

## ARTICLES

*Choosing Wisely: The Case of Maine's Hannibal Hamlin*

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## Introduction

For many Americans, Hannibal Hamlin is a largely forgotten name. The nation's 15<sup>th</sup> vice president from Maine left his position in 1865, right before the president at the time, Abraham Lincoln, became the first U.S. president in history to be assassinated. Although information about Hamlin is available today, citizens should familiarize themselves with the events of the nineteenth century regarding Hamlin as the lessons they extract from that time could have great utility today and well into the future.<sup>1</sup> Had the circumstances of his time been different, Hamlin could have played an instrumental role in Reconstruction following the Union victory in the Civil War. Hamlin had a fine resume and a wealth of experience that could have helped him in a presidential role, as he had the following credentials over the course of his entire political career: speaker of the Maine House of Representatives; member of the U.S. House of Representatives; member of the U.S. Senate; governor of Maine; vice president of the United States; Collector of the Port of Boston; and Minister to Spain. He was well known in New England politics, but not so much at the national level, which may, in part, have been a reflection of his time period. Nevertheless, many of his contemporaries acknowledged that Hamlin wielded a great deal of policy influence in Congress while he served.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, Hamlin's resume was very impressive regardless of the context of the time period. He had a plethora of political experiences from which to extract if afforded the opportunity to serve as chief executive. Unfortunately for him, the events of history would preclude him becoming president when he may have been a more effective leader than the person who succeeded him as vice president, Andrew Johnson.

## Political Career before Becoming Vice President

Hamlin was born in Paris Hill, Maine on August 27, 1809, and named after his father's twin brother; on February 12 of that same year

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Hamlin's apprenticeship law firm in Hampden. He was company.<sup>7</sup> During his time in as an attorney, as he re Judicial Court of Maine on n to the Maine House of Representatives Hampden district, and served rest of the country, Jacksonian this time. The egalitarian ethic were embraced in a state that became a state in 1820 after Mainers supported John Quincy and the National Republican Andrew Jackson and the Dem

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Abraham Lincoln emerged into this world.<sup>3</sup> Both men were deemed by their contemporaries to be very athletic for their time period and both would join forces in 1860 on the Republican ticket.<sup>4</sup> Due to the death of his father in 1829, Hamlin was compelled to run the family farm. Simultaneously, he aspired to become an attorney, so he maintained his interest in law by apprenticing with the most prestigious firm in Maine, Fessenden and Deblois.<sup>5</sup> At this time in his life, he was a supporter of Jacksonian Democracy and the newly organized Democratic Party. This support culminated in a business partnership between Hamlin and Horatio King in 1830 when the two purchased the *Oxford Democrat*. This venture did not last long for Hamlin, but it brought him in contact with Democrats who would be able to assist him with his political career at a later date.<sup>6</sup>

Hamlin resumed farming and studying the law after he sold his share of the newspaper. The lawyers with whom he interacted at Fessenden and Deblois had a profound impact on his worldview. Samuel Fessenden was an outspoken abolitionist and Hamlin, too, despised the institution of slavery. Hamlin had joined the growing abolitionist movement in the United States that had emerged by the late 1820s.

Hamlin's apprenticeship culminated in his establishing his own law firm in Hampden. He was also elected captain of the town's militia company.<sup>7</sup> During his time in Hampden, he gained invaluable experience as an attorney, as he represented the town before the Supreme Judicial Court of Maine on numerous occasions. He was first elected to the Maine House of Representatives in September 1835, from the Hampden district, and served from 1836–1841.<sup>8</sup> Not unlike much of the rest of the country, Jacksonian Democracy became popular in Maine at this time. The egalitarian ethos and hostility to the politics of privilege were embraced in a state that had not long been independent (Maine became a state in 1820 after splitting with Massachusetts).<sup>9</sup> While Mainers supported John Quincy Adams from nearby Massachusetts and the National Republican Party in 1828, they switched in favor of Andrew Jackson and the Democratic Party in 1832.<sup>10</sup>

Hamlin ascended to a leadership position quickly, serving as the speaker of the Maine House in 1837 and 1839–1840.<sup>11</sup> In 1837, he tried unsuccessfully to persuade his colleagues to abolish capital punishment. He believed that the death penalty was immoral and did not have a deterrent value. A half-century later, he gave a speech before



the Maine Legislature to persuade lawmakers to abolish capital punishment.<sup>12</sup> He was successful in 1887, and Maine legislators have never reinstated the death penalty.<sup>13</sup>

In 1840, Hamlin's political focus became national in scope. He was selected as a delegate to the Democratic National Convention in Baltimore in May. He was a committed delegate for Martin Van Buren's renomination by the Democratic Party. At this time, Hamlin was nominated by the Democrats for a U.S. House seat. He lost to the Whig candidate, Elisha Allen.<sup>14</sup> It was a close race as Hamlin lost by 200 votes out of 15,000 cast.<sup>15</sup> Hamlin resumed his law practice in Hampden but challenged Allen again in 1843. The election was delayed until the districts could be reapportioned.<sup>16</sup> This time Hamlin defeated him by over 1,000 votes.<sup>17</sup> Thus, Hamlin embarked on a career in national politics that would culminate in almost becoming the seventeenth president of the United States.

Hamlin became the chair of the Committee on Elections during his tenure in the House and was appointed to the highly coveted House Rules Committee as well. He was extremely fortunate in 1844, as he was invited to accompany President John Tyler and other dignitaries to cruise the Potomac River on the U.S. Navy frigate *Princeton*. He was on his way to board the ship when he was summoned to return to the House on urgent business. While testing one of the guns on the ship, an explosion occurred which killed several people, including Secretary of State Abel Upshur.<sup>18</sup>

Hamlin's memorabilia as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives was recently made available for purchase by the Raab Collection. During his tenure in the House, he denounced Henry Clay's economic programs and was a staunch Jacksonian Democrat.<sup>19</sup> In 1846, Hamlin took a principled stance on the Wilmot Proviso, a proposal by Pennsylvania Representative David Wilmot that would prohibit the introduction of slavery into any territory taken from Mexico as a result of the Mexican-American War. The proposal was attached to an appropriations bill to pay Mexico for the land that the United States had seized as a result of the war. The House members approved the appropriations bill and the proviso on August 8, 1846; on February 1, 1847, senators approved the bill but rejected the proviso. It never went into effect, but it did have the tangible impact of further dividing North and South over the slavery question.<sup>20</sup>

Hamlin gave a speech on the issue of creating a territorial government. The views he shared were contextual, but his views on slavery and his beliefs in the Union were not. "A dissolution of the Union for the sake of negro slavery! Sir, the man who blushes when it falls from his lips is not fit to be a public man for this miserable people. I would prove prominent, not unlike a man who blushes when it came to his political career."

Hamlin aspired to be a senator. He was selected by the state legislature to fill the seat of Senator John Fairchild, who died of a heart attack. His unnecessary death was a political opportunity. In May 1848, the legislature elected Hamlin to fill Fairchild's seat. He served in the U.S. Senate in various capacities. He was a Democrat by the anti-slavery party. He served from June 8, 1848 to February 1857. Perhaps most notably, he served from 1856 to become a Republican. He served from 1857-1861 and after leaving the Senate in 1861, he served from 1869-1881.<sup>23</sup> Hamlin had become the party of the Union. He had become a central litmus test for the party, and never returned to it.

Hamlin's tenure in the Senate was a turbulent period of upheaval in U.S. history. The measures of 1850, which were known as the Compromise Measures, were passed by Clay in a series of resolutions. Hamlin's compromise measures were a result of his compromise measures with the South. In September of 1850, Hamlin proposed that Utah or New Mexico. While in Mexico, Congress compensated the United States. Hamlin maintained in the District of Columbia. The most controversial measure was the one that maintained to fugitive slaves; north



Hamlin gave a speech in the House on January 14, 1847, on the issue of creating a territorial government in Oregon. The sentiments he shared were contextual, but nevertheless indicative of some of his views on slavery and his belief that the Union should remain intact: "A dissolution of the Union *because* we will not extend the institution of negro slavery! Sir, the man who would utter that sentiment, should blush when it falls from his lips. Dissolve this great and mighty republic for this miserable pretext."<sup>21</sup> His abolitionist views would later prove prominent, not unlike other politicians during that time period, when it came to his political career in national politics.

Hamlin aspired to become a U.S. senator in 1846 but was not selected by the state legislature. In late 1847, however, incumbent Senator John Fairchild died after a misguided knee operation by his doctor. His unnecessary death was shocking but provided Hamlin with a political opportunity. In May, 1848, Hamlin was selected by the state legislature to fill Fairchild's seat.<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, Hamlin would serve in the U.S. Senate in various stints as he was originally elected as a Democrat by the anti-slavery wing of the Democratic Party and he served from June 8, 1848 to January 7, 1857. He resigned from the Senate to serve as governor of Maine for a brief time in January and February 1857. Perhaps most importantly, he left the Democratic Party in 1856 to become a Republican. He would later serve in the Senate from 1857–1861 and after leaving the vice presidency he served again from 1869–1881.<sup>23</sup> Hamlin had become convinced that the Democratic Party had become the party of slavery. To him, the evil institution had become a central litmus test for Democrats. Accordingly, he left that party, and never returned to it.<sup>24</sup>

Hamlin's tenure in the Senate occurred during a monumental period of upheaval in U.S. history. He opposed the compromise measures of 1850, which were initially proposed by Senator Henry Clay in a series of resolutions in January 1850.<sup>25</sup> Clay believed that his compromise measures would avoid a crisis between North and South. In September of 1850, California was admitted as a free state. In exchange, there would be no federal restrictions on slavery for Utah or New Mexico. While Texas lost its boundary claims in New Mexico, Congress compensated Texas with \$10 million. Slavery was maintained in the District of Columbia, but the slave trade was prohibited. The most controversial feature of the Compromise of 1850 pertained to fugitive slaves; northerners were required to return runaway





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slaves to their southern owners. Hamlin had determined that slavery was not only a contradiction to the Declaration of Independence and Constitution, but the institution was morally repugnant as well.<sup>26</sup>

Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas, who worked with Clay on the compromise measures of 1850, was a chief architect of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. Douglas envisioned a transcontinental railroad going through his state; Illinois would be the eastern terminal. This act repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and permitted Nebraska and Kansas, based on the notion of popular sovereignty, to determine whether their respective territories would be slave or free soil. Nebraskans rejected slavery at the time and Kansans endorsed it, following a brief civil war known as Bleeding Kansas.<sup>27</sup> As Hatfield cogently noted: "The slavery issue split the Maine Democratic party into two factions. Hamlin's antislavery faction won the name "Woolheads" from its opponents. The Woolheads in turn labeled their adversaries, who opposed the Wilmot Proviso, "Wildcats."<sup>28</sup> The Woolheads supported prohibition laws and the Wildcats opposed them. In 1854, Hamlin denounced the efforts of Senator Stephen Douglas to enact the Kansas-Nebraska bill and repeal the Missouri Compromise. The bill passed

the Senate by a 37-14 vote; against it.<sup>29</sup> President Franklin Pierce's administration would be at war severe

In the 1856 presidential election, Hamlin ran for his new Republican Party against James Buchanan. Hamlin won 16 of the state's counties.<sup>30</sup> In that Fremont defeated Hamlin by a margin of over 28,000 votes.<sup>31</sup> Mainers clearly did not want many others in the country at the time were clearly committed to the Union. The magnitude of the victory was attributable to Hamlin's tireless effort. Mainers believed in Hamlin as a person not prone to pretense and adept at the art of communication. His practice of always answering

Nationally, Buchanan won Fremont's 33 percent; Fremont won over 21 percent of the vote. The Republican ticket lost in the new party as he also was a and New Jersey.<sup>34</sup> Though his tenure was due to pragmatic per year; the governor's salary an education for his children was selected for another term returned to Washington, D.C.

## 1860 Presidential Election

By the end of 1859, who were not committed to encouraged Hamlin to run for expected that Seward would be bid for the White House.<sup>36</sup> At seat from Illinois in 1858, Abolitionist appeal across the country, and



the Senate by a 37-14 vote; Hamlin was one of four Democrats to vote against it.<sup>29</sup> President Franklin Pierce signed the bill into law and the nation would be at war several years later.

In the 1856 presidential election, Hamlin campaigned actively for his new Republican Party and its standard bearer for the presidency, John Fremont. Hamlin made 99 speeches in Maine and visited all 16 of the state's counties.<sup>30</sup> His campaigning was successful in Maine in that Fremont defeated the Democratic nominee, James Buchanan, by a margin of over 28,000 votes and captured over 61 percent of the vote.<sup>31</sup> Mainers clearly did not view Buchanan in the same way as many others in the country did at the time. The people of Maine at this time were clearly committed to the notion of freedom in the territories. The magnitude of the victory in Maine for Fremont was largely attributable to Hamlin's tireless efforts and his high popularity in the state. Mainers believed in Hamlin's integrity and viewed him favorably as a person not prone to pretense and self-absorption. In addition, he was adept at the art of communication during his time as he maintained a practice of always answering his mail.<sup>32</sup>

Nationally, Buchanan won over 45 percent of the vote to Fremont's 33 percent; former President Millard Fillmore garnered over 21 percent of the vote for the Whig-American Party.<sup>33</sup> Although the Republican ticket lost in 1856, Hamlin became very popular in his new party as he also was asked to do campaigning in Pennsylvania and New Jersey.<sup>34</sup> Though he was elected governor of Maine, his brief tenure was due to pragmatic reasons. His salary as senator was \$5,000 per year; the governor's salary was \$1,000. Hamlin wished to provide an education for his children, so the higher salary prevailed. Once he was selected for another term as a U.S. senator, he left Augusta and returned to Washington, D.C.<sup>35</sup>

### 1860 Presidential Election

By the end of 1859, some Maine Republican Party leaders who were not committed to William Seward's presidential candidacy encouraged Hamlin to run for the Republican nomination. Many expected that Seward would be the most likely to secure the Republican bid for the White House.<sup>36</sup> After his failed effort to win a U.S. Senate seat from Illinois in 1858, Abraham Lincoln enhanced his popular appeal across the country, and his service to the Republican Party, by





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giving many campaign speeches for Republican candidates. When the Republicans assembled for their convention in Chicago in May 1860, they knew they were likely to prevail. Very soon into the convention, a Stop Seward movement emerged based on the perception that he could not carry Indiana or Pennsylvania. After the first ballot, Seward led Lincoln, 173½ to 102. Lincoln's campaign managers won over Indiana and Pennsylvania by offering cabinet posts to those states. Lincoln gained 79 votes on the second ballot and prevailed on the third one.<sup>37</sup>

Once Lincoln successfully secured the Republican nomination, the delegates then focused on a vice presidential running mate. The initial favorite of the rank-and-file delegates was Cassius Clay of Kentucky. Party leaders, however, preferred Hamlin. On the first ballot, Hamlin received 194 votes; Clay received 102½; John Hickman of Pennsylvania tallied 58; Andrew Reeder of Pennsylvania had 51; and Nathaniel P. Banks of Massachusetts received 38½ votes. On the second ballot, Hamlin forged ahead dramatically by garnering 367 votes. In a sign of solidarity, the Convention nominated Hamlin unanimously.<sup>38</sup>

There were several key reasons why party leaders chose Hamlin as the Republican candidate for vice president in 1860. He

was a former Democrat and a newly organized GOP according to Seward, which could help unify the party. Hamlin was from a different geographical region, which could also help to balance the ticket. From a substantive perspective, Hamlin's opposition to slavery was well known. This meant that the ticket would offer a divided electorate in the

On May 19, 1860, one of the first speeches in Chicago, Hamlin delivered a speech that shared his vision for the country.

Fellow-Citizens: Unsolicited, the nomination of Hannibal Hamlin as Vice President of the United States, which attaches to it the cause, which I have no detriment at my hands to that man who is to be here to pay a tribute to who comes from that has already culminated that man who is not only principles, but a representation that man who is identified with the labor of the truly with the labor of the tired to toil. Capacious, incorruptible, a man who has never cast a reproach on his friends, that is committed back your Government to the principles and practices, and administer in to purge the Government with which those in an utter insignificance. It is Union, with the just rights of the just rights of all the



was a former Democrat and could help to broaden the appeal of the newly organized GOP accordingly. He was perceived to be a friend of Seward, which could help unify the party in the November election. He was from a different geographical region of the country than Lincoln, which could also help to balance the ticket's appeal to the electorate. From a substantive perspective, he was also opposed to an expansion of slavery. This meant that the Republicans had a uniform platform to offer a divided electorate in America at the time.

On May 19, 1860, one day after the nominations were made in Chicago, Hamlin delivered a speech in Washington, D.C. In it, he shared his vision for the country. In his own words:

Fellow-Citizens: Unsolicited, unexpected, and undesired, the nomination has been conferred upon me. Unsolicited as it was, I accept it, with the responsibilities which attach to it—in the earnest and ardent hope that the cause, which is superior to men, shall receive no detriment at my hands. You are here to pay tribute to that man who is to bear your standard on to what we hope and believe will be a triumphant victory. You are here to pay a tribute to that young giant of the West, who comes from that region where the star of empire has already culminated. You come to pay a tribute to that man who is not only the representative man of your principles, but a representative man of the people;—that man who is identified in all your interests by his early associations in life, who sympathizes justly and truly with the labor of all this broad land, himself inured to toil. Capacious, comprehensive, a statesman incorruptible, a man over whom the shade of suspicion has never cast a reproach. But what is the mission, my friends, that is committed to our hands? It is to bring back your Government to the position, to bring back the principles and practices of its fathers and founders, and administer in the light of their wisdom. It is to purge the Government of its corruptions, compared with which those in any other administration pale into utter insignificance. It is to maintain the integrity of the Union, with the just rights of all the States; and while the just rights of all the States are maintained, it is also



to maintain that States shall not interfere in territories outside of their own jurisdiction. And it is to give new aids to commerce across the trackless ocean—it is to foster and give new life to the industry of this broad land.<sup>39</sup>

Note his observations about the importance of history in his speech, particularly with his references to the framers and a republican form of government. He appeared to be a national leader who understood the significance of the context of the times in which he lived.

There were four party tickets in 1860. The Republicans won with just under 40 percent of the popular vote. This translated into 180 electoral votes, however. Stephen Douglas, Lincoln's foe in the 1858 U.S. Senate race, finished in second place in the popular vote with almost 30 percent of the vote for the Democratic Party; his support only yielded 12 electoral votes. John Breckenridge, the candidate for the Southern Democratic Party, had 18 percent of the popular vote and 72 electoral votes. John Bell of the Constitutional Union Party garnered almost 13 percent of the popular vote which coincided with 39 electoral votes.<sup>40</sup> The disunity of the Democrats assisted the Republicans in capturing the executive branch. Many Democrats in the South were vehemently opposed to Douglas and that is why they supported Breckenridge. Douglas was perceived to tout a middle ground on slavery, thereby alienating southerners committed to the institution as a result. The Constitutional Union Party offered voters another choice and generally appealed to people who were dissatisfied with both major parties and wanted to preserve the status quo on the slavery question (maintain slavery but not allow it to expand into the territories).<sup>41</sup>

### Service in the Lincoln Administration (1861–1865)

Hamlin felt neglected by Lincoln during his tenure as vice president. He had no prominent role to play during the Civil War and was not an indispensable member of the administration. Though Lincoln appeared to have nothing against Hamlin, and may have liked him personally, he chose not to include him in making key decisions.<sup>42</sup> Under the Constitution, vice presidents can only break a tie vote in the Senate. The job does not necessarily come with political power unless the president decides to bestow political power on his or her vice president. This clearly did not happen with Lincoln as was the general custom of the time. In fact, most vice presidents have not been key brokers in their respective administrations. Hamlin was no different.

It was Hamlin who as vice president "was really on the spot" in his description of the vice president's role today. Although he was not involved in the planning of the war, he was in two of Lincoln's decisions of great significance. The most disputed was the sneak preview of the Emancipation Proclamation to the Cabinet on July 22, 1862, which prompted Lincoln to share the decision with Hamlin. Hamlin's grandson, Charles, paid Lincoln a courtesy call on June 18, 1862. Lincoln reported that he had read the first draft of the Emancipation Proclamation. The oral history of this event is often used to raise the possibility that at least Hamlin was more than just a passive leader who did not typically speak during a very difficult time. He was actually giving up their lives to the cause. It is intuitive, however, to believe that Hamlin, like Lincoln, who was a lawyer and a politician initially in order to ex-

Another area of influence was concerned allowing African American soldiers to fight. Hamlin: "He was slow to move, but he should have been; much slower than we should have been; much slower than we should have been; but he was slow to move and over and over again to act; but he was slow to move. Following the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, 1, 1863, African American soldiers were allowed to fight. Abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass and African American soldiers were

### 1864 Presidential Election

Hamlin was dropped from the ticket for the same reason why he was added to the ticket: he was not a popular leader, and perhaps Lincoln did not want to help the ticket prevail in the election. He did not need a seat in the U.S. Senate.



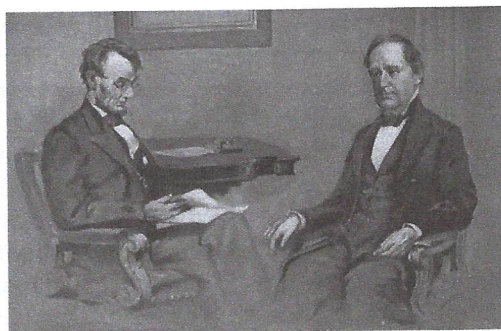
It was Hamlin who is credited with coining the phrase that the vice president "was really only a contingent somebody."<sup>43</sup> This is an apt description of the vice presidency as an institution that is still applicable today. Although he was largely ignored in such important matters as the planning of the Civil War, Hamlin may have played a role in two of Lincoln's decisions, one of which has a great deal of historical significance. The most disputed claim made by Hamlin is that he had a sneak preview of the Emancipation Proclamation before it was unveiled to the Cabinet on July 22, 1862. Could it be that his abolitionist views prompted Lincoln to share it with this otherwise ignored vice president?<sup>44</sup> Hamlin's grandson, Charles, corroborated his story that Hamlin paid Lincoln a courtesy call to tell him he was returning to Bangor on June 18, 1862. Lincoln reportedly objected, and in doing so, read the first draft of the Emancipation Proclamation to Hamlin.<sup>45</sup> Whether the oral history of this event is accurate or not is still unknown. It does raise the possibility that at least for one moment in the summer of 1862, Hamlin was more than just "a contingent somebody" on the great moral issue of that era in American history.<sup>46</sup> Abraham Lincoln was a deliberative leader who did not typically make fleeting decisions, particularly during a very difficult time where thousands of Americans were literally giving up their lives to keep the republic intact. It is not counter-intuitive, however, to believe that a methodical and thoughtful person like Lincoln, who was a lawyer by trade, would turn to a staunch abolitionist initially in order to extract feedback on this measure.

Another area of influence that Hamlin may have had on Lincoln concerned allowing African Americans to serve in battle. According to Hamlin: "He was slow to move...much slower than it seemed to us he should have been; much slower than I wanted him to be...I urged him over and over again to act; but the time had not come, in his judgment."<sup>47</sup> Following the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, African American soldiers joined the Union cause. Prominent abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass shared Hamlin's vision that African American soldiers would bolster the Union cause significantly.

### 1864 Presidential Election

Hamlin was dropped from the ticket in 1864 for basically the same reason why he was added to the ticket in 1860: Republican Party leaders, and perhaps Lincoln himself, wanted a candidate who could help the ticket prevail in the general election. Had he been guaranteed a seat in the U.S. Senate again, Hamlin would have declined to





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be a candidate for renomination as vice president.<sup>48</sup> The Republicans decided to run on a National Union Party ticket, as they hoped to attract support from War Democrats and pro-union citizens in the border states.<sup>49</sup> As the record of the 1864 Union Party Convention indicated, however, the choice of a running mate for Abraham Lincoln has been the subject of intrigue for over 150 years.<sup>50</sup> Was Lincoln largely responsible for unceremoniously dumping Hamlin from the ticket? Were there co-conspirators in this objective?

After the first ballot for the vice presidential nomination, Andrew Johnson of Tennessee led Hamlin by a margin of 200 to 150. Daniel Dickinson (New York) had 108 votes, followed by Benjamin Butler (Massachusetts) with 28, and six others totaled 33 votes. Before a second roll call was taken, several state delegations switched their votes. The final and official tally was Johnson (494), Dickinson (27), and Hamlin (9).<sup>51</sup>

To some, Hamlin was simply expendable for Lincoln in the sense that he was not a significant member of the administration; he came from a safe Republican area of the country, and had limited political strength in New England and even less elsewhere in the country. In addition, though he was a former Democrat, he was not a War Democrat who could help rally support for the Union ticket.<sup>52</sup> Yet, as one historian noted with regard to the selection of Johnson on the Union ticket and the repudiation of Hamlin: "Because of its effect

on the course of Reconstruction, the choice of Johnson as vice president in 1864 turned out to be one of the most important decisions of the Civil War era. To that end, Lincoln chose Johnson in a passive way; for his political intervention to political forces the president was largely responsible. Whether he played a more passive role, as Fehrenbacher noted in 1965, or a more active one, should be put aside until such time as it is greatly strengthened and how explained."<sup>54</sup> While Hamlin was not responsible for replacing Johnson at different conclusions about the war, Lincoln wanted to keep Hamlin on the ticket to do so.<sup>55</sup> More recent scholars have argued that Hamlin was an active participant in the decision. Clearly the Republicans were not in 1864. Consequently, they rejected Hamlin and sought to attract Democratic support for the war. William Harris, for example, argued that the nomination of Andrew Johnson and a former United States senator, Hannibal Hamlin, as vice president approved but did not. "[t]he vice-presidential nomination of 1864, driven by Lincoln's decision, was an attempt to depart from what emerged after the war that 'Lincoln had not been in a position to ensure its preservation, he concluded that a second-term running mate was insufficient evidence to support his primary catalyst for removing Johnson. He endorsed the move along with the reason that, at the time, they had to ensure electoral victory. Lincoln nominated George McClellan as Johnson as vice president before the war, following the president's death.



on the course of Reconstruction, the nomination of Andrew Johnson at Baltimore turned out to be one of the most important political decisions of the Civil War era. To that decision Lincoln certainly contributed in a passive way; for his policy of noninterference helped open the convention to political forces that swept Hamlin out of office."<sup>53</sup> Whether Lincoln was largely responsible for replacing Hamlin on the ticket or whether he played a more passive role may never be completely known. As Fehrenbacher noted in 1995, however, "...the story of Lincoln's deliberate, conspiratorial intervention in the vice-presidential contest should be put aside until such a time as the weak evidence supporting it is greatly strengthened and the strong evidence against it is somehow explained."<sup>54</sup> While Hamlin's grandson believed that Lincoln was not responsible for replacing Hamlin with Johnson, others have arrived at different conclusions about this event in history, as if Lincoln had wanted to keep Hamlin on the ticket, he undoubtedly had the power to do so.<sup>55</sup> More recent scholars on the subject have concluded that Lincoln was an active participant in the move to replace Hamlin with Johnson. Clearly the Republicans were concerned that they might not prevail in 1864. Consequently, they renamed themselves (National Union Party) and sought to attract Democratic and conservative supporters of the war. William Harris, for example, concluded that "[t]he convention nominated Andrew Johnson, the Union military governor of Tennessee and a former United States senator, to replace the incumbent vice president, Hannibal Hamlin, as Lincoln's running mate, a choice that the president approved but did not dictate."<sup>56</sup> Matt Speiser determined that "[t]he vice-presidential nomination of Andrew Johnson in the summer of 1864, driven by Lincoln's backstage involvement in that political decision, was an attempt to create a reconstruction policy far different from what emerged after Lincoln's death."<sup>57</sup> Jules Witcover judged that "Lincoln had not been neutral at all. Convinced that his reelection was imperative for the Union to complete its military mission and for its preservation, he concluded that he needed a War Democrat as his second-term running mate."<sup>58</sup> In my estimation, while there remains insufficient evidence to support the contention that Lincoln was the primary catalyst for removing Hamlin from the ticket, he must have endorsed the move along with other Republican leaders for the simple reason that, at the time, they perceived that a War Democrat was needed to ensure electoral victory over the rival Democrats, who ultimately nominated George McClellan.<sup>59</sup> The consequences of selecting Andrew Johnson as vice president became apparent to those that persisted following the president's death on April 15, 1865.



## March 4, 1865 and Beyond

The day that Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson were inaugurated prompted the departure of Hamlin from Washington, D.C. Hamlin left the vice presidency with dignity; Johnson started his job in an ill-advised manner. When Hamlin arrived to escort Johnson to the inauguration ceremonies, he clearly had a hangover. He proceeded to inform Hamlin about his bout with typhoid and the need to drink whiskey to gain the required strength to get through Inauguration Day; thus he requested a drink. Since Hamlin was a prohibitionist, he had no whiskey but sent out a caterer to find a bottle. Upon succeeding in this quest, Johnson was able to drink a few glasses from the bottle before becoming vice president. Hamlin provided an outgoing speech of conciliation and hope; then Johnson gave a memorable speech in the annals of executive branch transitions in U.S. history: "I am a-goin' for to tell you here to-day; yes, I'm a-goin' for to tell you all, that I'm a plebian!" the Vice-President-elect emoted. "I glory in it; I am a plebian! The people—yes the people of the United States have made me what I am; and I am a-goin' for to tell you here to-day—yes, to-day, in this place—that the people are everything."<sup>60</sup> Johnson appeared to be inebriated and as the procession reached the Capitol, Lincoln gave orders that Johnson not be allowed to speak outside.<sup>61</sup>

Hamlin returned to Maine and while in Bangor learned of Lincoln's assassination the following month. He traveled back to Washington, D.C. to attend Lincoln's funeral. Standing next to Johnson in the East Room of the White House, many must have pondered the sheer irony of the reality of that time. A few weeks and a vice presidential renomination would have made Hamlin the successor of the great Abraham Lincoln in the presidency.<sup>62</sup>

Hamlin would return to Maine after the funeral and then briefly serve as the Collector of the Port of Boston. He later resumed his career in the Senate in 1869, serving two full terms. Upon leaving the Senate, he became minister to Spain in 1881–1882, following his appointment from President James Garfield. He decided to retire and return to his home state where he resumed farming in his twilight years. He died at the age of 82 on August 27, 1891.<sup>63</sup>

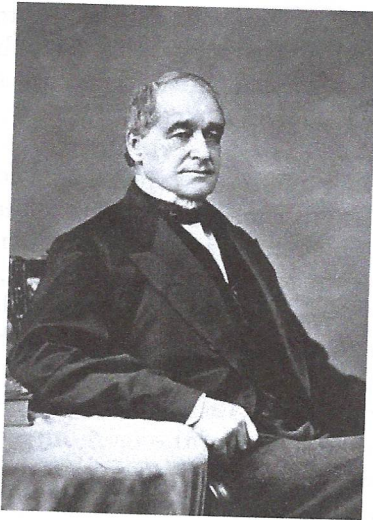
Johnson is considered by scholars today to be a failed president. In the 2017 C-SPAN survey, he finished just ahead of James Buchanan

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provided the following lin  
umaine.

as the worst president in the  
man he replaced is ranked as  
Washington and Franklin D.  
Trefousse, provided a succinct  
defeated him during his term  
lack of formal education, nor  
outgrow his Jeffersonian-Jack  
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wisdom to adjust to the realities

Johnson was impeached  
1868 but was not removed from  
to test the constitutionality of





Images courtesy of Special Collections, Raymond H. Fogler Library, University of Maine. Special Collections at the University of Maine provided the following links as well: [https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/spec\\_photos/3289/](https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/spec_photos/3289/)

as the worst president in the history of the republic. By contrast, the man he replaced is ranked as the best president ever, ahead of George Washington and Franklin D. Roosevelt.<sup>64</sup> Johnson's biographer, Hans Trefousse, provided a succinct summary of Johnson's presidency: "What defeated him during his term in the White House was not so much his lack of formal education, nor even his tactlessness, but his failure to outgrow his Jeffersonian-Jacksonian background. Johnson's continued identification with an America of small farmers and "mechanics," his attachment to a strict construction of the Constitution that was no longer in vogue, his refusal to adjust his racial views to the needs of the Republican party, and his persistent belief in the agrarian myth blinded him to the realities of the post-Civil War United States."<sup>65</sup> Johnson's racial views did not comport with the nation at the conclusion of the Civil War, and he did not attempt to modify them to address the realities of his time. In short, he was a product of his era, but he lacked the wisdom to adjust to the realities of his time simultaneously.

Johnson was impeached by the House of Representatives in 1868 but was not removed from office by the Senate. Johnson wanted to test the constitutionality of the Tenure of Office Act which precluded



him from firing Secretary of Defense, Edwin Stanton, unless the senators concurred. He fired Stanton and the Republicans in the House impeached him. Johnson's opponents failed by one single vote to obtain a two-thirds majority of senators to convict him.<sup>66</sup>

Johnson was not a suitable replacement for Lincoln in a critical time in history. Hamlin may have been a much better president in terms of uniting the country and promoting civil rights in the aftermath of a terrible war, as Witcover observed: "Lincoln's decision to drop Hamlin as his vice president after a single term deprived the country of a champion of slave emancipation who, had he been elevated to the presidency upon Lincoln's assassination, might have changed the nature and outcome of the Reconstruction era after the Civil War. The circumstance remains one of the more intriguing speculations of that most critical postwar period."<sup>67</sup> Lincoln was a great leader who was trying to keep his job in 1864 and at the very least, passively went along with replacing Hamlin with Johnson on the ticket. He did not forecast something that had not occurred up to that point in history, a presidential assassination. This decision had profound implications for the evolution of civil rights in the United States, for Americans not only lost Lincoln's leadership through violence, but they were compelled to endure almost a full term of Johnson as a result. The irony, of course, is that the Lincoln vision for Reconstruction would have likely been implemented had Hamlin replaced him. Lincoln was not afforded sufficient time to fully craft and later implement a comprehensive vision of Reconstruction. Yet as historian David Herbert Donald notes, Lincoln was not in favor of punishing southerners but had collaborated with members of Congress in order to promote the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment.<sup>68</sup> The Senate passed the Thirteenth Amendment in April, 1864 and the House in January, 1865.<sup>69</sup> Lincoln also agreed with the legislative proposal to create a new Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, intended to supervise and provide oversight of the transition from slavery to freedom in the south. The Freedmen's Bureau Act empowered federal officials to protect the emancipated slaves from exploitation by their former owners.<sup>70</sup>

### What Might Have Been

We will never know the implications of a Hamlin presidency and what it would have meant for the nation and the cause of Reconstruction given the impact of an assassin's bullet in April, 1865.

Yet both Lincoln and Hamlin represented the democratic and moral vision of the context of 1865, which suggestive to the cause of civil rights. Lincoln promoted a path to reconciliation during his presidency of Andrew Johnson. The selection of a Republican party presidential candidate was essential because, while Hamlin was not the best for governing, it is incumbent upon the party leadership to select a person with requisite appreciation of the role played by Lincoln in the constitutional republic. Abraham Lincoln's legacy in history and has set a high standard for the period in American history. Hamlin's qualities in the modern period make him a worthy standard bearer in the tradition of Lincoln at least was in agreement with the times and perhaps partly orchestrated by the forces around him likely were successful in overcoming, or ignored, the reality that the future might actually ascend to the throne in the years following the end of the presidency of Ulysses S. Grant as president. More Lincolnesque had Hamlin.

**Brian Fife grew up in South Portland from Marshwood High School in Maine in 1985.**

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Yet both Lincoln and Hamlin despised the institution of slavery and the democratic and moral values inherent in that belief system in the context of 1865, which suggests that he would have been more attentive to the cause of civil rights than Johnson. Whether he would have promoted a path to reconciliation with the South is unknown. The presidency of Andrew Johnson is, however, replete on one important matter. The selection of a vice president is a solemn task for major party presidential candidates in the United States. Choosing wisely is essential because, while winning elections is a necessary condition for governing, it is incumbent on presidential nominees, in conjunction with their party leaders in the context of the past or even today, to select a person with requisite competence, understanding, and appreciation of the role played by the president in the American constitutional republic. Abraham Lincoln is a revered leader in American history and has set a high standard of excellence during a bleak time period in American history. While candidates select their own running mates in the modern period, and party leaders generally did so for their standard bearer in the nineteenth century, there is evidence that Lincoln at least was in agreement with the decision to replace Hamlin and perhaps partly orchestrated the action. In hindsight, he and others around him likely were so focused on reelection that they glossed over, or ignored, the reality that in case of a dire consequence, Johnson might actually ascend to the chief executive position. The immediate years following the end of the Civil War, at least until the inauguration of Ulysses S. Grant as president on March 4, 1869, could have much more Lincolnesque had Hamlin been kept on the ticket.

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