



BOUTWELL: Radical Republican and Champion of Democracy

by Jeffrey Boutwell

W.W. Norton, January 21, 2025

**A conversation with author Jeffrey Boutwell
(19 November 2024)**

NOTE: Jeffrey and George are distant cousins who share a common ancestor, the indentured servant James Boutwell, who emigrated in 1632 from England to Salem, Massachusetts.

Contact: Johanna Ramos-Boyer | 703-646-5137 |
johanna@jrbpr.biz

Why this book?

George Boutwell was a key player in the major issues facing America from the 1840s to the beginning of the 20th century. He worked with Lincoln on the abolition of slavery and granting civil rights for newly emancipated Blacks, with Ulysses Grant in establishing the modern American economy, and with Mark Twain and others in opposing the imperialism of Teddy Roosevelt and America's annexation of the Philippines. Equality of rights and of economic opportunity, and the humane use of American power abroad, these issues are as important today as they were 150 years ago.

Why Now?

I'm a distant cousin of George's who knew little about him, despite growing up just miles away from George's hometown of Groton, Massachusetts. For most of the 20th century, George was either neglected or dismissed by American historians. But in recent decades, new histories of the Civil War, the Reconstruction era, and the Gilded Age have highlighted George Boutwell's consequential role in many different aspects of American politics. When I retired from my career in international science cooperation, I discovered there was no major biography of George, and I thought he deserved one. So, in March 2020, at the beginning of Covid, I got to work.

What kind of kinship did you feel with George as you researched and wrote the book?

Well, we both come from 1800s farming families. My great-great grandfather, Rodney Cleaves Boutwell, grew up in southern New Hampshire, less than 30 miles from George's boyhood home in central Massachusetts. We share a Yankee heritage, with similar personality

traits of obsessive attention to detail, little need for seeking or wanting the limelight, and a passionate belief in fairness and equity, not necessarily of outcome, but at least of opportunity. But the exploding light bulb was when I learned how George had traveled through hostile territory in white supremacist Mississippi in the 1870s to document racial violence for his US Senate committee, in precisely the same area where one of the formative events of my teenage years took place: the murder in 1964 of the civil rights workers, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner.

What did you learn about George that took you completely by surprise?

That's easy. My wife Buthaina stumbled across a history master's thesis written about George, in 1933, by a young African American graduate student at the University of Wisconsin. Benjamin Arthur Quarles was from Boston, the son of a Black railway porter and an Irish homemaker. At Wisconsin, Quarles was told by his (white) thesis advisors not to write about a Black subject, the reasons being that there wasn't enough primary source material about the role of Blacks in American life, and that one Black writing about another couldn't be objective! So, Quarles had to write about a white figure, and he chose George Boutwell because of George's commitment to Black education and voting rights during the difficult years of the Reconstruction era when white supremacists were seeking to regain political control in the South. Quarles titled his thesis, "George Boutwell: A Radical with Reasons." Of all the things I learned about George in the last five years, this is one I'm most proud of, that he was deeply admired by a young Black graduate student who would go on to become a premier historian of the 20th century. Benjamin Quarles wrote major histories about Black contributions in shaping American society and politics, and he wrote the first substantial biography of Frederick Douglass in the 1940s.

Why was George called a Radical Republican?

In the 1850s and 1860s, conservative opponents considered "radical" those who called for the abolition of slavery, Black civil rights, and increased economic and educational opportunities for all Americans, including immigrants. George and his colleagues wore the label proudly, proclaiming that the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments had finally extended the principles found in the Declaration of Independence (Jefferson's "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness") to all Americans, what historians today call the country's "Second Founding." No longer would the protections of the US Constitution, as it had when written, apply only to white males with property.

How are Republicans of George's era different from Republicans today?

It's a natural feature of American politics that parties evolve and change. The Democrats of today are considered the progressive party, but in George's time they were conservative, with a strong streak of white supremacy. Even before George's death in 1905, the Republican party itself was becoming more conservative, focusing on the interests of private business and property rather than on individual rights. Today, there are more changes still, with critics charging that progressive Democrats have abandoned middle-class voters while Republicans, I feel, over-emphasize the personal liberty of individuals at the expense of

an individual's responsibility to the common good. As for George, his story is one of putting principles above party; he left the Democratic party in the 1850s and became a Republican over the issue of slavery, but then abandoned the Republican party around 1900 over the issue of American imperialism abroad. If George were alive today, I believe he would agree with the fears of some of our Founding Fathers that the growth of political parties ("factions") would tear our country apart.

What does George Boutwell's story tell us about America today?

I fully share George's conviction that, as he wrote, "putting too much power into the hands of state governments had been a fundamental flaw of the original Constitution." This was precisely the reason he and others wrote the 14th Amendment, so that the national government could protect individual liberties from being abused by state governments, as is happening today with voting and privacy rights. We are all American *citizens* first, and only *residents* of a particular state second, yet state governments determine a great deal of one's personal liberty. Americans no matter where they live should have *equal* access to protection of the laws and to voting rights. All of us during our lives might reside in five or ten different states (I certainly have), but we remain Americans no matter where we live. Our American identity should be the determining factor in protecting the liberties that George and so many others fought for, not that we happen to live, at any particular moment, in Illinois or Virginia, Vermont or Georgia (as I have).

You're obviously devoted to spreading George Boutwell's story. Why?

The more I've learned about George, the more impressed I've become that a young man who never went to high school or college, much less law school, held just about every important office in American politics, except the presidency, while also becoming a devoted friend to Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses Grant. In 1877, George was even asked by President Rutherford B. Hayes to oversee an updating of the entire US legal code – not bad for someone with little formal education. George Boutwell was involved in so many different facets of American life: politics and Constitutional law, public education, finance and economics, foreign policy. Even prior to finishing the book, I've published some dozen articles and opinion pieces about George and his involvement in all these issues, and there are many more waiting to be written. I like to say that "George is the gift that keeps on giving."

Jeffrey Boutwell, Ph.D.
www.jeffreyboutwell.com