

THE FIRST MAYORALTY CAMPAIGN

IN THE summer of 1886, Henry George was waited upon by a committee representing 165 labor organizations who asked him to be their candidate for mayor of New York.¹

Busy with his writing, he explained that he could not accept the nomination without interrupting the work he had planned. But in a few days the committee returned and made an even more insistent appeal. George was in sympathy with the platform of the Labor party, but he questioned the group's ability to break the iron grip of Tammany Hall—especially since the trade union movement had made a poor showing at the polls the year before. He did not wish to expose his cause to ridicule through political failure. Again he declined the nomination.

The request was then made a third time. The committee assured George that labor had closed its ranks, that the organizations which embraced some 50,000 members were in solid agreement, and that this was a firm offer of support. These guarantees were not to be brushed aside. George felt compelled to make a formal reply, and so he wrote:

My personal inclinations are to say "No." I have no wish to hold office and my hopes of usefulness have run in another line. But there are considerations which under certain conditions, would compel me to say "Yes." . . . In this great city, the metropolis of the Western Hemisphere, municipal government has reached a pitch of corruption that, the world over, throws a slur and a doubt upon free institutions. Politics has become a trade and the management a business. The organizations that call themselves political parties are little better than joint stock companies for assessing candidates and dividing public plunder. . . . It is time for a body of citizens of New York to take some step to show that they have a deeper interest in the government of this great city than whether this or that set of poli-

ticians shall divide the spoils, and to demonstrate their power in a way to make their influence felt in every branch of administration.²

George had solicited some of his friends for advice. Father McGlynn thought he should run. Louis F. Post was at first dubious. But George went on to say that although failure would harm the cause which "earnest men" wished to help, he would accept the nomination if 30,000 citizens should express a desire over their own signatures that he be their candidate.

He expected that this letter, which he wrote to James P. Archibald, secretary of the Trade and Labor Conference, would end all discussion of the mayoralty. Instead, it was greeted with enthusiasm by the labor groups which had importuned him three times to run. They set about collecting signatures to the petition and invited him to review the annual Labor Day parade with Mayor William R. Grace from the stand in Union Square.³

Tammany was to be his unyielding foe as George's candidacy under the Labor banner took spirit and substance. The famous "Hall," once an idealistic force with the inspiration of Jeffersonian democracy, had degenerated into a group of professional politicians bent upon power and graft. In the 1870's the scandals of the notorious "Boss" Tweed ring gave rise to a faction called the County Democracy. But this group, too, became corrupt. On the eve of the 1886 election New York City was a byword for crooked politics.

Both Tammany and County Democracy saw in George a potential menace to their almost undisputed dominance. Together, they chose William M. Ivans, Chamberlain of the City of New York, to talk to George and dissuade him from running.

George and Ivans met in a private room in Seighortner's restaurant on Lafayette Place. The economist was informed that he could not possibly be elected Mayor of New York, no matter how many men might vote for him. Ivans had a proposition. If George would refuse the nomination, the two Democratic groups would run him for Congress in a city district where nomination to Congress was tantamount to election. Ivans explained that George could then go to Europe—or anywhere he desired—and on his return would receive a certificate of election to the House of Representatives.

"You tell me," said Henry George, "that I cannot possibly be elected Mayor of New York. Why, if I cannot possibly get the office, do you want me to withdraw?"

Ivans replied, "You cannot be elected, but your running will raise hell!"

George quickly responded, "You have relieved me of embarrassment. I do not want the responsibility and the work of the office of the Mayor of New York, but I do want to 'raise hell!' I am decided and will run."⁴

George wrote privately to Taylor that the campaign would achieve more in bringing the land question into practical politics than all the writing he could do. "This," he said, "is the only temptation to me."⁵

The formal nomination took place at Clarendon Hall⁶ on September 23. George was chosen candidate by the Trade and Labor Conference on the first ballot, with only a scattering of votes for other candidates. The convention accepted the platform which he wrote and in which he asked for taxation of land values, abolition of other taxes, municipal ownership of railroads and telegraph, and a reformed ballot system.

But the interest in his nomination was not confined to labor unions. During the Tweed days a group of Democrats calling themselves "Irving Hall" had seceded from Tammany. Now they came out for George against the other Democratic candidate and formally endorsed him at an acceptance meeting in Irving Hall. On this occasion George said, "The Tammany faction and the County Democracy faction have seen fit to join hands in an effort to put down a movement of the men who always have been the strength of the Democratic party. . . . Again, the true democracy, the party of Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson, is coming to the front. This is no petty contest for the mayoralty of a city, for the administration of a great municipality, it is the new birth of a great party that is destined to go on conquering."

Intense enthusiasm for George had also been voiced in a crowded meeting held in Chickering Hall, at which the Reverend Dr. John W. Kramer, an Episcopal clergyman, presided and at which the Reverend R. Heber Newton, a boyhood friend, Professor Thomas Davidson, Dr. Daniel De Leon, Charles F. Wingate, Professor David B. Scott, and Father McGlynn all spoke.⁷ Resolutions endorsing the Labor party nomination were passed with acclaim.⁸

A few days before this meeting Father McGlynn had received word from Archbishop Corrigan virtually ordering him not to associate with George's meetings or to "coincide with

socialism.”⁹ At the priest’s suggestion, the economist called on Archbishop Corrigan and tried in vain to explain his doctrines. The church dignitary was courteous but he pointed out that Father McGlynn had violated an understanding of four years before according to which he was to make no more political speeches. The Archbishop then informed George that he had called his council to meet at noon to consider the McGlynn case.

The priest looked at it a different way. He understood the agreement of 1882 as a promise not to speak further on the Irish land question. As for domestic politics, he had spoken in the meantime in behalf of Grover Cleveland—and without any censure. He felt that even should he be forbidden to speak at the Chickering Hall meeting, “he could not, now that he had been announced to speak, refrain from doing so consistent with his own self-respect and without publicly renouncing the rights of an American citizen.”

The upshot of his defiance was suspension for two weeks. George did not learn of the Archbishop’s action until later. When he took Father McGlynn to task for failing to mention his punishment, the priest replied:

“Why man, telling you would only have worried you. Why should I add to your worries?”¹⁰

On October 5, George delivered his formal speech of acceptance at a meeting in Cooper Institute Union.¹¹ This famous hall had been dedicated by Peter Cooper to free speech. It was there that Abraham Lincoln made his first address before an Eastern audience. The immense auditorium was so crowded that George himself had difficulty in entering. (An immense overflow meeting was held outside, where from trucks stationed in different spots the candidate later made short speeches.) The Reverend Dr. Kramer again presided and John McMackin, chairman of the executive committee of the Labor party, tendered the nomination. Large bundles containing the signatures of some 35,000 voters who had pledged their support to George were placed on the edge of the platform.

The nominee began his speech of acceptance by saying that he did not take the nomination lightly; that at first he could not consider it. “I did not desire to be Mayor of New York. I have had in my time political ambition, but years ago I gave it up. . . . Another career opened to me . . . that of the men who go in advance of politics, the men who break the road that

after they have gone will be trod by millions. It seemed to me that there lay my duty and there lay my career.”¹²

If elected, he went on, he would attempt to root up political corruption. “Without fear and without favor” he would “try to do my duty. I will listen as readily to the complaint of the richest man in the city as I will to the poorest.”¹³ He made it crystal clear that his object was reform; that he believed in the equal rights of *all* men; that he was opposed to privilege of whatever kind.

The packed hall listened intently as he continued:

Look over our vast city, and what do we see? On one side a very few men richer by far than it is good for men to be, and on the other side a great mass of men and women struggling to get a most pitiful living. . . . What do we propose to do about it? We propose, in the first place as our platform indicates, to make buildings cheaper by taking the tax off buildings. We propose to put that tax on land exclusive of improvements, so that a man who is holding land vacant will have to pay as much for it as if he was using it, just on the same principle that a man who should go to a hotel and hire a room and take the key and go away would have to pay as much for it as if he had occupied the room and slept in it. In that way we propose to drive out the dog in the manger who is holding from you what he will not use himself. . . . The value of the land of this city, by reason of the presence of the great population, belongs to us to apply to the welfare of the people. . . .

I am your candidate for Mayor of New York. It is something that a little while ago I never dreamed of. Years ago I came to this city from the West, unknown, knowing nobody, and I saw and recognized for the first time the shocking contrast between monstrous wealth and debasing want. And here I made a vow, from which I have never faltered, to seek out and remedy, if I could, the cause that condemned little children to lead such lives as you know them to lead in the squalid districts. It is because of that that I stand before you tonight, presenting myself for the chief office of your city—espousing the cause, not only of your rights, but of those who are weaker than you.¹⁴

Henry George set up campaign headquarters in the Colonnade Hotel on Lafayette Street near Astor Place. Most of the campaign funds were collected at meetings and solicited by volunteers. But there was little to fight the combined strength of Tammany and the County Democracy, which together under

the banner of the Democratic party chose Abram S. Hewitt for their candidate.

Hewitt has appeared in this story before. It was he, who, in 1880, had engaged George to do some private research on a Congressional report. He now took upon himself the role of saving society from "the ideas of anarchists, nihilists, communists, socialists and mere theorists."¹⁵ He exhorted his fellow citizens to "distrust the men who make it their business to prate of the rights of men. It is a very convenient stepping-stone for such people to the property of other men. It pays to be a demagogue."¹⁶

Hewitt and his supporters hoped that the Republicans would rally behind this "candidate of law, order and progress" and scourge the wild agitator from out of the West. But the Republicans nominated their own candidate—a young man of ability and private means, Theodore Roosevelt.

Roosevelt's campaign, conducted mostly in the strongholds of his own party, was feeble. Hewitt and George exchanged open letters in the newspapers but did not meet on the platform. Hewitt seemed obsessed with the Roosevelt candidacy and warned the third candidate's followers, "If by the action of the Republican Party Henry George should be elected Mayor of this city, or even come very close to it, the men engineering this Republican movement had better go out onto Henry George's unoccupied lands and hang themselves."

This tangential attack sorely tried the patience of the Republican *New York Tribune*. It cried out:

Mr. Hewitt and Mr. George have each assailed with great vigor the weak points of the other. Neither succeeds in defending himself against the attacks made because both are in positions absolutely indefensible. Mr. Hewitt ought to be beaten because he is the candidate and (*will he, nill he*) the instrument of the Democratic ring. Mr. George ought to be beaten because he is the candidate and instrument of men who are hostile alike to true freedom of labor and to the right of labor to its savings. Both are laboring for Mr. Roosevelt by demolishing each other.

To say nothing of this opposition to Hewitt as well as George, the press of New York was arrayed almost solidly against the Labor candidate. The only exceptions were the *Irish World* and the German *Volkszeitung*. Louis F. Post wrote the editorials for the latter.

Some of the campaign reporting was highly distorted and unfair. But George was hardened to such tactics. Three years before he had written Josephine Shaw Lowell, who had been worrying about twisted statements attributed to him, "I expect to be misrepresented and misunderstood by very many and care nothing for it except in the case of those I esteem. It is useless to try to get correction. I can only trust that there are some people who know I am neither a crank nor an idiot."¹⁷

Apparently many editors who had been misrepresenting him quite agreed with James Gordon Bennett, who wrote in a letter to Poultney Bigelow, "In my humble opinion Henry George is a 'humbug' and a 'busybody' . . . If the *Herald* does anything it will be either to ignore Mr. George and all his nonsense, or if he should happen by chance to become dangerous, pitch into him roundly."¹⁸

During the mayoralty campaign George apparently was considered "dangerous," for "pitch into him" the New York papers did. In a note to Mrs. Lowell, George said, "I think of you every night as I read the lies of the *Evening Post* and have been wondering how much you believed. The best reports will probably be in *The Leader*, the newspaper started today."¹⁹

This little daily was a singular venture in journalism. Edited by Post, it was launched in an attempt to give the George cause honest reporting. The editorial and reportorial work was contributed without pay by many of the copy editors and reporters on the larger dailies who would repair to *The Leader's* office after their regular stints and work long hours in George's behalf. The paper was self-supporting and jumped quickly to a circulation of thirty-five thousand.

Since George could not draw Hewitt to the platform for joint debate he had to be content with dozens of speeches, in personal appeals to voters of all degrees. He spoke from trucks on docks, in factory yards, and at street corners in a "tail-board campaign." It was one of the fiercest mayoralty contests in New York's history. George was called not only "demagogue" and "revolutionist" and an "enemy of civilization and the social order"²⁰ but also was accused of attacking the sacred rights of property and of preaching anarchy and destruction.

He took all of this in stride, and a year later he could write: "Falsehood and abuse are ever the weapons employed against truth, and the man who attempts to do battle against a great

social injustice must expect them, and will, if he be wise, learn to be careless of them, content with knowing that—

‘... never yet
Share of truth was vainly set
In the world’s wide fallow.’”²¹

But commendation and praise came amidst the calumny and slander. George drew support from men representing many different factions: T. V. Powderly of the Knights of Labor; Samuel Gompers, president of the newly organized American Federation of Labor; Father J.O.S. Huntington, the “Protestant Monk”; George Inness, the painter; and Colonel Robert G. Ingersoll, “the great agnostic.” One of the largest contributions made to the campaign fund was a check for one hundred dollars from a manufacturer, August Lewis, until then unknown to Henry George.

Lewis was a man of great charm, conservative manners and quiet dignity. Patron of the arts and friend of writers, musicians, and painters, he was one of the founders of the New York Oratorio Society and of the Philharmonic Orchestra and had given money to help build Carnegie Hall. As a member of the Society for Political Education he had received in 1882 a copy of *Progress and Poverty* through a gift of Francis G. Shaw. He had not read George’s work until the mayoralty campaign, and at once he became a convert. A long and devoted friendship followed, and toward its end George was able to epitomize Lewis’s outstanding characteristic in one sentence, “Your delicate kindness is as obvious in what you don’t say as in what you do.”²²

As election day approached the rumor spread that Father McGlynn had deserted George. At the risk of another reprimand from his ecclesiastical superiors, the priest stated to the press: “Each day, more and more earnestly, I desire to see his [George’s] triumphant election. I know of no man I admire and love so much. I believe that he is one of the greatest geniuses that the world has ever seen and that the greatness of his heart fully equals the magnificent gifts of his intellect.”²³

To his superiors, Father McGlynn’s crime evidently was not in taking part in politics but in supporting George, since the Right Reverend Monsignor Preston, Vicar General of the Archdiocese, did not find it incompatible with his own priestly

duties to step into the campaign. While not openly championing Hewitt, he wrote a formal letter condemning the candidacy of George, declaring his principles "unsound, unsafe and contrary to the teachings of the Church." He added, rather naively, "And although we never interfere in elections, we should not wish now to be misunderstood at a time when the best interests of society may be in danger."²⁴

Meanwhile, the two other candidates were leaving no stones unturned. In his final speech on October 30, Hewitt said:

I am a candidate for Mayor only for one purpose. I regard the election of Henry George as Mayor of New York as the greatest possible calamity that could menace its prosperity and future hopes. But I have no fear that he will be elected, or if he is elected, I have no fear that the doctrine of confiscation which he preaches will ever be put in practice in this city. . . . What I do fear is lest by the division which exists among those who have no faith in the doctrines which Henry George has been disseminating in this city, and in consequence of this division he may receive a larger vote than he would fairly be entitled to, the man who will be elected may not receive so great a majority as to give a final and fatal blow to these doctrines of anarchy and destruction which this new apostle is preaching to the working people.

Hewitt again appealed for the Roosevelt vote, arguing that "the only success that can attend" Roosevelt's efforts "would be the election of Henry George," in which case "Mr. Roosevelt himself would lament in sack-cloth and ashes and ask forgiveness of his fellow-citizens for the calamity he had helped to bring about."

But young Theodore Roosevelt, then twenty-eight, had no intention of throwing his vote to Tammany. He said:

There are curious circumstances in this election. The George vote from the Democratic party is so large and from the Republican so small that we have a right to regard his candidacy as simply a split from the Democratic party. To stop the growth of the split the Democrats have tried to force the fight for the mayoralty on false issues. They try to make it appear that it is a contest between anarchy and order. Mr. Hewitt, they say, represents order, while Mr. George represents anarchy. This I say is false. I oppose Mr. Hewitt not because he is not a good man, but because he is simply a new figurehead of the same party that has misgoverned this city

for the last quarter of a century. I believe that there should be a change in the government and it is on that issue that I am making the fight.

On the Saturday night before election George's rank-and-file supporters engaged in a giant demonstration which must have given his opponents even further pause. A crowd of workingmen variously estimated at from twenty thousand to sixty thousand strong paraded through Union Square past the small wooden reviewing stand where George greeted them. The parade was without uniforms, without bands, without any of the usual political trappings. Carrying torches, trade union banners and signs, the marchers clumped rhythmically through the cold rain chanting "George! George! Hen-ry George!" or "Hi! Ho! the leeches-must-go!" or yet "George! George! Vote for George!"²⁵ The parade took two hours to pass.

In the meantime Monsignor Preston's letter inferentially condemning George had been given to the newspapers. On the morning following the parade, the Sunday before the election,²⁶ it was distributed at church doors and made the subject of sermons. Thundered from Catholic pulpits, the denunciation of Henry George doubtless had great weight in the election.

The candidate himself had made few attacks on his rivals. He had merely stressed his conviction that "a civilization cannot stand that is not based on justice." He made his last address at Cooper Union on election eve.

The only thing I regret in this campaign [he said] is that my opponent [Hewitt] saw fit to refuse my challenge to debate face to face before our fellow citizens the principles that he says are living issues in this campaign.

The campaign is over. I have done my part. Now it remains for you to do yours. . . . I ask no man to vote for the candidate, but to vote for the principle. . . .

But elected or not elected we have won a victory. Elected or not elected, I thank God from the bottom of my heart that it has rested upon me to begin what I believe will prove the grandest work ever begun in America. . . . And I am glad that in this city of New York, where years ago, unknown I took into my heart of hearts the cross of a crusade that I have never faltered from, that it has devolved upon me to lead in this first movement. . . .

Closing with an eloquent appeal, he called upon his followers to "do your duty tomorrow and tomorrow night we may begin

a cheer that will echo through this land and around the world.”

But merely to vote was not enough. New York had no Australian secret ballot. Under the election laws each party had to print its own ballots, distribute them, and provide its own voting booths. The new party was under a cruel disadvantage. The counting of ballots was a careless, slipshod procedure easily open to mishandling and fraud.

The George men were desperate over their own inadequacy. In some voting places there were no George ballots. Some places had no Labor party watchers, though every effort had been made to man each district.

Early on election night a Puerto Rican named Antonio Molina, who was one of the staunchest and most loyal of Georgists, called on Mrs. George. He was in a frenzied state. Tears of anger streamed from his dark, blazing eyes as he told how, at one of the polling places where he had been a watcher, he had seen twenty ballots “for the Prophet” counted for Hewitt.

This was not an isolated case. Gustavus Myers testified that “the vote of the labor forces was so overwhelming that even piles of fraudulent votes could not suffice to overcome it. One final result was left. This was to count out Henry George. And that is precisely what was done, if the testimony of numerous eye-witnesses is to be believed. The Labor Party, it is quite clear, was deliberately cheated out of an election won in the teeth of the severest and most corrupt opposition.”²⁷

Charles Edward Russell, the author, recalls: “When the last vote had been deposited that day, Henry George was elected Mayor of New York. In the next three hours he was deprived of his victory by the simple process of manipulating the returns. Twelve years later Richard Croker, speaking to an intimate friend, admitted the manipulation. His version of it was simple but sufficient. ‘Of course,’ he said, ‘they could not allow a man like Henry George to be Mayor of New York. It would upset all their arrangements.’”²⁸

The “official” vote was:

Abram S. Hewitt	90,552
Henry George	68,140
Theodore Roosevelt	60,435

The next morning the defeated candidate was back in the office of the Henry George Publishing Company. “I shall buy a bottle of ink and some pens and again go to writing,” he announced cheerily to a *New York Sun* reporter.²⁹

Letters of congratulation on the size of his vote poured in from all over the world. A crowded meeting was held in celebration at Cooper Union.³⁰ In his speech before this gathering George demanded the Australian ballot system for the United States in line with articles urging its adoption which he had begun writing as far back as 1871.

The newspaper comment was, for the most part, surprisingly sympathetic:

The *New York Times*: "[The George vote] surprised even those who did not make the common mistake of declaring his following to be made up of cranks and Anarchists."³¹

The *Baltimore Sun*: "When we remember that he was not well known in the politics of the city, having been principally before the public as a writer upon economic subjects as related to the labor element, and that the machinery of both the old parties was against him, to say nothing of Wall Street and property interests generally, it is remarkable that he should

A SURPRISING RESULT.



A cartoon on the 1886 mayoralty campaign, from a New York newspaper.

have succeeded in bringing to the polls nearly 68,000 supporters."³²

The *New York World*: "It is an extraordinary thing for a man without political backing, without a machine, without money or newspaper support, and without any logical, fixed, practical principles to have polled 67,000 votes * for Mayor of this city. It was something that no man has ever done before, and the achievement carries with it a great compliment to the integrity of Mr. George's character and to the aim of his life. Mr. George's energy in the canvass has been almost phenomenal, and his capacity for leadership must henceforth be admitted to be equal to his ability in purely intellectual work."³³

The *Pall Mall Budget*: "[Henry George] stood as the incarnation of a demand that the world should be made a better place to live in than it is today; and his candidature was a groan of discontent with the actual, and therefore of aspiration after the ideal."

Henry George set his own seal on the "defeat." Knowing, late on election night, that he had lost, he addressed his tired and disheartened followers at headquarters:

I congratulate you tonight upon the victory we have won. . . . I did not accept your candidacy for the office nor did you nominate me for the office. What we sought was to bring principle into American politics. The future is ours. This is the Bunker Hill. We have been driven back as the Continental troops were driven back. If they won no technical victory, they did win a victory that echoes around the world and still rings. We have begun a movement that, defeated, and defeated, and defeated, must still go on. All the great currents of our time, all the aspirations of the heart of men, all the new forces of our civilization are with us and for us. They never fail who die in a good cause.³⁴

* The discrepancy of more than 1,000 votes is not explained.—Editor