

Article Title:

Malignant Catatonia, Bromism, and the Unexpected Death of Presidential Candidate, Horace Greeley

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Abstract

Horace Greeley was a prominent New York newspaper editor in the mid-19th century and United States presidential candidate in 1872. He ran against Ulysses S. Grant, lost the election, and died before the Electoral votes were counted. His death on November 29, 1872, in a private insane asylum, was ascribed to ‘mental exhaustion’ and ‘brain swelling’ by his treating physicians. Although contemporary authors argued his cause of death, there is no modern-day psychiatric analysis of Greeley’s rapid physical and mental downhill course after his failed presidential run. This manuscript will review Greeley’s social and psychiatric history and detail his clinical signs and symptoms that suggest that he likely died of complications of malignant catatonic in the setting of excessive doses of potassium bromide.

Keywords: Catatonia, Malignant Catatonia, Bromide intoxication

Article Text

Introduction

Horace Greeley (1811–1872) was a newspaper editor that personified the phrase ‘the power of the press’. He was the editor of the *New York Tribune* for more than 30 years during which time he widely influenced public opinion concerning American politics. He was an outspoken supporter of the abolition of slavery before the Civil War and was a loud supporter and detractor of Abraham Lincoln’s presidency. After Lincoln’s death Greeley was highly critical of both Presidents Andrew Johnson and Ulysses S. Grant. He ran for president against Grant in 1872 representing the Liberal Republican and Democratic parties. He lost the election by a wide margin and died in a private insane asylum less than 4 weeks later, before the Electoral votes were counted. He remains the only major American presidential candidate to die between the popular election and the final convening of the Electoral College votes. This paper will review Greeley’s life, his run for the presidency and his unusual death. We will also review the psychiatric care and misunderstood condition of malignant catatonia, as well as the use of potassium bromide before Greeley’s death, highlighting its role in the treatment of epilepsy, sleep disorders and psychiatric illness.

Early Life

Horace Greeley was born into a family of poor farmers on Feb 3, 1811, near Amherst, New Hampshire. Both of Greeley’s older siblings died before he was born and he described himself as a “feeble, sickly child often under medical treatment.” His father moved the family to Vermont where Horace worked as a printer apprentice from 1826 to 1830 starting at the age of 15 years old.^{1(p 41-53)} Horace moved to New York City in 1831, at the age of 20, and worked for a variety of newspapers. He met his wife Mary Young Cheney in 1833, in New York City and they married on July 5 1836. After a variety of failures and successes in the newspaper business, Greeley merged two existing publications, *The Log Cabin* and *The New Yorker* to form the *New York Tribune*.²

The New York Tribune

On April 10, 1841, Greeley launched the *New York Tribune* and used it as a platform to express his support for his social views and the political positions of the Whig party and subsequently the Republican party.³ The *Tribune* supported social moral and political reform through the writing of Greeley and some of the era’s greatest thought leaders and writers including; John Hay(1838-1905)⁴, Friedrich Engels(1820-1895)⁵, and Karl Marx(1818-1883)⁶. Greeley used the *Tribune* to advocate for an array of causes including socialism, temperance, vegetarianism, women’s rights and his utopian vision of a better America. The phrase ‘go west young man,’ became the calling of the expansion movement of mid 1800s America and is often attributed to Greeley.⁷

Greeley and the Civil War

The defining cause of Greeley’s journalistic career was the abolition of slavery, and he used the platform of the *New York Tribune* to lead that cause. During the Abraham Lincoln’s first term, Greeley supported the war effort but constantly pushed the President to move more quickly to end slavery. Greeley’s editorial, “The prayer of Twenty Million” in August 1862 argued that the purpose of the war was emancipation.⁸ Lincoln’s position was pragmatic, stating "My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery".⁹ Despite these differences, Greeley remained a critical force in maintaining Northern support for the war. After the assassination of Lincoln, Greeley

disagreed with the policies and approach of President Andrew Johnson and was a vocal supporter for his impeachment.¹⁰

Greeley Presidential Candidate

After Johnson's presidency, Greeley continued to support reconciliation with the southern states and amnesty for the Confederate leaders a position that put him at odds with the Republican party and President Ulysses S. Grant.^{11,12,13} In 1872 Greeley broke with the Republican party and positioned himself to run for the presidency with the newly formed Liberal Republican Party. Greeley's only prior government experience was a brief stint in Congress (1849) where he served for three months after a special election was held to fill an open seat.¹⁴ After Greeley was nominated for the presidency during the Liberal Republicans party Convention that was held in Cincinnati in May of 1872, the Democratic Party immediately endorsed him.¹⁵ Greeley lost the November 5th national election to Grant by a wide margin.¹⁶ In mid-November, before the electoral votes were counted, Greeley was admitted to a private Sanatorium due to 'mental exhaustion'. He could not sleep and did not eat or drink for several days until he died on November 29th, 1872. Since no previous presidential candidate had died before the electoral count there was no precedent to follow in the final determination of the election. Grant received 55.6% of the popular vote and carried 32 of 37 states which guaranteed his victory with 286 electoral votes. The 63 electoral votes assigned to Greeley eventually were split between a variety of Liberal Republican and Democratic politicians.^{17,18} On December 4th, 1872, thousands of mourners lined the streets of New York to watch his funeral procession, which included President Grant, the Vice President, and leaders from both Republican and Democratic parties.¹⁹

Greeley's Mental Health History

Horace Greeley was healthy most of his life. He abstained from drinking alcohol and was largely a vegetarian. He had no known documented illness other than three episodes of mental health breakdown in 1849, 1861, and in 1872 just prior to his death.

1849 Death of his son, "Pickie."

When Greeley was a child, he was chronically sick and under medical care. Given that history and the fact that his older siblings died at a young age, it is likely that his mother was overly protective and doted on him. Margaret Mahler, a pioneer in early childhood development in the early 1900s, described an "anxious attachment style" particularly pertinent to medically ill children who have an exaggerated fear of parental loss and abandonment. Those children become overly attached to the parent, afraid of navigating the world without the parent.²⁰ This may account for Greeley's own description of the "instant and violent attack of illness and unable to watch through a closed window the falling of rain without incurring an instant and violent attack of illness".^{1(p 41-53)} "Having suddenly lost her 2 former children, just before my birth, my mother was led to regard me even more fondly and tenderly than she otherwise might have done. Hence, I was her companion and confidant."^{1(p41-53)} Recurrent illness as a child would have kept Greeley attached to his mother and removed the spectre of having to venture out into the world without her. Although Greeley had some formal education, a large part of his education was through voracious reading and self-study which allowed him some intellectual freedom while remaining at home. Apparently, Greeley was able to "launch" as a late adolescent and move away from home physically, but it is likely that he remained psychologically over-attached to his mother.

Greeley met and married his wife Mary in the early 1830s and given what is known about Mary's personality and relationships to her own children, it's likely that she too had

attachment difficulties that complemented Greeley's.^{1(p188, 426)} In other words, they each satisfied the other's yearning for intense attachment that hearkened back to their respective relationships with their own mothers. The Greeley's married life was marked by the death of several of their children. Of their seven children, only two daughters, Ida and Gabrielle, survived to adulthood. In 1849, the death of their son Arthur, known as "Pickie," at age five was particularly devastating. The death of Pickie significantly effected Horace Greeley as he experienced his own emotional loss and struggled to deal with the impact it had on his wife. Greeley characterized his grief by saying "I no longer covet length of days... I would prefer not to live long"²¹ Given the information we have, we could infer that Pickie's death was the hardest loss for Greeley because he particularly identified with Pickie who was doted on by his wife similar to how he was doted on by his mother.^{1(p188,426)}

1861 Battle of Bull Run.

Greeley had encouraged Union forces to invade Virginia and occupy Richmond very early in the war.²² The first major battle of the war was the First Battle of Bull Run on July 21, 1861 which was a resounding defeat for the Union troops at the hand of the Confederate Army.²³ After this defeat, Greeley left New York City and spent two weeks at his farm in Chappaqua NY trying to recover from the emotional stress he was experiencing. In a letter to Lincoln dated July 29, 1861, Greeley admitted that he had not slept in 7 days. His sleepless grief was caused by thoughts that the loss at Bull Run would convince Lincoln to make peace with the Rebels on their terms. By Aug 17, 1861, Greeley stated that "I have been very ill, and am yet too weak to work, yet am doing so because I must. I scarcely slept at all for a week; now the best I can do is to get two or three hours of uneasy oblivion every night."²⁴ This description may have represented mixed Bipolar episode with both manic and depressive features.

Many years later, Greeley's close friend and colleague, Samuel Sinclair, stated that the stress of the loss at the First Battle at Bull Run made Greeley "severely ill with brain fever...on the verge of insanity", lasting two weeks during which time "Greeley was ill-nourished, delirious and unconscious most of the time".²⁴ In contrast, a homeopathic physician, Edward Bayard, who cared for Greeley during this illness stated that he saw "no evidence of insanity" but instead described Greeley as "laboring under depression of spirits".²⁵ Both Sinclair and Bayard did not recognize these symptoms as Catatonia accompanying a primarily depressed mood. The diagnosis of Catatonia was not described until the 1870's and Malignant Catatonia was elucidated only in the 1930's.²⁶

1872 Presidential Campaign.

Greeley's final battle with his mental health began during the Presidential election of 1872. Greeley had chosen to campaign for himself and did so by traveling through 5 states and giving over 200 speeches, up to 22 each day.²⁷ This was not the norm in the 1870s, presidential candidates did not campaign for themselves in this era. In addition, Greeley had fought against the Democratic party his entire life and now was campaigning alongside his lifetime political enemies.²⁸ Rival newspapers, most notably the New York Herald, challenged his proposed policy of ending reconstruction and made fun of some of his unusual contradictory editorials that had appeared in the Tribune over the years.²⁸ Greeley, known for his ill-fitting clothes, eccentric mannerisms, and round face ringed by a white beard, became an easy target for caricature.(figure 1) The renowned political cartoonist Thomas Nast, in the pages of *Harper's Weekly*, mercilessly depicted Greeley as an incompetent fool, and traitor—often showing him shaking hands with Confederate ghosts or embracing the very Democrats he had long battled.(figure 2 figure 3). In reviewing this history, it would seem that his ability to tolerate the frenzied pace of campaigning through 5 states giving 22

speeches would have been sustained by a manic episode. Furthermore, his contradictory viewpoints and eccentricities would support the idea of having labile moods, labile opinions, and an odd presentation.

By early October while the challenging campaign applied maximal stress on his mental health, Greeley's wife, who had been frail for many months, had a downturn in her health. Earlier in her life she likely suffered from episodes of depression but in the latter half of 1872 her behavior became increasingly erratic, and her physical health declined.^{29,30} Greeley suspended his campaigning in mid-October to return home and care for his wife, but she continued to deteriorate and died on October 30, 6 days before the national election.³¹ Greeley wrote to Sinclair on the day of his wife's death... "I am not dead but wish I were. My house is desolate, my future dark, my heart a stone. I cannot shed tears; they would bring me relief. Shed tears for me, but do not write again till a brighter day, which I fear will never come."³² In the middle of the grief of his wife's death, the election brought a further downturn into depression as Greeley lost the November 5th, 1872, election by a landslide to US Grant. After the election on November 13, Greeley was seen by a friend, Rufus F. Andrews, who stated that the presidential candidate was hardly recognizable, emaciated confused and depressed.³³

On November 14, one of his physicians, Dr Ernest Krackowizer, placed Greeley on potassium bromide to help him sleep and deal with his deepening sadness.³⁴ Potassium bromide was widely used in the 1870s for everything from seizures, sleep disorders depression and psychosis.^{35,36,37,38} The initial symptoms described by Dr Krackowizer included lack of sleep, loss of appetite, and perseveration on the death of his wife. The diagnosis at the time was extreme nervous depression. Dr Krackowizer put Greeley on a half drachm (approximately 2 grams) of bromide, and he slept better for one night, but the remainder of the symptoms worsened. On November 16 Greeley went to his farm where he continued his daily bromide until the doctor saw him again on November 18. His sleep was poor again and his mood despondent. On Nov 19th Dr Krackowizer consulted with Dr D. Tilden Brown of the Bloomingdale Asylum.^{33,34} Both agreed that Greeley would need inpatient psychiatric care. On November 20 Greeley continued to report no sleep exhibiting alternating episodes of mania and catatonia. Dr Tilden Brown's diagnosed Greeley with 'inflammation of the medulla oblongata.' Greeley was admitted to the private sanatorium of Dr George Choate in Pleasantville New York on Thursday November 21.³⁴ At the time of admission, Greeley continued to have episodes of catatonia alternating with severe confusion plus was not drinking, eating or sleeping. Attempts were made to feed Greeley by placing a tube into his stomach, but he often shut his mouth tightly when asked to cooperate with medical attention. When he spoke, Greeley stated repeatedly "when I was born I died and when I died I was born." The rest of his speech, when it occurred, was incoherent.³⁴ During his stay at the Choate House, Greeley became so violent that all the furniture was removed from his room. He narrowly escaped severe burns when he threw a kerosene lamp on the floor setting his room on fire.³³

Another famous doctor, Charles-Edward Brown-Sequard (1817-1894), was brought in to consult on Greeley while he was at the Choate House.³⁹ He presumed that Greeley had swelling at the base of the brain which was causing his symptoms. Brown-Sequard also noted pus in Greeley's right eye and "gangrene" on his right nostril.³⁴ While at Choate House, Greeley was given a mixture of sherry wine which served as a sedative, otherwise no other treatment was offered. Greeley died on at 6pm on November 29, 1872, at the Choate House, not eating or drinking.³⁴

Bromide

Bromide was a common treatment for psychiatric disorders in the latter half of the 19th century. Bromide was first used to treat epilepsy in the 1850s and was the only effective treatment of seizure disorders until the introduction of phenobarbital in the 1920s.^{40,41} In the 1870s Bromide was also an effective treatment for sleep disorders such as insomnia.⁴² Due to its powerful sedating properties, asylum doctors frequently prescribed it for mania, "hysteria," anxiety, agitation and "nervous excitability." Bromide was also a favored treatment of neurasthenia, a common psychiatric diagnosis in this era.⁴³

The clinical use of bromide eventually faded due to side effects termed 'bromism.' Potassium bromide has a very long half-life in the body so moderate doses over a 2-to-3-week period will accumulate leading to severe side effects of the drug.⁴⁴ Unfortunately, some of the side effects of bromide were similar to the symptoms of neurasthenia.⁴⁵ Patients with bromism complained of confusion, slow thinking, flat emotions, slurred speech impaired memory. In patients with "severe mental exhaustion," it was sometimes unclear if their failure to improve with potassium bromide was due to the underlying neurologic disorder or the drug. Some features that highlighted bromism included acneiform eruptions on the trunk and face and a dusky skin discoloration (bromide rash).⁴⁶ Tremor and staggering gait were also a hallmark of severe bromism. Bromide for the treatment of sleep or psychiatric disorders fell from favor in the early 1900s as the recognition of the complications of chronic use became apparent.⁴⁷

What was Greeley's cause of death?

During the final 2 weeks of his life, it is clear that his oral intake diminished markedly. He already looked cachectic on November 13 when he was seen at his home by Rufus Anderws and after that time he stopped eating. Some attempts were made to manage his lack of oral intake by an oral-gastric feeding tube but was very unlikely that Greeley allowed repeat episodes of feeding due to his alternating episodes of catatonia and mania. Greeley had no other known physical disease that would have contributed to his death other than malnutrition and dehydration.

The homeopathic community at the time suggested that Greeley was mistreated by conventional medicine. Dr Russell T. Trall MD (1812-1877), a champion of homeopathic medicine, published an article in 1873 that claimed Greeley was drugged "into a state of stupidity" by the use of bromide.⁴⁸ While it is known that Greeley was taking potassium bromide at the time of his rapid psychological decline, it is unclear if Greeley was suffering from any of the side effects of bromism. The acne and 'gangrene' reported by Dr Brown-Sequard on Greeley's face support the diagnosis of bromism so it is possible that bromide toxicity may have contributed to Greeley's rapid psychiatric decline.

Conclusions

Now, as opposed to then, we understand Greeley's proximal cause of death to have been Malignant Catatonia in the context of untreated Bipolar Disorder and exacerbated by a Bromide toxicity. Using the present day Bush-Francis Catatonia Rating Scale, Greeley met several criteria including: Excitement (extreme, non-purposeful agitation), Mutism (minimal or no responsiveness), Verbigeration (repetition of phrases like a scratched record), negativism (doing the opposite of what's asked), withdrawal (refusal to eat, drink, make eye contact), impulsivity (inappropriate, sudden, inexplicable behaviors like setting a fire), perseveration (repeatedly returning to the same topic), autonomic abnormalities (unstable vital signs). In our current era of modern medicine, we also have laboratory evidence for catatonia with such measures as CPK and WBC elevations. We would be able to do an Ativan

Challenge to confirm a diagnosis of catatonia and quickly treat with electroconvulsive therapy and benzodiazepines that were only developed in the 1940s and 1950s respectively.

In the final analysis, Horace Greely would not have become president in 1872 because he lost the election right before his death. However, had psychiatric care been able to recognize and treat his conditions appropriately, perhaps he would have continued to be an influential figure in American politics, or even campaign again for the presidency. History continues to remind us of the progress made in the fields of psychiatry and medicine and continually pushes our quest for knowledge forward.

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All authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships with other people or organizations that could inappropriately influence or bias their work.

Author Conflict

The authors declare no author conflicts.

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Tables:

None

3 Figures:

See 3 separate files.
