candidate. Butler was deluged with impractical advice, requests for money, and the problems of local editors, busybodies, and eccentrics. Cleveland and Blaine no doubt received similar mail, but probably in lesser volume. They, in any case, could count on the massive organizations of the regular parties to deal with such matters. As the candidate of what Theodore Roosevelt later somewhat unfairly designated the “lunatic fringe” in American politics, Butler was supported by a far higher proportion of eccentrics, adventurers, and romantic idealists than the regular party nominees. Such a following would have been the despair of a more conservative politician, but all that is known of Butler’s enthusiasm for desperate causes, original ideas, and melodrama leads one to suspect he rather enjoyed his chaotic campaign and unorthodox followers. Both the candidate and his supporters were doomed to disappointment in the outcome of the election and perhaps disillusionment with each other, but in another sense Benjamin Butler and Third party radicalism were a natural combination.

\textsuperscript{56} W. Dean Burnham, \textit{Presidential Ballots 1836-1892} (Baltimore, 1955), 933.