

Stephen B. Elkins on Presidential Conventions

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WASHINGTON, June 15.—(Special Correspondence of The Bee.)—“Do our national conventions represent the choice of the people?”

I asked this question of Senator Stephen B. Elkins as we sat together in the library of his house on K street this afternoon. We were discussing the political situation, and the senator had been giving me some of his experiences in the management of presidential campaigns. He has, you know, been one of the leaders of the republican party for more than a quarter of a century. He became a member of the national committee when he was a territorial delegate from New Mexico, at the beginning of Grant's second term, almost a generation ago, and he was chairman of the republican executive committee in the Blaine-Cleveland campaign of 1884. Senator Elkins has had to do with the making of every presidential candidate for the past twenty-five years. He was a leader of the Blaine forces in the conventions of 1876, 1880 and 1884, he was at the head of the Harrison element in 1888, and he knows about as much of the inside history of national conventions as any public man in the country.

“Do our presidential conventions represent the choice of the people?” Senator Elkins repeated my question reflectively and then went on. “I think not as a rule. Sometimes they do, but the nominations are made by the leaders of the party, many of whom are animated by selfish motives and who sometimes accomplish their ends by finesse, intrigue and combination. The result is that the candidate so made is often not the man who is closest to the hearts of the masses. Indeed, it seems to me that the presidential nominee is seldom the first choice of the people.

“Take the nomination of President Hayes, for instance,” Senator Elkins continued. “It was made at Cincinnati in 1876, notwithstanding Blaine had a greater following than him or any other candidate. I was there as one of the Blaine representatives, and I knew all about the inside workings of the convention.

“The chief candidates were James G. Blaine, Roscoe Conkling, Oliver P. Morton, Hartranft of Pennsylvania and almost at the tail of the list Rutherford B. Hayes. The day before the nomination was made everything was in Blaine's favor. We thought we had him nominated; but night came on, the gas of the convention hall had been tampered with, and we were forced to put off the ballot which would have secured his candidacy until the next day. All that night the opposing forces worked to defeat us. They finally united, and, as a result, Hayes became the choice of the convention. He was then an almost unknown quantity in the minds of the people.”

“It was much the same in the convention of 1880, was it not?” I asked.

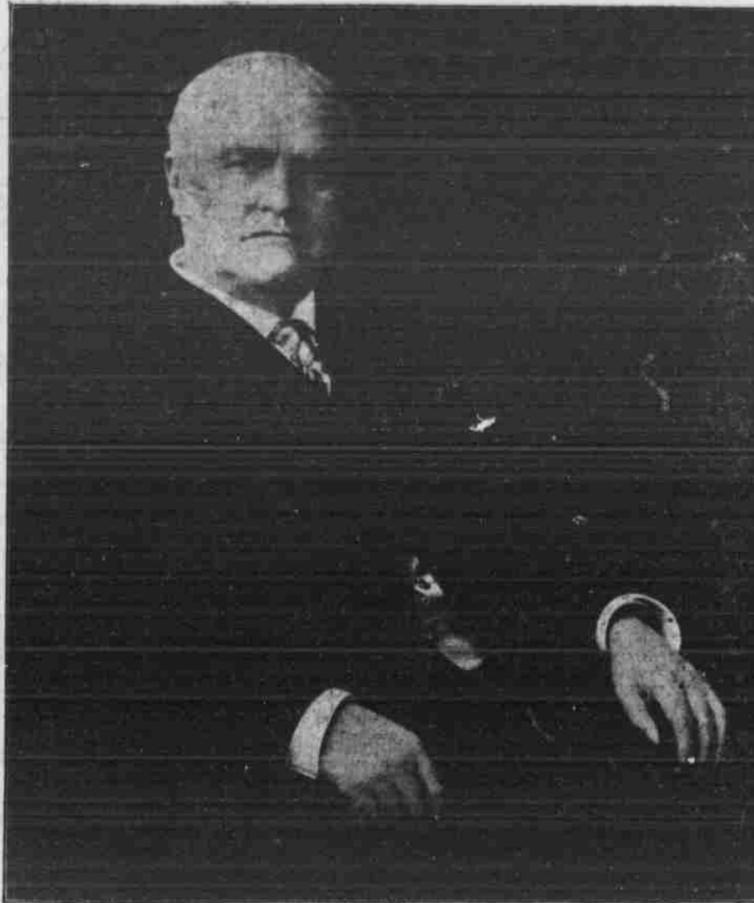
“Yes,” replied Senator Elkins. “The candidates of the people in that convention were Blaine and Grant. John Sherman had some following, but he had no strong hold upon the masses, and Blaine was more the choice of the whole republican party than any of the others. Nevertheless, James A. Garfield, who came from Ohio as the representative of the Sherman forces, became the nominee. I don't think Garfield hoped to be the candidate until the convention met.

“When I saw him in New York, two months before that, he promised me that if at any time it became impossible to nominate John Sherman he would do all in his power to throw the vote of Ohio to Blaine. The convention met, and the Blaine forces and Grant forces struggled and struggled in that famous deadlock, with the Sherman vote far in the rear. There seemed no chance for Sherman, and I tried again and again to persuade Garfield to give Blaine the Ohio vote on one ballot at least, but he put me off with, ‘Not yet, not yet.’ He then seemed to feel that he would be nominated. The speech he made for Sherman was a better speech for himself than for Sherman, and whether intentionally or not it brought him up in the minds of the people as a possible candidate. The result was that he was nominated, taking precedence over Blaine and Grant, the candidates of the people.”

“When was Blaine nearest the presidency?”

“Mr. Blaine received the nomination in 1884,” said Senator Elkins. “That was a case in which the choice of the people became the choice of the convention. I think the same occurred in the nomination of McKinley in 1896 and 1900, and that will be the case with President Roosevelt in the convention next week. In the national convention of 1884 there were several other candidates. Arthur, then president, had a considerable following. Senator Hawley was presented by Connecticut, Senator Sherman by Ohio and Senator Logan by Illinois. Blaine, however, was easily nominated, receiving 541 votes to Arthur's 207. General Arthur professed himself satisfied, but many of his followers were lukewarm in the campaign which followed.

“I have said that Blaine was nearest the White House then,” continued Senator



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Elkins. “He was elected, in fact, but the democrats had the control of the election machinery in the state of New York and they counted a lot of Butler votes as Cleveland votes and thereby made him president. I have never believed that Cleveland was fairly elected.”

“How about the nomination of Harrison?” I asked.

“That took place in 1888,” said Senator Elkins, “and largely through Blaine's influence. Mr. Blaine was in Europe that year, and shortly before the convention he sent home a letter from Florence in which he declined to be a candidate. Then John Sherman, W. Q. Gresham, Chauncey Depew, Russell A. Alger, Joe Hawley, W. B. Allison and Benjamin Harrison came forth as candidates. Shortly before the convention met Andrew Carnegie left New York for Scotland, where he expected to take a coaching tour with Mr. Blaine. I had a chat with him about the time he sailed and we then made up a code of twenty words in order that I might cable Blaine about the convention and what passed be known to ourselves alone.

“Carnegie gave Blaine the code and by it I cabled Blaine from Chicago. He again declined to be a candidate, and I asked him to cable me his choice among those before the convention. He replied: ‘Take Harrison.’ In the balloting which followed it was Blaine's strength going to Harrison that made him the nominee, although this was greatly helped by the support of Tom Platt. John Sherman was also an element in that convention, and he might possibly had the Blaine following had he shown more sympathy for Blaine in the convention of 1876 and 1880.”

“You have had much to do with the management of campaigns, Senator Elkins,” said I. “What does it cost to run one?”

“The expenses vary from year to year,” replied Senator Elkins, “but I may say they are steadily increasing. The Hayes campaign cost about \$300,000. The Blaine campaign of 1884 cost \$460,000 and that of Harrison, which was managed by Quay, cost, I have been told, about \$1,200,000. The two campaigns since then have, according to current belief, cost doubly as much as the Harrison campaign. So, you see, the expenses are enormous.”

“How about the democrats; do they spend much money?”

“They spend all they can get,” replied Senator Elkins, “but they are usually not able to raise so much as the republicans. In the Blaine-Cleveland campaign they spent fully as much as we did, and I know what we spent, for I was then chairman of the republican executive committee, with Mr. Jones of Pittsburg at the head of the national committee. Mr. Jones was a very cautious business man, and we kept close accounts of everything, so that we knew just where the money went.”

“But where do these vast sums go, senator? Are they used to buy votes?”

“No,” replied Senator Elkins. “The man who will sell his vote to you will resell the same vote to the democrats, and even if it were not dishonest it would not be good business to buy votes. The money is spent in various ways. The literary bureaus which prepare and circulate campaign literature cost enormous sums. Hundreds of thousands of dollars are paid to speakers, who must be ready to go to any part of

the country on telegraphic notice. Many public men who give up their whole time to the campaign are paid so much for the season, or so much per night. Indeed, one United States senator asked me \$6,000 for his services during one campaign. Then it costs a fortune to poll the country—that is, to ascertain just how many republicans, democrats and independents there are in each election precinct and how they will vote. It is upon such polling that every campaign is planned. This is largely done by the states, but the national committee helps.”

“But, senator, is not much of the money used dishonestly?” I asked.

“I think not,” was the reply. “I don't think any of it is knowingly so used by the national committee. In a vast machine like that of a political party, however, you will always find dishonest men and the money given out for organization and special work sometimes sticks to the hands of those who receive it. I think we lost a large percentage of what we spent in that way during the Blaine campaign.

“The cost of a national campaign,” continued Senator Elkins, “is very great outside of the actual money spent in politics. There is an enormous loss of business. The people let politics take them away from their stores, trades and farms. There is always an uncertainty as to the results and as to a possible change of tariff and other matters that affect business, so that presidential years are lean years as far as business is concerned.”

“But this makes our government a very expensive one, senator?”

“Yes, it is expensive,” was the reply, “but it is worth all it costs. The advantages of a democracy far outweigh all such evils. We are our own masters and our expenses are of our own creation and not those of one man or a half dozen men as in a monarchical government.”

“But does not our democracy tend to produce a nation of boodlers?”

“No,” replied Senator Elkins. “There is some official corruption, but the press exposes the most of it and there are an hundred honest men to every rascal. I am not afraid of the morality of the American people and I don't believe there is any danger of our town councils, our state legislatures and our national congress becoming corrupt. As long as men are men you will now and then find a dishonest one, here and there among them, but the majority will always be true to themselves and their country.”

“How about official morality at Washington? How much can a United States senator legitimately make?”

“He can make just \$5,000 a year,” said Senator Elkins, “and not one cent more. I am tired of this talk about senatorial corruption. I know it is said there are members of the senate whose votes are for sale, but, if so, I do not know them. No one has ever approached me with an offer for my vote or my influence. The professional lobbyist is largely a newspaper fiction. He did exist in the past, but at present, if he exists at all, his weight is so small as to be imperceptible.”

“But how about making money out of information as to probable legislation? Congress is supposed by some to be a kind of an annex to Wall street.”

“It is not so,” replied Senator Elkins. “I don't think senators speculate upon such matters. In the first place how can one be sure of his information, and, if so, how be sure that the markets will go as you expect them to go. The truth is the Wall street brokers can discount the action of congress quite as well as we can, and such of our senatorial lambs as have gone to Wall street have come back badly shorn. There are not many, but now and then one may take a flyer, as it is called, but it is usually to his sorrow. Indeed, I have never heard of any senator or representative making much money by such speculations. I don't believe it possible, unless backed by an experience and ability in such matters which would make the man a success on the outside. Besides, most of the senators are poor, and that in itself is an evidence of their innocence as to this charge.”

“But, Senator Elkins, some men do make a great deal out of the government. How about the Cleveland bond sale of \$52,000,000, whereby, according to the papers, Pierpont Morgan made \$1,000,000 in one day?”

“I remember that statement,” said Senator Elkins. “I quoted it in one of my speeches in the senate. But Pierpont Morgan is not a United States senator. He is a New York banker of international note, and greater in business than any or all of the senators put together. The money he and his fellows made out of that sale was in the ordinary course of legitimate business, and their success came largely from playing upon the fears of the administration and the country.

“I can't see why Grover Cleveland called that matter up at this time,” continued Senator Elkins. “It may be that he wants to be the democratic candidate for the presidency, and thinks that this feature of his administration may help him. To my mind it is far from commendable, and I showed this at the time by a resolution which I introduced into the senate providing that no further sales of bonds should be made without advertisement or by private contract. I believe that resolution saved Uncle Sam a great deal of money. When it was before the senate Russell Sage wrote me that I had saved the government \$6,000,000 by it.”

“Give me the story in a nutshell,” said I.

“Since Grover Cleveland has revived the subject I have no objection to doing so,” replied Senator Elkins. “It was in the latter part of 1895 that Cleveland made his contract with certain New York bankers to take \$62,000,000 worth of United States 4 per cent bonds at 104½ and place them in Europe. This contract was made without advertisement for bids and as a private sale to J. Pierpont Morgan. The reason for it was that there seemed to be a scarcity of gold in the country, and the gold reserve fund in the treasury had fallen considerably below the \$100,000,000 mark, which is the legal reserve. Shortly after the sale was made it was reported that Mr. Morgan took the bonds to New York, and within twenty-four hours thereafter sold them for 112, and more, so that the syndicate made about \$6,000,000 out of the deal. Of this it was alleged that J. Pierpont Morgan received \$1,000,000.

“At the same time more gold was needed, and it was proposed to issue \$100,000,000 or \$200,000,000 more of bonds in the same way. Our laws provide that even the smallest of our public contracts shall be by advertisement, and only to the highest bidder, and I did not think it was right to sell the bonds in this way to private parties without such advertisement. I also thought there was plenty of gold in the country, and that the bonds could be sold at home. I was so convinced of this, that, although I was then new to the senate and backward about pushing myself to the front, and although all my friends advised against it, I offered my resolution that no further bonds should be placed at private sale or under private contract, and that no sale whatever should be made without due advertisement for proposals, and then only to the highest bidder.”

“How did the resolution take in the senate when it was offered?” I asked.

“I was warned that it would create a panic. Some of the senators thought it would throw the nation into bankruptcy and begged me to keep quiet. I offered the resolution, nevertheless, and in speaking upon it showed that war loans aggregating more than \$2,500,000,000 placed in time of peril had been put out at less expense to the government than these \$62,000,000 issued in time of peace. I showed that the loans of the civil war were placed at commissions of less than 3 per cent to the government, while the New York bankers had already made more than 8 per cent out of that contract with Uncle Sam and that they now expected to make as much or a greater percentage on the \$100,000,000 or the \$200,000,000 then under consideration. In other words, if the issue of \$300,000,000 was sold through them at the same rate their profits would be about \$14,000,000.”

“How did it turn out, senator?”

“The result was that the people began to protest against further private sales,” said Senator Elkins. “The president and the

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