

The Halpin Affair: How Cleveland went from Scandal to Success

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If ever there was a question as to which political vice Americans were more tolerant of- sexual philandering or financial corruption-the presidential election of 1884 presented a clear choice.¹

Introduction

As the 1884 presidential election approached, the Democratic Party was hopeful it would win the presidency for the first time since before the Civil War. An up and coming politician from New York, Grover Cleveland, had been selected as the Democratic nomination in early July. Cleveland prided himself in ‘clean government’ and making decisions that would be best for the majority of his constituents. He refused to make choices that would benefit big business or his own pockets.² Despite Cleveland’s virtuous public face, Cleveland had to defend his private virtue after the *Buffalo Evening Telegraph* released an article claiming that Cleveland had an illegitimate nine-year-old son with Maria Halpin. In what came to be known as the Halpin Affair, Cleveland defended his virtuous reputation to continue his chance at running for the presidency, even though that meant putting down Halpin’s reputation. Cleveland’s reputation as “Grover the Good” from before the scandal broke helped him win the 1884 presidential election due to him appearing virtuous in his public dealings. While having sex outside of marriage was against the expected norms of the time, Cleveland’s status as a bachelor prevented the media from painting him as a complete hypocrite. Halpin’s lack of voice in the “credible” new sources, paired with Cleveland’s political clout, his virtuous reputation, and his management of the scandal allowed Cleveland to recover from the scandal in time to win the presidency.

Background

Cleveland became the mayor of Buffalo, NY on the January 1st, 1882, and he made it clear from the beginning he was not going to treat his career in politics as a business initiative.³ Cleveland quickly moved up the political ranks and became the Governor of New York in 1883. Cleveland continued to push for clean government, and he won many “battles against corruption, preventing John Kelly, Boss Tweed’s successor at Tammany Hall, from appointing



Figure 1: The pillars say “Honest, Faithful, Capable.” These virtues were the literal foundation of Cleveland’s campaign

his disreputable and incompetent friends to public office.”⁴ Cleveland refused support from Tammany Hall despite his aspirations to someday become president and despite the difficulties that came from winning a presidency without Tammany Hall’s support.

However, Cleveland managed to build an honorable reputation through his independence from the Hall. Democratic Party leaders took quick notice of Cleveland's growing popularity in New York amongst 'the common people,' and when "General Edward S. Bragg of Wisconsin nominated Cleveland for president as the 1884 convention, he said, 'We love him most for the enemies he has made.'" ⁵

Cleveland continued to play off of his honorable and upstanding reputation as he campaigned for the presidency as can be seen in Figure 1. ⁶ When the scandal with Maria Halpin broke,

Cleveland's honorable reputation was damaged, but he proved he had a strong enough image with his public virtue to overcome the scandal that resulted from his private life.

Maria Halpin moved to Buffalo in 1871 after her husband died from tuberculosis. With two children from her marriage, Halpin moved to Buffalo to take a sales position from a family friend at Flint & Kent, a dry-goods store. ⁷ She left both of her children behind in Jersey City to stay with her parents. Halpin worked in the men's collared shirt section of the store, and met Cleveland in 1873. He began to court her for several months. In 1874, Halpin gave birth to a son, but Halpin was unsure if the child was Cleveland's or not: "Neither she nor Cleveland were certain, but since the other men with whom she was involved were married, Cleveland willingly accepted responsibility. Although Maria demanded marriage, Cleveland consented only to child support." ⁸ Halpin may or may not have been seeing multiple men, but it is also likely Cleveland was seeing various women. As Pastor Henry W. Crabbe would claim in a later article by the *Buffalo Evening Telegraph*, he saw Cleveland as a "corrupt" man who'd had many relations with different women. ⁹ However, while the Halpin Affair would cite national debate over the moral ethics of electing a 'fornicator' to the oval office, Cleveland managed to keep many of the other details of his private life away from the media. This allowed Halpin to be painted as the one with loose morals, whereas Cleveland could claim that he had made a one-time mistake.

Publicized

The scandal became public on July 21st, 1884 when the *Buffalo Evening Telegraph* published a front-page article called "A Terrible Tale: A Dark Chapter in

a Public Man's History." ¹⁰ The *Telegraph* received news of the story from Rev. George H. Ball. The *Telegraph* was viewed as a modern day tabloid, and Ball's story was extremely sensational. ¹¹ A staunch Republican, Ball claimed that he saw it as his duty to reveal the 'truth' about a man who he saw as a moral threat if he were to make it to the White House. Ball claimed Cleveland would get drunk at public events, become involved in fistfights, and have orgies. ¹² The *Telegraph* also claimed Cleveland had seduced Halpin, but "withdrew his promise to marry her, then 'employed two detectives and a doctor of bad repute to spirit the woman away and dispose of the child.'" ¹³ Due to the *Telegraph's* tabloid status, a wider audience did not believe the scandal until an additional account was printed in the *Boston Journal*. ¹⁴ This account narrowed in on the one part of the *Telegraph's* article that was true: Halpin had a nine-year-old son, and she was claiming his father was Cleveland. After the scandal broke, many people saw Cleveland as the one at fault, and the "sensational charges, quickly transmitted throughout the nation, generated a tempest of debate, eliciting heated commentary from ministers, partisans, and independents alike." ¹⁵ Throughout the course of his campaign though, Cleveland would prove that he could recover from the scandal, and he would prove that Americans did see sexual philandering as a less onerous crime than financial corruption.

The Comeback

So how was Cleveland able to overcome this sex scandal that threatened to ruin his run for the presidency as well as the rest of his political career? Part of the reason that Cleveland was able to recover from the scandal was due to the pure timing of when it was released. The *Telegraph's* article was released two weeks after Cleveland was chosen as the Democratic nominee at the National Democratic convention. If the scandal had broken before the convention then Cleveland would not have been chosen. An article released in *The New York Evangelist* called "The Various Defenses of Governor Grover Cleveland" was released August 21st, 1884. The paper claimed it was a long time supporter of Cleveland, but was "forced to conclude that if things now developed had been known to the country three months ago, there would not have been in the United States of America a man less likely to be nominated for President than Grover Cleveland of Buffalo." ¹⁶

However, Cleveland had fourteen weeks before the election to turn public opinion back into his favor, and he was more than able to use this time period to his advantage.¹⁷

As the scandal broke, and Cleveland's advisers began to panic about what their next move should be, Cleveland kept his next step simple. On July 23rd, Cleveland sent a telegraph to his advisers, and said: "whatever you do...tell the truth."¹⁸ Cleveland admitted to his advisers that he'd had an affair with Halpin, but he was unsure if Oscar was his child or not.¹⁹ Cleveland never admitted to being Oscar's father, nor did he deny it. However, he did allow it to be known that he was paying for Oscar to be taken care of. This tied into his persona as "Grover the Good." "The more details that came out, the nobler he looked. Cleveland, it was revealed, had dutifully watched over the child and had always acted in his best interest."²⁰ Cleveland claimed that although he may have made a mistake when he was younger, he would make up for it in the best way that he could. He financially supported Oscar and Halpin. While some later claimed that he did this to simply keep Halpin quiet, he still appeared in the public light as a hero.

It was also revealed that Cleveland had done more than just attempt to protect Oscar through finances, but Cleveland also protected him when Halpin began to drink excessively on a regular basis. Early in March of 1876, Cleveland found out Halpin was an alcoholic and had the child removed from her custody. Oscar was taken to the Protestant Orphan Asylum, and Cleveland paid for his stay there.²¹ Cleveland also had Halpin admitted to the Providence Asylum in an attempt to have her sober up and get her life back on track. However Halpin only stayed at the asylum for five days because she was deemed to not be insane.²² Cleveland even provided financial support for Halpin after she left the asylum to begin her own business outside of Buffalo. However, Halpin stuck around Buffalo, and as Halpin appeared to be on the road to recovery, she was allowed to visit her son at the orphanage. At least she was allowed to visit until she kidnapped him from the orphanage one day. It took three months for authorities to recover the child. Halpin consulted with a Buffalo lawyer about fighting for custody, yet he advised her against suing Cleveland, and she ultimately dropped the charges and resolved that her son would be adopted.²³ Not long after Oscar

was returned to the orphanage, Cleveland ensured an influential family of his acquaintance adopted him. While not in Oscar's life, Cleveland guaranteed Oscar had everything he could ever want in life. As the details of Cleveland's heroics continued to be leaked to Democrats, more people came to support Cleveland and refused to be turned away by a sexual exploit that he had committed ten years earlier.

Cleveland was also able to win the presidency because the age old question of public vs. private virtue came forward as it was discovered that James G. Blaine had not been completely honest in his public dealings. Blaine had "used official powers to grant railroad rights that would profit him personally. Even juicy tales about Cleveland's sexual past did not eclipse Blaine's misdeeds."²⁴ In addition to these true accusations, Blaine was already seen as a "friend of the rich."²⁵ In contrast, Cleveland was seen as the honest common man. In addition to his public misdealings, Blaine had his own private scandal as his wife gave birth only three months after she had gotten married.²⁶ Despite this information reaching Cleveland's desk, he decided to not publicize it. This partially tied into Cleveland's persona to not feel the need to fight dirty to win the election from using gossip to defeat Blaine, but it also "kept any head-to-head comparison of the sexual lives of the two men out of the headlines, and the focus straight on their financial reputations: an arena in which Cleveland could clearly triumph."²⁷ Despite Cleveland's attempts, Blaine's untimely marriage still reached the press, but unlike Cleveland, Blaine refused to admit the truth and denied the allegations. His refusal to admit to his private life allegations, in addition to it being discovered that Blaine had lied to an 1876 House investigating committee about his involvement with the railroads and his ties to the rich, cast Blaine in a position that made it hard for many voters to identify with him. As a Chicago reformer commented on the 1884 election,

We are told that Mr. Blaine has been delinquent in office but blameless in private life, while Mr. Cleveland has been a model of official integrity, but culpable in his personal relations. We should therefore elect Mr. Cleveland to the public office, which he is so well qualified to fill and remand Mr. Blaine to the private station that he is admirably fitted to adorn.²⁸

Many Americans came to reflect this view, and saw Cleveland's public virtue as more important than his private virtue.

While many newspapers continued to comment on Blaine and Cleveland's scandals, Cleveland's seemed to become of lesser importance when juxtaposed with Blaine's: "Set against Blaine's identification with the rich and famous, Cleveland's sexual misdeeds played more as a joke than as a disqualification for public office."²⁹ As seen in Figure 2, on September 27th, *The Judge* printed a political cartoon showing "Grover the Good" looking frustrated as a mother holds a crying baby.

Despite the tension that is present in the picture, both Halpin and the baby have been taken care of financially, and "the prosperous appearance of the figure of Maria Halpin in the cartoon reveals that, throughout the scandal, Cleveland managed to cast himself not as victimizer, but as something closer to a victim."³¹ Cleveland's lack of appearance as a predator represents a shift from "the first stories about Halpin [portraying] him as a wolfish womanizer who had satisfied his own desires at the cost of a helpless widow's health and reputation." This cartoon shows a definite shift in the public's perception of Cleveland's scandal just a month and a half before the general election.



Figure 2

Halpin Silenced

While the talk of the scandal overwhelming resolved around Cleveland and his political climb to the presidency, Halpin's side of the story failed to be told. Cleveland had enough political clout to keep Halpin's own voice out of the media, but,

He did allow Halpin's personal life to be made public to the extent that this assisted him. Halpin was an alcoholic, which made Cleveland's decision to take the child away from her an act of rescue. Even Cleveland's refusal to admit the child's paternity worked in his favor, leaving open the possibility that the child wasn't his- which made his sexual relationship with Halpin appear, paradoxically, less damaging. It turned Halpin into a loose woman, possibly a seducer, definitely not marriage material, and certainly neither innocent nor vulnerable.³²

Here Halpin's silence works in Cleveland's favor. Cleveland had more control over what could enter the media strictly based on his support from the Democratic Party. If Cleveland had affairs with other women in the past, those dealings certainly did not reach the media. However, if Halpin was even too close of "friends" with a gentleman it put their relationship, and her virtue, into question.

The name of Halpin's son, Oscar Folsam, especially pulled the issue of the boy's parentage into question because many people believed that Halpin and the adult Oscar Folsam, Cleveland's old law partner and close friend, had an affair together. Halpin knew Folsam's wife from working at the department store, but Halpin claimed "I never spoke a word to that man in my life."³³ Halpin's son came to be named Oscar Folsam not because of an affair she was having with Folsam, but when "the child was Christened, one of his sponsors in baptism was Oscar Folsam; and the infant was called Oscar Folsam Halpin."³⁴ In the fall of 1884, an article written by Charles McCune and released in the *Buffalo Courier* claimed that Cleveland accepted responsibility simply to protect his deceased friend.³⁵ Even Cleveland himself refuted claims that he was paying support just to protect Folsam. In a letter to a friend, Cleveland commented on McCune's article, "now is this man crazy or does he wish to ruin somebody? Is he fool enough to suppose for a moment that if such was the truth (which it is not, so far as the motive for silence is concerned) that I would permit

my dead friend's memory to suffer for my sake?"³⁶ Despite the facts and Cleveland's own reaction, the majority of the public opinion still shifted to see Halpin as a loose woman who had intimate relations with multiple men.

Halpin was also silenced through being committed to a mental institution even though she was not insane. However, this was not uncommon for 'deviant' women of the time. Such was the case with Alice Mitchell, a woman who murdered her closest friend and lover in 1892. However Mitchell was tried for being insane, not for being a murderer, because her lover was a woman.³⁷ Mitchell killed her ex-lover Freda Ward with a razor when Mitchell ran into her one day on the docks. At the time, American society could not comprehend same-sex love, so the jury did not see how it was logical for Mitchell to kill Ward and attributed her actions to insanity. Lisa J. Lindquist, author of "Images of Alice: Gender, Deviancy, and a Love Murder in Memphis" claims, "by murdering Freda Ward, Alice Mitchell transgressed a multitude of boundaries around acceptable middle-class female behavior."³⁸ Although an entirely different kind of case, Halpin's alcoholic behavior differed from what was considered 'acceptable middle-class female behavior,' and resulted in her being sent to an asylum. In September 1884, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* printed an article with a quote from one of the doctors at Providence Asylum where he stated that Halpin clearly was not crazy, and he did not understand why she had truly been brought to the asylum in the first place.³⁹ Even though Halpin was an alcoholic at the time that her son was taken from her, her trip to the asylum is an example of what American society would do with women who presented deviant behavior in the late 1800's.

Cleveland also benefitted from the reality that it was not uncommon for politicians to have sex scandals. Although Cleveland's scandal took place in 1874, it can still be tied to modern day political scandals. One sex scandal Cleveland's can be paralleled to is Dick Morris' sex scandal with the prostitute Sherry Rowlands. In 1996, Morris was Clinton's top adviser, and he was accused of cheating on his wife as well as giving Rowlands some insider information. However, Cleveland's scandal ties into this more modern sex scandal because "as the media coverage progressed, Morris' 'fall' was normalized, taking its place as a demonstration not of a bad apple spoiling

the bunch, but of an American political environment in which good apples, not bad ones, ought to be the surprise.”⁴⁰ The same was true of the 1884 election for Cleveland. Even though he was presented as the sexual predator from first accounts, the public view of his transgression eventually shifted and accepted what had happened before the election. In addition, it helped Cleveland that his competitor had his own private scandal. Like Cleveland, Morris managed to orchestrate his own comeback into the political realm, and “although it began with the tabloid-driven sexual story, in the hands of mainstream political reporting it became a story of politics as usual.”⁴¹ The parallels between Cleveland and Morris show how the comeback of a politician is obtainable if the scandal is handled in the “right” way within the political machine.

Another parallel between the two scandals is that a tabloid broke both scandals. *Star* reported on Morris’ indiscretions, but the tabloids were the only media to cover Rowland’s side. Gamson claims, “the women whose sexuality was for rent were dismissed or further objectified in the storytelling (largely erased from the mainstream media stories... Rowlands [was] regulated to tabloid and pornographic press).”⁴² While Halpin was not a prostitute, she was not a famous woman, and it was therefore deemed unnecessary for her voice to enter the mainstream media. In the same way the prostitutes were ‘erased’ from mainstream media, Halpin did not enter mainstream media unless it was for other people to talk about her. She did not get to truly tell her own side of the story to reputable news sources. Halpin was also objectified in newspaper articles when she was described as a ‘loose woman.’ As Democrats spun the Halpin affair into a story that benefitted Cleveland, Halpin was “possibly the seducer rather than the seduced.”⁴³ However, one exception occurred when the *Chicago Tribune* printed pieces of an affidavit Halpin had written. In it, she defends her honor and claims Cleveland took advantage of her. Halpin also wrote, “the circumstances under which my ruin was accomplished are too revolting on the part of Grover Cleveland to be made public.”⁴⁴ Unfortunately, the majority of the mainstream media must have agreed with Halpin’s point because having her words printed in a paper as reputable as the *Chicago Tribune* was a rarity.

Conclusion

The Halpin Affair reveals how strongly a sex scandal can shape a presidential election. Cleveland was the favored winner for the presidency until the scandal broke. However, Cleveland also proved that one could make a comeback from a sex scandal – even one that included an illegitimate child. Cleveland showed that using honesty was the best policy to get the public back on his side. Despite his instructions to “tell the truth,” though, many details of the Halpin Affair are still unknown. It is unclear if Halpin was actually raped by Cleveland as some early reports stated or if their relationship was consensual. Overwhelmingly, it seems the affair was consensual, but the question of the true patronage of the child is also left open. Cleveland claimed there was a possibility the child was his, but Halpin was also accused of being with multiple men and was said to have only chosen Cleveland as the father because he was the only bachelor she was having intimate relations with. It is entirely possible both Cleveland and Halpin were having relations with various partners, but Cleveland’s acceptance to pay does seem to indicate him as the father. The money trail connected him to Halpin more than any rumors or gossip ever could. It would have been a poor and risky move for Cleveland’s political career to pay Halpin money for the child if he was not the father because of the connection the money created. Although Cleveland was known for his generosity, it seems unlikely he would pay Halpin unless he felt guilty and responsible to help take care of them. Regardless, Cleveland’s financial care for Halpin and Oscar cast him as an honorable man attempting to atone for a mistake in the eyes of the public, and “Democrats explained his sexual indiscretion as a transient weakness– a one-time personal mistake that had been handled honorably.”⁴⁵ Even with Cleveland’s comeback, and Blaine’s own public and private indiscretions, Cleveland only managed to win the presidency with thirty-seven more electoral votes than Blaine. Yet, the public still made it clear they would prefer a president with a private scandal instead of a president with public corruption.

Halpin’s lack of voice also attributed to Cleveland’s presidential victory. Halpin was restricted to the tabloids, and she lacked the power to prove that Cleveland had seduced her or ever promised to marry her. While Cleveland was originally seen as the womanizer when the scandal first broke and was being

spread by most newspapers, Halpin was quickly phased out of reputable papers. Her lack of presence in major newspapers was partially due to her being a woman of no famous standing in the late 19th century. Her lack of presence was also tied to the projection of politicians overall. As could be seen with Morris' case, the public is usually shocked at first by a political sex scandal, but then normalizes it and almost comes to see it as an expected behavior for politicians. Unfortunately, Halpin came to be a victim of that viewpoint. Overall though, the Halpin affair does not have a tragic ending for any involved. Cleveland went on to become the president, Halpin remarried, and Oscar became a doctor.⁴⁶ If nothing else, the Halpin affair set the precedent for how future politicians could handle career threatening sex scandals, and manage to become positive in the public's opinion again.

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