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THE FOX GOES TO FRANCE: FLORIDA, SECRET CODES, AND THE ELECTION OF 1876

by JAMES C. CLARK

SAMUEL J. Tilden's defeat in the 1876 presidential election has long been the subject for contention and discussion. While many of the causes have received attention, the role played by the secret telegrams between New York and Florida has been overlooked. Confusion over the codes utilized for the telegrams prevented Tilden's operatives in Florida from purchasing the vote of a key state official. Had the attempt succeeded, the state's four electoral votes might have been awarded to Tilden, and the prize of the presidency would have gone to him and the Democratic party.

On election night, November 7, 1876, Tilden held an imposing 250,000 popular-vote lead over Rutherford B. Hayes, the Republican candidate, and seemingly had won 184 electoral votes to Hayes's 166. Tilden needed just one more electoral vote to win, and the states of Florida, South Carolina, and Louisiana had not yet reported. South Carolina had seven electoral votes, Florida four, and Louisiana had eight. There also was a single unreported electoral vote from Oregon, but the Democrats did not plan to make a fight there, and the decision would go to Hayes almost by default.

Even Hayes thought he had lost the election. He noted in his diary that he went to bed early and "fell into a refreshing sleep and the affair seemed over."¹ In the early-morning hours, however, events began to unfold in New York that would put Hayes eventually in the White House.

Daniel E. Sickles, a Republican-party regular, controversial Union Army general, and former United States minister to

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1. Rutherford B. Hayes, *Hayes: The Diary of a President 1875-1881, Covering the Disputed Election, the End of Reconstruction, and the Beginning of Civil Service*, T. Harry Williams, ed. (New York, 1964), 47-48.

Spain, arrived at the party headquarters in New York that evening to find just one clerk on duty. Sickles examined the returns carefully and thought he saw a chance for victory. He immediately sent telegrams to Republican leaders in several states, notably South Carolina, Florida, and Louisiana, with the order: "With your state sure for Hayes, he is elected. Hold your state."²

Hayes also received support from John C. Reid, editor of the strongly Republican *New York Times*. Reid had believed Tilden was the winner until a telegram arrived from Daniel Magone, chairman of the New York state Democratic party: "Please give your estimate of elector votes for Tilden. Answer at once." Reid reasoned that if Magone was unsure of the election results, then perhaps there was reason for Republican optimism.³ Reid rushed to the Republican headquarters where he found New Hampshire Senator William Chandler, a member of the Republican National Committee. Chandler telegraphed Republican officials in Florida: "The Presidential election depends on the vote of Florida, and the Democrats will try and wrest it from us. Watch it, and hasten returns."⁴ Chandler also informed Hayes of the developments.⁵

The situation was confusing. Hayes was leading in South Carolina by 600 to 1,000 votes, and the question was whether the Democrats would try to change the results. In Louisiana, Tilden led by 6,300 votes. The Democrat also led in Florida, where his margin was a slim ninety-one votes with both sides claiming that fraud had been committed in every county.

Chandler left New York by train for Florida on November 8, but only after urging Hayes to send in other men of "high character" to assist him. Both parties dispatched what they called "visiting statesmen," and the City Hotel in Tallahassee was filled with the dignitaries. The Republicans included former General Francis C. Barlow, a New York attorney, designated by President Grant; General Lew Wallace of Indiana, later the author of the

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2. Jerome L. Sternstein, ed., "The Sickles Memorandum: Another Look at the Hayes-Tilden Election-Night Conspiracy," *Journal of Southern History* 32 (May 1966), 342-57.
 3. Ari Hoogenboom, *The Presidency of Rutherford B. Hayes* (Lawrence, 1988), 26.
 4. Edward S. Holden, "The Cipher Dispatches," *International Review* 2 (April 1879), 405-24.
 5. Keith Ian Polakoff, *Politics of Inertia: the Election of 1876 and the End of Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge, 1973), 202-04.

novel *Ben Hur*; Governor Edward F. Noyes of Ohio; and John K. Kasson of Iowa. Thomas J. Brady, second assistant postmaster general, arrived in the state with several postal employees.⁶

Prior to his arrival Chandler cabled Florida Republican leaders: "Render every possible assistance. Funds will be on hand to meet every requirement."⁷ When the senator reached Tallahassee, he found that Democratic party representatives had preceded him.⁸ They included Georgia Governor Joseph E. Brown and Pennsylvania-based Democratic officials C. W. Woolley and John F. Coyle. They were joined by Manton Marble, former editor and owner of the *New York World* and Tilden's personal friend. Before leaving New York, Marble had obtained a code, or cipher, from Colonel W. T. Pelton, Tilden's nephew and aide.⁹ Marble assured Pelton, "We shall put Uncle Sammy through."¹⁰ Woolley also had received a code before coming to Florida.

Florida Republican Governor Marcellus Stearns anticipated trouble and asked Grant to send troops to the state capital. General Thomas H. Ruger and twelve companies of soldiers left Georgia for Tallahassee on November 11, 1876.¹¹ Stearns had been elected lieutenant governor in 1872 and succeeded to the governor's office in 1874 upon the death of Ossian B. Hart. In 1876, the governor was a candidate for a full term against Democrat George F. Drew. Stearns, like Hayes, trailed his Democratic opponent, although by a wider margin.

Initial Florida electoral returns showed Tilden with 24,441 votes to 24,350 votes for Hayes, a lead of ninety-one votes.¹² The state's canvassing board was required by law to meet thirty-five days after the election and to tally the returns. The board could exclude returns that were "irregular, false or fraudulent" and

6. "Presidential Election Investigation, Testimony Taken by the Select Committee on Alleged Frauds in the Presidential Election of 1876," House Misc. Doc. 31, 45th Cong., 3rd sess., pt. I, 528.

7. Alexander Clarence Flick, *Samuel Jones Tilden: A Study in Political Sagacity* (New York, 1939), 344.

8. William Watson Davis, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (New York, 1913; facsimile edition, Gainesville, 1964), 714.

9. "Presidential Election Investigation," pt. II, 54.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Jerrell Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet: Florida in the Era of Reconstruction, 1863-1877* (Gainesville, 1974), 316; Davis, *Civil War and Reconstruction*, 703n. Shortly before his service in Florida, Ruger had resigned as superintendent of West Point.

12. "Presidential Election Investigation," pt. II, 54.

thus could accept or reject returns as it saw fit.¹³ The three members of the board were Samuel B. McLin, the Republican secretary of state; Clayton A. Cowgill, Republican comptroller; and William Archer Cocke, Democratic attorney general. McLin, a native of Tennessee, had moved to Florida in 1854 and had served briefly in the Confederate Army from which he reportedly deserted. He was working as the editor of a small Lake City paper when he was appointed secretary of state in 1873. He also was editor of the *Tallahassee Sentinel*, one of the most influential, pro-Republican newspapers in the state. Cowgill was a Delaware physician and a Union Army veteran who moved to Florida following the Civil War. He was appointed state comptroller in 1873. Cocke was a Virginia native who had settled in the state during the war. Although he was a Democrat, he had been appointed to office by a Republican governor. McLin served as chairman of the canvassing board.

Prior to the board's meeting, Republicans and Democrats began examining returns from key counties to uncover evidence in support of their candidates. Noyes and Wallace, for example, used Federal troops in north Florida counties to solicit affidavits from blacks who claimed they had been intimidated by local Democrats.¹⁴ Wallace later wrote: "Money and intimidation can obtain the oath of white man as well as black to any required statement. A ton of affidavits could be carted in . . . and not a word of truth in them, except the names of the parties, swearing."¹⁵

Senator Chandler was not overly optimistic about Republican chances in Florida. He predicted in a telegram to Hayes that the party likely would lose the state by about 150 votes.¹⁶ Barlow also was convinced that the Democrats had carried the state and informed Grant and others of his findings. Understandably, Barlow's fellow Republicans insisted that he leave Florida before his opinions and activities created additional political problems.¹⁷

The board began its deliberations in Tallahassee on November 27, 1876. Every county had reported by that date

13. *Laws of Florida* (1872), 19.

14. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet*, 317.

15. Lew Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2 vols. (New York, 1906), II, 901-02.

16. W. E. Chandler to R. B. Hayes, November 18, 1876, Hayes Papers, Rutherford B. Hayes Library, Fremont, OH.

17. Flick, *Samuel Jones Tilden*, 346.

except Dade, which had only a few voters. Ten representatives of each party watched as the results were announced. As each county return was read, challenges were offered, either by the Democrats or the Republicans, and sometimes by both. On the first round the two Republicans on the board disallowed some Democratic ballots, and Hayes took a lead of forty-three votes.¹⁸ The results were not final, but they provided Republicans with publicity as newspapers reported their lead.¹⁹

At the board's second meeting the numbers changed, and the Democratic electors took a ninety-four vote lead.²⁰ In all, seven sessions were held, and by the evening of December 5 the board had rejected enough Democratic votes to pronounce Hayes the winner. McLin testified later that he had regarded his position on the board primarily as a Republican partisan and that he had voted to sustain his party whenever possible.²¹ On December 6, the Republican electors met to cast their votes for Hayes. The dissatisfied Democratic electors met, and Attorney General Cocke certified pro-Tilden results.²² Both sets of returns were dispatched to Washington. On January 2, 1877, the newly inaugurated Florida legislature decided to intervene as well. It created a new canvassing board which certified Tilden the winner and forwarded on to Washington a third set of returns.²³

South Carolina and Louisiana also sent multiple returns to Washington. President Grant appointed a fifteen-member commission to hold hearings and decide the case. The commission included eight Republican and seven Democratic members. On February 9, 1877, the commission voted eight to seven to award all nineteen disputed electoral votes to Hayes.²⁴ The way was paved for Hayes's presidency.

Although they had lost the presidency, the Democrats benefited from Tilden's defeat. They made Hayes's questionable elec-

18. "Report of the Senate Committee on Privileges and Election with the Testimony and Documentary Evidence on the Election in the State of Florida in 1876," Senate Report 611, 44th Cong., 2nd sess., pt. II, 11-12.

19. *New York Herald*, November 29, 1876.

20. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet*, 321.

21. "Presidential Election Investigation," pt. II, 98-100.

22. "Report of the Senate Committee," pt. IV, 14.

23. "Testimony Taken Before the Special Committee on Investigation of the Election in Florida," House Misc. Doc. 35, 44th Cong., 2nd sess., pt. I I I, 70-79.

24. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet*, 338.

tion a continuing campaign theme during the next several years. The Republican party was labeled as corrupt, and the Democrats vowed to undo the great wrong in the 1880 election. Newspapers supporting the Democratic party labeled Hayes a “usurper” and claimed that he and the Republicans had stolen the election.²⁵ Tilden called the affair a “political crime.”²⁶

To aid in keeping the issue before the public, Democratic Congressman Clarkson N. Potter of New York introduced on May 13, 1878, a resolution to create a congressional committee to investigate the election. The resolution passed despite opposition from Republicans, and Potter became committee chairman. The panel began its hearings later the same year and discovered that almost everyone associated with helping the Republicans win in the South had received a federal appointment. Some disgruntled Republicans, nonetheless, testified against their party.²⁷ One was McLin, who had been named associate justice of the New Mexico Supreme Court as a reward for supporting Hayes but who became embittered when approval of his nomination was forestalled by Florida’s Republican Senator Simon P. Conover. McLin testified that the Republicans had assured him he would be “taken care of” if he helped their cause.²⁸ He also reported Marble’s assurance to him that, if Tilden won, McLin would not die poor.²⁹

The Republicans needed an issue in 1878 to counter the Democratic strategy and to place that party on the defensive. The issue that ultimately satisfied the need arose from a very unusual source, the Western Union Company. Within days of the election, controversy over its outcome seemed certain, and James O. Green, a Western Union employee and son of a com-

25. Paul Leland Haworth, *The Hayes-Tilden Disputed Presidential Election of 1876* (Cleveland, 1906) 306.

26. *New York Herald*, October 28, 1877.

27. For example, Edward H. Noyes was named minister to France, John A. Kasson minister to Austria, Lew Wallace governor of New Mexico, Marcellus L. Stearns federal commissioner at Hot Springs, Arkansas, and F. C. Humphreys collector of the port of Pensacola. Haworth, *Disputed Presidential Election*, 309; House Report 140. 45th Cong., 3d sess., 21-22.

28. “Presidential Election Investigation,” pt. IV, 98.

29. *Ibid.*, 101. McLin returned to Florida after the failure of his Senate confirmation. Travels to and from New Mexico had undermined his health, and he died at his home near Orlando on September 17, 1879. *Tampa Guardian*, September 27, 1879.

pany vice president, thought his company might become involved. Green realized that if an investigation were undertaken telegrams involving the campaign might be subpoenaed and used as evidence. Western Union prided itself on protecting the confidentiality of its customers, and Green believed that telegrams in the company's possession could embarrass important clients if their contents were revealed.

Company rules required that telegrams be retained for three years in case a customer sued Western Union for sending incorrect information. In December 1876, James Green's father ordered all telegrams in the Washington files relating to politics collected and sent to New York. Each telegram transmitted during the fall of 1876 was examined. Some obviously were of a political nature, and, as was not unusual for businessmen and politicians at the time, many were in code. Some individuals had their own code books, and a standard code dictionary was also available. Accordingly, Western Union clerks examining coded telegrams were told to check for names of well-known politicians, or certain addresses, such as those of the New York headquarters of the two political parties.³⁰ In all, nearly 30,000 telegrams from the 1876 campaign were sent to New York.

Western Union officials feared that messages dealing with the election might be subpoenaed by one or more congressional committees, so the company turned them over to Clarence Gary, its New York attorney. When the Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections eventually issued the subpoena, it specifically named Gary.³¹ He shipped the telegrams to the committee in a large trunk.³²

Company president William Orton understandably wanted the telegrams returned. He worried that they might become part of a permanent record and be opened to public examination. Leonard Whitney, manager of the Western Union office in Washington, warned Orton, "If the telegrams got into the hands of either the House or the Senate we would not be able to get them back; that the Clerk of the House and the Secretary of the Senate would have no authority to take them out of the files;

30. Ibid., 5.

31. Ibid.

32. Albert M. Gibson, *A Political Crime: The History of the Great Fraud* (New York, 1885), 75.

and . . . the best course would be to apply to the chairmen of the committees."³³ In March, Orton asked key senators to return the telegrams, and, through his influence and that of his company, he was successful. On March 17 the telegrams were returned to Western Union.

Company officials believed they had recovered all of the cables. When they arrived from Washington the younger Green secretly had the trunk and its contents burned.³⁴ However, more than 600 telegrams had been removed in Washington, apparently by George E. Bullock, a clerk on the Senate committee and a dutiful Republican. In May 1878, when Bullock was named consul to Cologne, he turned the telegrams over to another Republican, Representative J. L. Evans of Indiana. Evans gave them to Thomas Brady, the second assistant postmaster general, who had been active in Florida after the election. Brady's title did not indicate properly his powerful position as a leading Republican fundraiser.³⁵

Meanwhile, Senator Chandler was continuing to search for a way to stop Democratic attacks on his party. He believed that the Western Union telegrams would have provided him with the ammunition that he needed and complained bitterly about their destruction. Republican Congressman Eugene Hale of Maine knew that Brady had some of the telegrams. He obtained the coded cables and had copies made of those most likely to embarrass the Democrats.³⁶

Six hundred thirty-one of the original 30,000 telegrams remained, and nearly all of them involved the Democrats. An unknown person had removed most of the messages transmitted by Republicans. Floyd Grant, the Western Union employee who originally had counted the telegrams, testified later that Republican messages were as numerous as Democratic ones. As to the Florida election, he remembered more Republican than Democratic telegrams. Any one of several people could have removed the cables from the committee room where they had been stored for months.³⁷

33. "Presidential Election Investigation," pt. II, 25.

34. *Ibid.*, 33.

35. Haworth, *Disputed Presidential Election*, 316.

36. *New York Tribune*, January 29, 1879.

37. "Presidential Election Investigation," pt. II, 9. A complete set of the original telegrams can be found in the James A. Garfield Papers, Box 168, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

In the summer of 1878 Chandler gave a set of the telegrams to Congressman Benjamin Butler, a member of the Potter committee. Representative Frank Hiscock, another Republican member of the committee, also received copies. Chandler mailed about a dozen of the telegrams to Whitelaw Reid, editor of the pro-Republican *New York Tribune*. Later Chandler sent all of the telegrams relating to Florida to Reid, and eventually he forwarded the rest of the cables in his possession. Brady also gave Reid some of his copies.³⁸

Reid was intrigued with the telegrams, but he was unsure what to do with them. He did not understand the secret codes, but since nearly all of the messages were addressed to Democratic party officials in New York from the contested states of Florida, South Carolina, and Louisiana, he suspected they might contain information that could embarrass the Democrats.³⁹ Reid decided "to play about them for a little while." He later stated: "First, we threw a few of them out in editorials, trying to make a little fun out of them, and attract attention to them in the hope that somebody would supply a translation. Nobody came forward, however, and then we attacked them seriously."⁴⁰ The dispatches must have seemed very odd to *Tribune* readers. One printed November 13, 1876, was sent from Columbia, South Carolina:

Very news says Copenhagen to from can Florida you count much in be give what Louisiana am placed in Returning Board (to) insure, what say you? Give news from Louisiana, Oregon, Florida.⁴¹

When no one volunteered to translate the codes, Reid gave separate sets to two members of the *Tribune* staff, William M. Grosvenor and John R. G. Hassard. A third set was transferred to a man Reid did not identify. The three worked independently to break the multiple Democratic codes and a single Republican code.⁴² In August, Hassard and Grosvenor achieved a breakthrough. They noticed that the word "Warsaw" occurred fre-

38. *New York Tribune*, January 29, 1879.

39. "Presidential Election Investigation." pt. IV, III.

40. *Ibid.*

41. Holden, "The Cipher Dispatches," 408.

42. Haworth, *Disputed Presidential Election*, 316.

quently and often was used as "Warsawed." They guessed that it stood for telegraph or telegraphed.⁴³ It gave them a start in what became a tedious and time-consuming task. On October 7, 1878, the newspaper announced the existence of the codes and the following day began publication of the telegrams.⁴⁴

The first telegrams to appear in print were from Florida, and their publication was designed to maximize embarrassment to the Democrats. The timing was good for the Republicans, coming just weeks before the fall 1878 congressional elections, and the cables helped to blunt the ethics issue the Democrats had hoped to use.⁴⁵ To keep the matter before the public the *Tribune* spaced out publication, printing the South Carolina dispatches eight days after the Florida telegrams, and the Louisiana wires followed. The telegrams captivated readers. Solving the coded messages seemed to them like a mystery out of Edgar Allen Poe's *Gold Bug*, and many Americans enjoyed using the *Tribune* codes to figure out the telegrams for themselves.⁴⁶

Most of the telegrams were in a transposition cipher in which the words were rearranged according to a predetermined code. Identifying the code was difficult, and different arrangements applied based upon the length of the message. To solve the mystery, two telegrams of equal length were selected and written on a piece of paper. Individual words then were cut out and arranged until they made sense. The second message served as a check on the accuracy of the first.

43. *New York Tribune* (extra edition no. 44), November 12, 1879, 3 (hereafter, *Tribune* extra). This extra edition was entitled, "The Cipher Dispatches: Secret History of the Electoral Canvass in 1876."

44. Haworth, *Disputed Presidential Election*, 317.

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*, 321.

The code actually contained ten separate keys:

Table of Keys

Key	10	words	15	words	20	words	25	words	30	words
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	9	4	8	3	6	12	6	18	17	4
	3	7	4	7	9	18	12	12	30	26
	6	2	1	12	3	3	23	6	26	23
	1	9	7	2	5	5	18	25	1	15
	10	6	13	6	4	4	10	14	11	8
	5	3	5	8	13	1	3	1	20	27
	2	8	2	4	14	20	17	16	25	16
	7	10	6	1	20	16	20	11	5	30
	4	1	11	11	19	2	15	21	10	24
	8	5	14	15	12	19	19	5	29	9
			9	9	17	13	8	15	27	5
			3	14	1	10	2	2	19	19
			15	5	11	6	24	17	28	17
			12	10	15	7	5	24	24	25
			10	13	18	14	11	9	4	22
					8	17	7	23	7	28
					16	11	13	7	13	1
					2	15	1	4	18	18
					10	9	25	10	12	12
					7	8	22	8	22	6
							9	23	21	21
							16	20	15	20
							21	3	3	29
							14	13	9	14
							4	19	14	7
									2	3
									6	11
									16	13
									23	10
									8	2

If the message included more than thirty words, a combination of codes was used. In a fifty-word message, the thirty- and twenty-word keys might be combined, although any combination was possible. Often the telegrams indicated which key was to be used.⁴⁷

A typical telegram, for instance, was sent on December 3, 1876, from New York City to C. W. Woolley, one of the Democratic operatives in Tallahassee:

47. "Presidential Election Investigation," pt. IV, 326.

[1]Perfect [2]you [3]want [4]power [5]we [6]could [7]and
 [8]answer [9]you [10]cannot [11]believe [12]delivered
 [13]all [14]telegraphed [15]do [16]do [17]all [18]application
 [19]no [20]in [21]and [22]stay [23]private [24]has [25]you
 [26]have [27]meddlers [28]other [29]prevent [30]here.W.

The message contained thirty words, and use of Key IX was required to obtain the solution. Once the words were numbered, the proper arrangement was simple:

All here have perfect belief in you. We cannot prevent meddlers. No other has power and all application declined. Stay and do what you telegraphed you could do.⁴⁸

When a telegram contained a number of words not divisible by five, "nulls" or "dumb words" were added. These nulls included: Anna, captain, Charles, Daniel, Jane, Jones, lieutenant, Thomas, and William.⁴⁹

The Democrats also had a substitution code that involved preselected words in place of key words. The substitution code either could stand on its own or be used with the transposition code:

Vocabulary Key

<i>Code word</i>	<i>Actual word</i>	<i>Code word</i>	<i>Actual word</i>
Africa	(Gov.)Chamberlain	America	Wade Hampton
Amsterdam	bills	Bolivia	proposal
Brazil	too high (?)	Bavaria	unknown
Bremen	commissioner (?)	Chicago	cost, draft
Chili	cautious (?)	Copenhagen	dollars
Denmark	Colonel Pelton	Europe	Louisiana
Fox	C. W. Woolley	France	Florida, Stearns
Greece	Hayes	Havana	Republicans
Ithaca	Democrats	Lima	accept
London	canvassing board	Louis	governor
Max	John F. Coyle	Monroe	county
Moses	Manton Marble	Paris	draw
Petersburg	deposit	Portugal	maybe Chandler
Rochester	votes	Russia	Tilden
Syracuse	majority	Utica	fraud
Vienna	payable	Warsaw	telegraph

48. *Ibid.*, 364.

49. *Ibid.*, 327.

To indicate numbers, the names of rivers and places were used:

<i>Numbers Key</i>			
<i>Code word</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Code word</i>	<i>Number</i>
River	0	Potomac	6
Rhine	1	Scuylkill	7
Moselle	2	Mississippi	8
Thames	3	Missouri	9
Hudson	4	Glasgow	100
Danube	5	Edinburgh	1000

On November 27, 1876, Tilden's nephew, Colonel Pelton, received a telegram in New York that used the vocabulary code:

Must Paris for Edinburgh Copenhagen, Lima Chicago.
Please answer immediately. Manton Marble.

Utilizing the vocabulary code the telegram reads:

Must draw for thousand dollars, accept cost. Please answer immediately. Manton Marble.⁵⁰

The most difficult code was a number cipher that used numbers to represent words and words to indicate numbers.⁵¹

<i>Number code</i>			
<i>Code word</i>	<i>Actual word</i>	<i>Code word</i>	<i>Actual word</i>
France	two	Sixteen	canvass board
Italy	three	Nineteen	received
Greece	four	Twenty	agree
England	five	Twenty one	telegraph
One	telegraphic credit	Twenty three	Edward Cooper
Two	will deposit	Twenty four	votes
Three	supply or provide	Twenty seven	John F. Coyle
Four	have you arranged	Thirty	Republicans
Five	will send or remit	Thirty two	canvassing
Seven	draw or draft	Thirty four	G. P. Raney
Nine	bank	Thirty five	requirements
Ten	dollars	Thirty seven	member
Eleven	thousand	Forty	expenses
Twelve	hundred	Forty one	paid, protected
Thirteen	necessary	Forty six	prompt, prudent

50. *Ibid.*, 352.

51. *Ibid.*, 327.

Coyle used both the transposition code and the number code on November 13 in a telegram to New York Democratic leader Henry Havemeyer:

In nine one plyne of twelve ten thirty hold Italy sixteen thirteen eleven information will eight that three England first and go immediately seven twenty afternoon twenty situation one tomorrow. Sent two Tallahassee seven twenty four has meeting to thirty. Max.

To translate the telegram, Key VI first was used, then the number code:

Necessary supply telegraphic credit of Plyne in First eight Bank five thousand three hundred dollars. Information that Board will hold canvassing meeting immediately. Coyle and Raney go to Tallahassee tomorrow afternoon. Coyle has sent dispatch situation. Coyle.

The reference to “plyne” in the telegram is to James H. Payne, president of the Florida Savings Bank of Jacksonville and treasurer of the Democratic State Committee. The error in misspelling Payne was corrected in a later telegram.⁵²

Dictionary ciphers also were used. A dictionary was selected, usually a small volume that could be carried easily, and the sender and receiver agreed on a number of pages, usually one to four, forward or backward. If the sender wanted to use “money,” he would find the word in the dictionary. If it was on page 100, ten words down from the top, the sender looked forward or backward the agreed number of pages and then counted ten words down to find the code word.

Finding the solution to a dictionary code was difficult for code breakers. The correct dictionary had to be ascertained (more than sixty different dictionaries were in print in 1876) and then the number of pages had to be determined. The task was frustrating for the *Tribune's* editors and staff. They eventually solved the problem by looking for uncommon words that did not appear in all dictionaries. One such word was “geodesy.”

52. *Tribune* extra, 13.

They also assumed that the dictionary would be small enough so that the Democratic agents sent South could carry it easily. Ultimately, *Webster's Pocket Dictionary* proved to be the correct one.⁵³

The dictionary code was used in an unsigned December 5, 1876, telegram from Florida to one of the Democratic operatives in New York:

Kneel lexicography bass lye leech conduit stevedore to
taken descant and woe spermaceti aforesaid helm subjugate
hovel of boon research leave terra-cotta forewarning wright
unprejudiced seem ordinal metre shamble.

The translation is:

Just left [General] Barlow. Latter concedes State [Florida]
to Democrats and will so advise. Have strong hope of Board.
Repeat last telegram.

The last four words, "seem, ordinal, metre, shamble," likely are nulls.⁵⁴

The double cipher code was used rarely. Accurate transmissions were difficult to ensure, and the telegrams tended to be very long. Each letter was assigned a number. The word money in the code was "96-55-33-93-89."⁵⁵

The final code was a letter substitution that could be as confusing as the number code. Only a few telegrams utilized this code because it was difficult to send. One of the messages was:

Why not imnsss ityep iaan yianse nspnsi mpe?

First it was necessary to arrange the message:

Why not im ns ss it ye pi aa ny ia ns en sp ns im pe?

Translated it read:

53. "Presidential Election Investigation," pt. IV, 329.

54. *Ibid.* 379.

55. *Ibid.*, 329.

Why not send from Key West?⁵⁶

Three groups of Democrats had been involved on the Florida scene in 1876. The locals included four leading political figures, George P. Raney, William A. Bloxham, A. L. Randolph, and J. J. Daniel.⁵⁷ Democrats arriving from the North included Manton Marble (code name Moses); John F. Coyle, a Washington lobbyist and former Pennsylvanian (code name Max); and C. W. Woolley, a Pennsylvania politician (code name Fox or winning). The third group, W. T. Pelton (code name Denmark) and Henry Havemeyer, remained in New York City. Most of the telegrams were sent to Pelton and a few to Havemeyer.

The leading national Republican in Florida was Senator William Chandler, whose code name was Everett Chase. The Republican code name of the Democratic headquarters in New York was Everett House.⁵⁸ Tilden, who was referred to in the cables by his code name Russia, did not himself send or receive any of the telegrams examined by the Potter committee. Woolley communicated with Havemeyer, and Marble dispatched telegrams to Pelton.⁵⁹ Each operative used a different code.

The coded telegrams reveal the story of the desperate Democratic efforts to win Florida for their party. State Democrats moved quickly to save the state for Tilden and their own state candidates. The first telegram was sent November 9, two days after the election, and was from A. L. Randolph in Florida to Duke Gwinn, a Democratic leader in Philadelphia. It set the tone for what was to come:

We need money to resist Radical pranks. State is for Tilden.

The same day, J. J. Daniel sent telegrams from Jacksonville to Raney and Bloxham in Tallahassee:

56. *Ibid.*, 416.

57. George P. Raney, William D. Bloxham, and A. L. Randolph were officers of Tallahassee's Democratic Reform Club. Raney served as state attorney general beginning in 1877; Bloxham, former lieutenant governor, later twice was elected governor. James Jaquelin Daniel was a Jacksonville attorney, newspaper publisher, and political leader.

58. *Tribune* extra, 9.

59. "Presidential Election Investigation," pt. IV, 74.

You will attend to everything east and north of Suwannee.
You take middle and west in hand. Expenses will be paid.
Draw on Payne if you need money.

Raney also dispatched a wire that day to a Democratic party official in New York:

Our state has gone for Tilden and Democratic State ticket by at least 1,600. We learn that W. E. Chandler has left Washington for this place. Radicals intend fraud. We need material aid to check them. Can we get it?

His second telegram read:

Send a good man here to represent your committee, with an understood cipher.

The first telegrams from Florida were not sent in code. The Florida Democrats had to wait for someone from New York who would bring a cipher.⁶⁰

Marble arrived in Tallahassee by November 16 and telegraphed Pelton:

Use hundred and forty cipher all to there advice some our must everything cordially necessary one coming remain our head received was absolutely driving no probably month was result this business to majority being evidence will truth but afoot Democratic establishing be that distances contriving but unquestionable clear nothing Democrats slow well followed preserve now be returns doubtless to may enormous claim county first board wrongly travel to be will move may canvassing purge and will our difficult Governor canvasser received Democrat three egregious action require returns able county of canvassing of already fraud one where state board being officers Republican with the immediate beginning legal other Georgia helpful very Governor while need Brown help questions counsel Sellers the arising no in we possible best also and Saltonstall remain

60. *Tribune* extra, 12

can be Moses along and here on general called on army road today officers attorney Governor.

The first words, "Use hundred and forty cipher," called for using Key VII four times and Key V twice:

Use hundred and forty cipher. Our coming was absolutely necessary. There was no head driving everything to result. Some one must remain all this month. Cordially received; probably our advice will be followed. Clear Democratic majority unquestionable. Democrats contriving nothing but to preserve evidence establishing truth. That business now well afoot, but slow, distances being enormous, travel difficult. Canvassing Board doubtless may and will purge county returns. Governor [Stearns] may wrongly claim to be canvasser. Our first move will be to require of the board of three State officers, one being able Democrat, immediate action, canvassing returns already received, beginning with county where Republican fraud egregious. Governor Brown, Georgia very helpful. Sellers the best possible counsel in legal questions arising. We need no other help while he and Saltonstall can remain. Called on Governor, Attorney-General today; also on army officers along road and here. Marble.⁶¹

The Democrats realized that of the three southern states dispute their best hope for victory was Florida. Smith Weed, a Democrat assigned to look out for party interests in South Carolina, telegraphed Havemeyer on November 16:

France Moselle over man greatest river with am Rhine exertions is there full in not here am power made state are chances but you where that be have should confident Rhine to morning in France be concert success is are Africa I the all this conditional working authority communications Europe for Warsawed on act and that close and in for.

The translation utilizes both the transposition and the substitution code:

61. *Ibid.*, 13-14.

Am confident that Florida is state where greatest exertions should be made. Have you man with full power there? Chances are not over one in twenty here; but am working for that one. [Republican Governors] Chamberlain [South Carolina], Kellogg [Louisiana], and Stearns [Florida] are in close communication and act in concert. The authority I telegraphed for this morning all to be conditioned on success.⁶²

The Democratic operatives in Florida concluded that the two Republican members of the canvassing board would follow their party line. Marble considered the possibility of buying the vote of a Republican member of the canvassing board, but apparently he had a falling out with Woolley as to who had the responsibility for negotiating such an offer. The two men clearly were operating independently. Each reported to a different person in New York, and each had a different secret code. Both men considered themselves to be Tilden's chief representative in Florida. Woolley sent a telegram to Havemeyer on December 1:

Making Jane said you to I William enemy privately Daniel propositions Moses last night to Captain from the stop to. Fox.

Based upon Key V, the telegram read:

I privately said to you last night to stop Marble from making propositions to the enemy. Captain Jane Daniel William. Woolley.

The same day, Woolley sent his version of a possible deal to Havemeyer:

Sixteen Fetch may make thirteen forty of half of a twelve eleven ten. Can you say two in nine immediately in twenty. Fox.

The translation is:

62. "Presidential Election Investigation," pt. IV, 121-22.

Board Fetch may make necessary expense of half of a hundred thousand dollars. Can you say will deposit in bank immediately if agreed?⁶³

The meaning of "Fletch" is unknown but apparently refers to a member of the canvassing board whose vote was for sale. McLin most likely was the target of the bribe, although he did not specifically say that he had been offered anything.

Havemeyer immediately replied to Woolley:

Twenty one nineteen two ten twenty cannot however seven before twenty four thirty seven nineteen reply forty six. H.

The translation using the number code is:

Telegram received. Will deposit dollars agreed; [you] cannot, however, draw before vote member received. Reply promptly.⁶⁴

Either because of instructions not to withdraw the money until after the vote or because Marble also was seeking to make a deal, Woolley sent an angry telegram to Havemeyer on December 2:

More in select have whom some you in confidence one winning evidently than. Fox.

The Key IV translation is:

Select some one in whom you have more confidence than you evidently have in Woolley.⁶⁵

In reply, Wooley received a telegram assuring him of support in New York:

Perfect you what power we could and answer you cannot belief declined all telegraphed do do all application no in and stay private has you have needless other prevent here.

63. *Tribune* extra, 20.

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Ibid.*

Utilizing Key IX, the translation is:

All here have perfect belief in you. We cannot prevent needless [interference]. No other has power, and all application declined. Stay and do what you telegraphed you could do. Private. Answer. W.⁶⁶

Meanwhile, Marble was working on his own— and a more expensive— bribe. He telegraphed Pelton on December 2:

Certificate required to Moses decision have London hour for Bolivia of just and Edinburgh at Moselle hand a any over Glasgow France rec'd. Russia of Moses.⁶⁷

The Key VII translation is:

Have just received a proposition to hand over at any hour required Tilden decision of Board and certificate of Governor for 200,000. Marble.⁶⁸

The following day, an unsigned reply was sent to Tallahassee:

Warsaw here. Bolivia Brazil.

That telegram read:

Dispatch here. Proposition too high.⁶⁹

Faced with this rejection, Marble counteroffered to Pelton on December 3:

Preventing Moses best Bolivia or from Glasgow vote London documents united Rochester states half giving [dropped word] concurrence electors his cast being court either of in received of action for Havana.

Using Key X, the translation read:

66. Ibid.

67. Ibid., 19.

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid.

Proposition received either giving vote of Republican of Board or his concurrence in Court action preventing electors' vote from being cast, for half hundred [\$50,000] best United States documents. Marble.⁷⁰

When he did not receive an immediate reply, Marble went to another of the visiting Democrats, E. L. Parris, for help. Parris was the only Democrat using a dictionary code. Since the resulting telegram was sent in that code, it seems likely that Parris sent it. The message was sent to Henry Havemeyer on December 4:

Scarcity secured shear distances settee you advanced to husky heart affectioned with functionary sleeper sauce box exempt tidewater undertaker match school plinth settee you scarify nascent beehive admonish upon implacable overhung worry underbrush plinth unlandlocked to untransomed. Sixteen, twenty-one, twenty-three kneel preeminenced your lightning.

Using *Webster's Pocket Dictionary* and turning back one page, the translation is:

Saturday secured. Several dispatches sent you addressed to house. Have advised with friend. Situation same; everything uncertain. Marble says plan sent you Saturday must be acted upon immediately; otherwise unavailing. Plan unknown to undersigned. Sixteen, twenty-one, twenty-three just presented your letter.⁷¹

The meaning of "Saturday secured" is unknown; perhaps it refers to McLin.

The same day Woolley cabled Havemeyer repeating his deal and asking what to do:

Half twelve may less thirty eleven winning ten additional seven for give lieutenant sixteen Russia. Fox.

Combining Key IV with the number code produced the following translation:

70. Ibid., 20.

71. Ibid.

May Winning give hundred thousand dollars less half for Tilden additional Board member? Lieutenant. Woolley.⁷²

The conflict between Woolley and Marble was becoming frustrating for the Democratic party leaders in New York. The same day that Marble and Woolley sent their telegrams about offering a bribe, either Pelton or Havemeyer responded:

Act divided time ruin him counsels each all important you in Warsaw other of you may see have or conjunction consult him lose will with and coincide you must Israel.

The Key IX translation is:

See Israel [Moses] and act in conjunction with him. you must coincide, or you will ruin each other. Have telegraphed him consult you. Time important. Divided counsels may lose all.⁷³

The key moment was at hand, but Tilden's managers in New York faltered. First, they received reports that the canvassing board would back Tilden and that a bribe was unnecessary. Woolley received a telegram from Pelton, but it was in Marble's code:

Given Rochester that have London will not fully advise you use reported so need Lima, Rhine to here if us. W.

Utilizing Key VI, the translation is:

Reported here that Board have given us one vote. If so you will not need to use acceptance. Advise fully.⁷⁴

The information was incorrect, but there was a critical delay until Pelton and Havemeyer could be informed. A delay also ensued while Woolley found out what the telegram said because it was in Marble's code.

Time was running out, but finally Marble was authorized to purchase McLin's vote. A crucial mistake was made, however,

72. Ibid.

73. Ibid., 21.

74. Ibid.

as the telegrams from New York used incorrect codes. Marble received a message using Woolley's code, and Woolley received another using Marble's. On December 5, the day the board was to vote, Woolley telegraphed Havemeyer:

No one here knows meaning of words Lima Rhine. Fox.⁷⁵

Marble telegraphed Pelton:

Tell Spain to repeat his message in my cipher. It is unintelligible.

Finally, the codes were straightened out, and the correct telegram was sent to Marble:

Lima should important in once be concert council and better if trust you there very no Warsaw can Fox done time him divided act only Bolivia with an consult here.

Based upon Key IX and the substitution code, the translation is:

Telegram here. Proposition accepted if done only once. Better consult with Wooley and act in concert. You can trust him. Time very important and there should be no divided councils.⁷⁶

The confusion and delay nonetheless had cost the Democrats the opportunity to purchase the necessary vote on the canvassing board. Woolley wired Havemeyer:

Saturday William if power joined forty further twenty have Charles necessary be Jane you late ten sixteen will with and six twenty too to against secured five from advise appear. Fox.

The Key X translation is:

Power secured too late. Twenty-five ten appear to have joined with the Board against contract from Saturday. Will

75. Ibid.

76. Ibid.

be prompt and advise you further if necessary. Jane Charles William Woolley.⁷⁷

Marble sent a similar telegram to Pelton:

Bolivia Laura. Finished yesterday afternoon responsibility Moses. Last night Fox found me and said he had nothing, I knew already. Tell Russia saddle Blackstone.

Using the substitution code, it read:

Proposition failed. Finished yesterday afternoon responsibility [as] Moses. Last night Woolley found me and said he had nothing, which I knew already. Tell Tilden to saddle Blackstone.⁷⁸

The phrase "Tell Tilden to saddle Blackstone" is something of a mystery. Perhaps it meant that a legal challenge was all that was left to the Democrats.

The few Republican telegrams that have survived show the use of a simple code. On his way to Florida, William Chandler sent a telegram to his New York headquarters containing a secret code to be used in future cables. Chandler's code was short, and he admitted he had selected "feeble synonyms":

William = send	Rainy = things look favorable
Warm apples = majority	Cold fellows = Democrats
Oranges = Florida	Cotton = Louisiana
Robinson = \$3,000	Jones = \$2,000
Brown = \$1,000	Smith = \$250

Chandler ended by advising, "But don't telegraph unless necessary."⁷⁹

The other Republican telegrams also are nonincriminating. Chandler telegraphed Louisiana Governor William P. Kellogg on November 16:

77. Ibid.

78. Ibid.

79. "Presidential Election Investigation," pt. IV, 526.

Pay no attention to cold reports. Telegrams here say cotton low and fever spreading.

The translation is:

Vote favorable outlook in Florida. Pay no attention to Democratic reports. Telegrams here say Louisiana uncertain.⁸⁰

The Republicans demanded that the Potter committee hearings be expanded to include the Western Union telegrams. At first the Democratic-controlled committee resisted, but the calls were persistent, and on January 21, 1879, the committee agreed to consider the telegrams in hearings in Washington and New York.⁸¹ Even though they showed that a bribe was being negotiated, Marble denied that any offer was made. He testified in New York that the *Tribune* had not translated the telegrams correctly, but he never offered any corrections. Marble insisted that he was not trying to steal the election but merely to obtain what the Democrats had won fairly at the polls: "All the misrepresentations of the *Tribune* in its broadside of October last, and later in its pamphlet," he stated, "hinge upon the false representation that we were bereft of every honest hope, and therefore that we were obliged to resort to dishonest acts." He continued: "The proof is conclusive all through my dispatches that I believed we had carried the state, and I also gave proofs that we had carried the state. There is no doubt now that we carried the state."⁸²

Pelton testified that a bribe had been offered. He related his role in the offer but insisted that Tilden knew nothing about the affair. Regardless, Tilden had been damaged by the revelations. Up until then he had enjoyed significant support in the Democratic press for the party's nomination in 1880. After the Potter committee hearings his standing in the party declined, and the Democrats at their national convention nominated General Winfield Scott Hancock.

Had Manton Marble been successful in buying Samuel McLin's vote, the Florida canvassing board would have supported

80. Gibson, *Political Crime*, 75-76.

81. Haworth, *Disputed Presidential Election*, 322.

82. *Ibid.*

Tilden in 1876. Had Governor Stearns certified the results, Florida's four electoral votes would have given Tilden a total of 188, three more than the number needed to win the presidency.

Florida's highly partisan electoral process thus provided the key to four, and perhaps eight, more years of uninterrupted Republican rule in the White House. The margin by which Florida's votes were determined was not the incorruptibility of her political leaders, but the failure to use the proper code in only one of the hundreds of secret telegrams sent in the aftermath of the election of 1876. Never before, or since, has Florida exercised such political power in the election of a president of the United States.