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## Benjamin Harrison

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BENJAMIN HARRISON

GEORGE GEIB

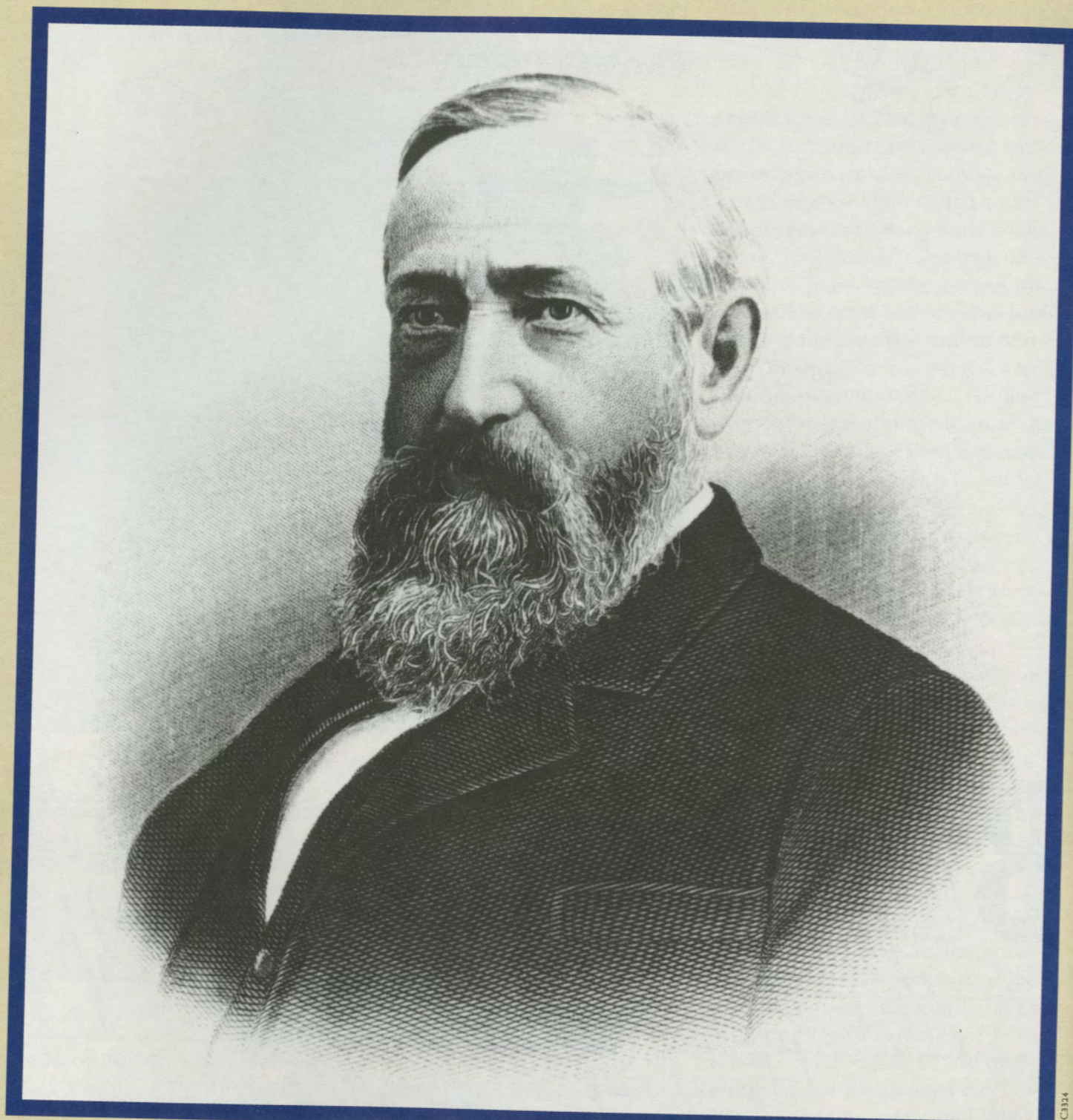


A NOISEMAKER FROM BENJAMIN HARRISON'S REELECTION CAMPAIGN, 1892.

PRESIDENT BENJAMIN HARRISON HOME

**B**enjamin Harrison stood five foot seven, with a stocky frame that grew in girth as the years passed. He wore a beard when it was fashionable and kept it when the fashion changed. He spoke in a high-pitched, sometimes raspy, voice. He commanded attention with his conviction and logic. In an era when Indiana bred presidential and vice presidential aspirations, he was the only Hoosier elected president. He illustrates the challenges and opportunities of national ambition.





BENJAMIN HARRISON, TWENTY-THIRD PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES, 1889-93.

IFHS C3324

There's little question that the decisive event of Harrison's career was the Civil War. Meeting on other political matters with Oliver Morton in 1862, Harrison responded to an urgent plea to help recruit new state regiments and soon found himself colonel of the 70th Indiana. He served with success in the western theater, particularly in William T. Sherman's advance on Atlanta and George H. Thomas's later Nashville campaign. Harrison's courage under fire at Resaca and his growing skill in the management of men under his command won him a brevet brigadier's commission in the war's last year. Scenes from the war years pervaded his oratory for the rest of his life.

The Second Indiana Cavalry was the first full cavalry regiment I ever saw. I saw it marching through Washington Street from



**DURING THE CIVIL WAR, BENJAMIN HARRISON PARTICIPATED IN GENERAL WILLIAM TECUMSEH SHERMAN'S GEORGIA CAMPAIGN. AFTER THE BATTLE OF PEACHTREE CREEK, HARRISON (LEFT) WAS PROMOTED TO BREVET BRIGADIER GENERAL.**

PRESIDENT BENJAMIN HARRISON HOME

risons had been prominent in America for two centuries. The family's founder had created one of Virginia's great plantation dynasties. Benjamin's great-grandfather had signed the Declaration of Independence. The grandfather, Old Tippecanoe, had been elected

president in 1840, and the father had served in Congress. When in 1888 Democrats parodied a popular song to serenade his presidential hopes, they affirmed the power of family connection.

His grandfather's hat is too big for his head,  
But Ben tries it on just the same.  
It fits him too quick, which has oft-times  
been said,  
With regard to his grandfather's fame.

Benjamin Harrison was often touchy on the point and sometimes quick to seek ways to show he could stand on his own two feet. It may help to explain why he left the family seat near North Bend, Ohio, to pursue a career in law in early Indianapolis. Success didn't come easily to the young lawyer, and the drive for it soon fed two vital decisions. It caused him to develop his speaking

*Benjamin Harrison*

the windows of my law office; and as I watched the long line drawing itself through the street, it seemed to me the call for troops might stop; that there were certainly enough men and horses there to put down the rebellion. It is clear I did not rightly measure the capacities of a cavalry regiment, or the dimensions of the rebellion.

Wars create heroes, and Harrison returned in 1865 to a hero's welcome. Even then, however, some critics speculated how much was his own success and how much was owed to the surname he bore. Earlier Har-

**IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE 1888 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN, HARRISON SPOKE TO THOUSANDS OF VISITORS AT HIS INDIANAPOLIS HOME. EVENTUALLY THE CROWDS BECAME SO LARGE THAT THEY COULD NOT FIT ON THE LAWN, AND HARRISON BEGAN SPEAKING IN UNIVERSITY PARK IN DOWNTOWN INDIANAPOLIS.**



PRESIDENT BENJAMIN HARRISON HOME

style, and it encouraged him to enter politics. He became a skilled extemporaneous speaker and a masterful jury pleader in an age when the jury, not the judge, was often the focal point of the law. Courtroom law also directed his early political path. By 1857 he had been elected city attorney of Indianapolis, and in 1860 he won statewide office as reporter of the Indiana Supreme Court.

A Whig family tradition and a repugnance for slavery made him an easy convert to the new Republican party.





JOB SEEKERS BESIEGED HARRISON IN THE FIRST MONTHS OF HIS PRESIDENCY. IN THIS CARTOON, WHICH APPEARED IN PUCK, HARRISON IS PREPARED TO DISH OUT POLITICAL APPOINTMENTS TO A NUMBER OF PROMINENT REPUBLICANS.

The concern and compassion of his speeches regarding the slave and, later, the freedman were hallmarks of his rhetoric.

I remember, as a boy, wandering once through my grandfather's orchard at North Bend, and in pressing through an alder thicket that grew on its margin I saw sitting in its midst a colored man with the frightened look of a fugitive in his eye, and attempting to satisfy his hunger with some walnuts he had gathered. He noticed my approach with a fierce, startled look, to see whether I was likely to betray him; I was frightened myself and left him in some trepidation, but I kept his secret.

Modern interpreters have spent much time and energy applying current techniques of political analysis to the Indiana electorate. We're often told that the voters spoke in codes that masked deeper motives. It is argued that voters reflected the religion each inherited from their regional or ethnic origins. Republicans acted upon the language of personal piety and inner character, while Democrats moved to the rhythms of liturgy and ritual, publicly performed. Harrison, a Presbyterian of unquestioned personal morality and character, becomes easy to place in the GOP.

Contemporaries would have found these current theories overdrawn at best. Indiana Republicans, for example, spent much time bemoaning the difficulties created by religion in politics, particularly over the socially divisive issue of temperance. Central to their concern was the decision of the 1874 Republican state convention to adopt a "bone dry" platform and the subsequent flight of enough beer and whiskey drinkers to doom the Grand Old Party in the next three elections, including the 1876 race for governor.

That race had been especially important to Harrison. He had unsuccessfully sought the gubernatorial nomination four years before and had now been chosen as the standard-bearer. It was bad enough to lose, as his party had done in 1872, to Thomas Hendricks, a man

of national stature, but it was worse still to lose, as Harrison did in 1876, to a colorful character of only local appeal, Blue Jeans Williams, whose penchant for locally made cloth extended even to his campaign dress.

Yet out of defeat had come opportunity. The Republicans adopted an altered and improved party organizational structure, recognizable to us as the modern system of precinct politics, that won in 1880. Harrison emerged with reputation enhanced and positioned himself to capitalize on the 1880 victory with legislative election to a six-year U.S. Senate term. It would put him on the national stage.

Harrison enjoyed confronting adversaries. He did it in the courtroom, in the army, and on the speaker's trail. He did it well, marshaling evidence, argument, and biting humor. Not surprisingly he used his Senate seat to oppose the Democrats, especially after the 1884 election handed him a Democratic president to challenge. Grover Cleveland was so much that Harrison was not: an Easterner, a draft dodger who had hired a substitute in the Civil War, a free trader, and a factional man from another party. Even the loss of Harrison's Senate seat in 1886 failed to blunt the regard he won



A FAMILY SHOWS ITS SUPPORT FOR HARRISON AND RUNNING MATE LEVI P. MORTON OF NEW YORK IN THE 1888 CAMPAIGN.

within his party. By 1888 he was a serious contender to oppose Cleveland.

Harrison's greatest asset was the possibility that he could carry his home state. Indiana was then a happy hunting ground of electoral votes because it was one of the few truly competitive states of the Gilded Age. America was a two-party presidential system built around two large, one-party regions: a solid Democratic South and an almost as solid Republican North. In only a handful of states, such as New York (and adjacent Connecticut and New Jersey) and Indiana, were presidential elections really in doubt. Harrison's 1888 convention supporters put their stress upon his appeal to those doubtful states; his campaign managers put their resources there; and it worked in Indiana and New York. He joined his grandfather as one of the few challengers in American history to unseat an incumbent president. Wartime heroism had been turned into peacetime success.

Presidential selection in America includes that elegant anachronism of the eighteenth century, the electoral college. Harrison won the electoral college despite losing the popular vote (by about 90,000), and the reason is readily apparent: his opposition was engaged in the wide-



## HEROES

spread disfranchisement of black Republican voters in the South. Harrison himself understood this and soon backed legislation—called a “Force Bill” by his critics—to provide federal supervision of future elections. Like many of the initiatives of his presidency, it anticipated a key issue of the coming century.

**H**arrison soon found that it was easier to capture the White House than it was to govern from it. Nowhere were his problems more immediate, or more continuing, than with the federal patronage. Elected five years after the passage of the Pendleton Civil Service Act, which required federal agencies with more than fifty employees to hire on the basis of merit, Harrison clearly felt pressure to appoint the “best” men to office. Defeated for governor of Indiana in 1876, he equally clearly lacked executive experience in dealing with the insistent demands of the party faithful. Always ill at ease with strangers, it had once been quipped that he could give a speech to ten thousand, and each would leave his friend; but if he met each of them individually, all would leave his enemies. Unwilling to delegate the responsibility (except for postmaster appointments), his White House days became an endless succession of interviews. Harried and hurried, he drummed his fingers and shuffled his feet as workers from his 1888 campaign sought their rewards—and he then passed over the recommendations of many party leaders, especially in the doubtful states of New York and Ohio.

His patronage failure has blinded many ever since to a number of other fascinating features of his presidential years. It was his census bureau that proclaimed the end of the frontier line in 1890 and his signature that admitted six new states to the Union. His army experienced

the last Indian battle, at Wounded Knee in 1890, and Harrison used the subsequent inquiries to justify army reforms that prefigured Elihu Root's. Many forget that Harrison signed the Sherman Antitrust Act, appointed Theodore Roosevelt to the Civil Service Commission, and dramatically recast the direction of



REPUBLICANS FREQUENTLY USED HARRISON'S CIVIL WAR EXPERIENCE TO PROMOTE THEIR CANDIDATE.

PRESIDENT BENJAMIN HARRISON HOME

American foreign policy. Through his secretary of the navy, Benjamin F. Tracy, he laid the first keels of the Great White Fleet. With his secretary of state, James G. Blaine, he looked beyond isolationism to create the Pan-American Union. Harrison's dispute with Chile in 1891–92 prefigures the big stick by a decade. The reforms that we associate with the Progressive Era are hard to imagine without the foundations that Harrison laid with little recognition.

Most contemporaries blamed his

falling-out with party over issues of patronage for his defeat in 1892. He was able to defeat the insurgents' choice, Blaine, in the Republican convention. But then the general election rematched him with former president Grover Cleveland, energized and reorganized since 1888. In the final vote, Harrison's plurality declined by a third of a million votes, and the doubtful states of 1888 abandoned him.

Today it's easier to blame the loss on Harrison's style of presidential leadership. The grandson of a Whig president, Harrison held a Whiggish regard for legislative independence, tending to wait upon Congress to send him legislation to review. Harrison's problem was that the Congress he headed was a battleground of regional interests. Older sectional issues were yielding to the problems of a disorderly and rapidly industrializing country. Civil War concerns were being replaced by the populist insurgency, with its bitter debates over monetary policy. Harrison's own favorite issue, the tariff, was often forgotten and never effectively addressed by those in Congress to whom he delegated responsibility. Time and again his hands-off style of leadership brought him flawed legislation, notably on the issue of silver coinage, that left him no choice except a reluctant signature or an unpopular veto. So modern in many of his ideas, Harrison was a traditionalist in political style. A hero to his state, he found that national greatness escaped his grasp.

*George Geib is professor of history at Butler University. He delights in politics and served as contributing editor on politics for the Encyclopedia of Indianapolis. Geib has frequently played the role of General Harrison for both the Columbia Club and the President Benjamin Harrison Home.*