

A March of Triumph?

Benjamin Harrison's Southern Tour and the Limits of Racial and Regional Reconciliation

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On April 17, 1891, Mayor Lucas Clapp of Memphis, Tennessee, stood at a dais to introduce President Benjamin Harrison. The president was in the midst of a nationwide whistlestop tour. He had already spent three days in the South, stopping quickly in a succession of towns to deliver a speech before moving on. Most of the introductions that Harrison received during these speeches were bland boilerplate material. As a result, the words that Clapp uttered were particularly memorable. He lauded his fellow white southerners as “lovers of justice and equal rights,” and asserted “that in dealing with the gravest and most perplexing social and political problem that has ever confronted a community or a people, it is our purpose and our habit to be just and lawabiding.” But Clapp, a southern Democrat, could not resist the urge to make a pas-

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sionate partisan plea at the northern Republican's expense. Speaking on behalf of white Memphians, he noted that there was "a paramount aim and purpose with us to guard our social purity, preserve our civilization and maintain Caucasian prestige and supremacy."¹

Clapp laid down the gauntlet; a Southern politician had frankly addressed the color line as a matter of formal inequality. In his remarks, however, Harrison neither admonished the southern mayor nor directly addressed the topic of white supremacy. Instead, he introduced a theme that he would consistently pursue throughout his tour: the supremacy of the law. Harrison claimed that "[t]his government of ours is a compact of the people to be governed by a majority, expressing itself by lawful methods." Continuing in this vein, he asserted that Americans "must all come at last to this conclusion, that the supremacy of the law is the one supremacy in this country of ours." The president's comments were greeted with a roar from the crowd.²

It is hard to determine what in particular the audience found so compelling about Harrison's response. Did they welcome a statement of aggressive intervention from a northern president? Did they endorse his love of law? Or did they merely appreciate the verbal exchange that had taken place? The meanings of Harrison's statement become clearer when placed in the context of the journey that he had undertaken. Harrison would face similar encounters throughout his national sojourn, though none as direct as his confrontation with Mayor Clapp. The entire scene speaks to the precarious relationship between race, region, and Republicanism in 1891 that lies at the heart of this article.³

The second major tour through southern states by a Republican president since the Civil War, Harrison's journey was important for three major reasons. First, the tour signified a new political tack for the president and the Republican Party as they looked ahead to the election of 1892. Having advocated in 1890 measures widely perceived as hostile to white southerners, Harrison now applied a more conciliatory approach. The Republican Party was ready to court southern voters by addressing themes

¹*Memphis Appeal-Avalanche*, "The Nation's Head," April 18, 1891, p. 1.

²John S. Shriver, comp., *Through the South and West With the President, April 14- May 15, 1891* (New York, 1891), 23-24.

³The three most relevant books on the intersection of these topics in Benjamin Harrison's era are Vincent P. DeSantis, *Republicans Face the Southern Question: The New Departure Years, 1877-1897* (Baltimore, Md., 1959); Stanley P. Hirshson, *Farewell to the Bloody Shirt: Northern Republicans and the Negro Question, 1877-1893* (1962; Chicago, 1968); and Rayford W. Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro: From Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (1954; New York, 1965).

that would appeal to both northern and southern whites and by dealing with racial issues in national terms. Second, the tour demonstrated the limitations of that approach, in particular the party's evasiveness on issues of racial justice. Throughout his southern swing, Harrison used oblique attacks, including appeals to the law, and he and his party paid the price for that strategy. Finally, the journey highlighted the ways in which white southerners, blacks, and the Republican Party continued to contest the legacy of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Although the long-term implications of the president's journey were not evident to many of his contemporaries, with hindsight it is clear that Harrison and the Republicans sacrificed the basic interests of black Americans.

Harrison's trip in the spring of 1891 was fraught with potential difficulties. The tour was the first nationwide trip undertaken by a president. As a result, it proved to be an organizational nightmare. Harrison and his aides analyzed train schedules, consulted local delegations, and extended political favors. Where would the president go, what places would he avoid, and what would he say? George Washington had established the precedent for presidential travel by visiting all of the states, but the growth of the railroad made travel in the now vastly expanded nation more practical and more comfortable. In 1880 Rutherford Hayes had become the first president to visit the west coast, but no one before Harrison had attempted an intensive speaking tour throughout the country. The political significance of a nationwide tour cannot be overemphasized. When Harrison argued about the importance of adhering to the Constitution, or raised specific policy issues such as tariffs, he was appealing not to any particular region but to the entire country. In addition, Harrison became the first president to visit Arkansas, Texas, and a number of western states. Residents of western cities and towns could know that in welcoming their president they paid honor not only to their country but also to their community and its place within the nation.

The trip was not all pomp and parades. In an era before public opinion polling, travel was an ideal way for presidents to gauge reaction to their existing policies and send up trial balloons for new initiatives. Harrison's 1891 trip solidified a Republican tradition, begun by Hayes, in which the party's president used a journey through the South as an opportunity for announcing new political priorities.⁴

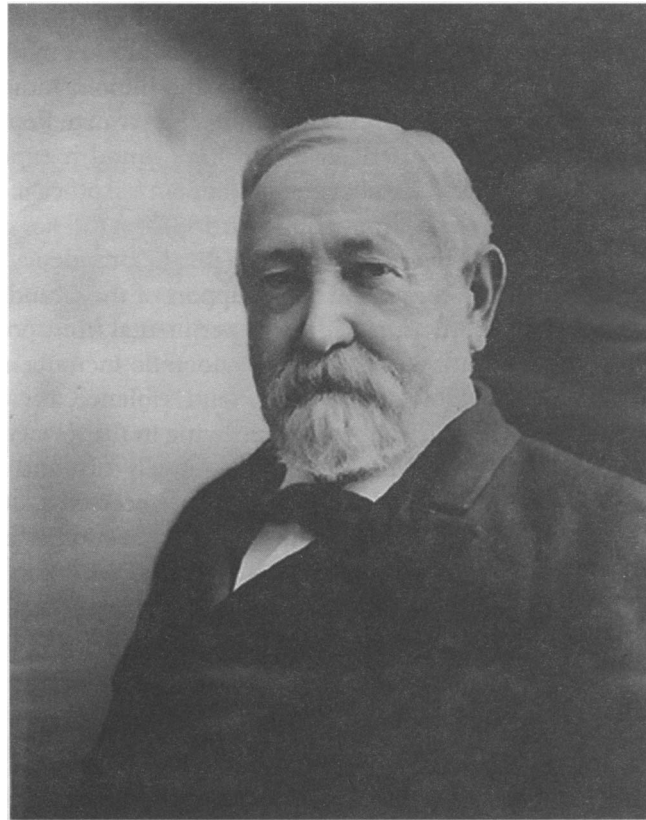
⁴For more on the emergence of Republican presidential tours during the Gilded Age, see Edward Frantz, "Goin' Dixie: Republican Presidential Tours of the South, 1877–1933," Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2002.

With an ambitious scale and an important political message, Harrison carefully scheduled his southern destinations. Commencing on April 14, he gave major speeches in Knoxville, Chattanooga, Atlanta, Birmingham, Memphis, Little Rock, Houston, Galveston, San Antonio, and El Paso—all within one week. Such a pace meant that local citizens had a limited opportunity to meet and speak with the president. It also meant that Harrison gleaned little about these locations, because at times he did nothing more than stop in the train depot to speak and shake hands. Southern cities preferred a quick presidential visit over none at all, but many local leaders lamented the fact that the Hoosier never remained in one location for more than twenty-four hours. Some places missed the president entirely. The *New Orleans Daily Picayune* decried the president's absence: "It is to be greatly regretted . . . that New Orleans, the largest and most representative city in the South, should not have been visited."⁵ In neighboring Mississippi, Harrison chose a characteristic flanking movement, passing through towns but giving no speeches. The Magnolia State had recently disfranchised its African American population, and it remained in many ways the taproot of southern racism. It would be the only state that Harrison visited during his long journey in which he did not deliver a speech. Like his other maneuvers with respect to racial politics, this decision reaped some short-term benefits but yielded long-term problems.

Short, paunch-bellied, with the requisite bearded visage of his era, Benjamin Harrison was as stubborn as a mule. Described even by allies as prickly, he was a loner who did not communicate well. Like so many of his generation, Harrison's public career started after his service in the Civil War. When he volunteered in the summer of 1862, Harrison was commissioned as a lieutenant of the 70th Indiana Regiment. Among their many campaigns, the regiment took part in General William T. Sherman's 1864 March to the Sea. Harrison's career was distinguished by competence, if not brilliance; by the conclusion of the war he had been brevetted a brigadier general.

Upon war's end, Harrison went back to his law practice in Indianapolis, made an unsuccessful run at the governorship in 1876, and served

⁵*New Orleans Daily Picayune*, editorial, "The President's Trip," April 19, 1891, Benjamin Harrison Papers, Library of Congress microfilm edition (Washington D.C., 1960), Scrapbook volume 10, p. 146, series 16, reel 146. All subsequent references to the Harrison Papers will be noted as BH Papers.



Benjamin Harrison in 1891.
Courtesy Indiana Historical Society

a single term in the United States Senate, between 1881 and 1887. Although biographer Harry Sievers identifies Harrison with the radical faction of Republicans, he did not hold elective office during Reconstruction. He had been, however, a mild advocate for African American rights and spoke up occasionally about racial injustice in the South.⁶ His writings during the war do not dwell on the issues of slavery or freedom, nor do they often reflect on black people. His association with his extended

⁶Harry J. Sievers, *Benjamin Harrison, Hoosier President: The White House and After* (Indianapolis, 1968), 149–53.

family, many of whom hailed from Virginia, no doubt exerted some influence on these attitudes, as did his political maturation in the closely divided state of Indiana. Even more than Ohio and Illinois, Indiana had a strong faction of pro-southern Democrats and conservative Republicans. The naturally conservative Harrison would have found it expedient to play down divisive racial issues when he sought political office in his state. Harrison briefly stepped away from politics in 1887 but did not have long to wait before he became his party's nominee for the presidency.⁷

In 1888, boosted by the enthusiastic support of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) and the appeal of an experimental front-porch campaign, Harrison eked out a victory over Democratic incumbent Grover Cleveland despite losing the popular vote. Fraud, violence, and intimidation had prevented many African Americans living in the former Confederate states from voting. Had those votes been freely cast and counted, Republicans claimed, their candidate would have received a substantial majority. Despite conditions in the South, the 1888 election also ushered Republican majorities into both houses of Congress. With a majority of seven in the Senate and twelve in the House, Republicans had a firmer grip on both the executive and legislative branches than at any time since 1875. They seemed well-positioned to enact any domestic policies they wanted to pursue, including measures that would prevent the southern voter fraud and violence that they had decried.

The political context is critical for understanding Harrison's actions as president, but so, too, are his personal traits and convictions. Journalist Henry Stoddard assessed the president as "[e]arrest, thorough and prudent, he lived up to the great responsibilities of his office; he gave a conservative, constructive administration."⁸ He was not as powerless as his contemporaries depicted him, however. Numerous representations of a tiny Harrison beneath a gigantic top hat perpetuated the notion that he was a political pygmy.⁹ Like many men of his generation, Harrison vener-

⁷The most colorful aspect of Harrison's campaign was that Lew Wallace, author of *Ben Hur*, wrote the official campaign biography and did his best to portray Harrison in similar heroic terms. For a description of their association, see Harry J. Sievers, *Benjamin Harrison, Hoosier Statesman: From the Civil War to the White House, 1865–1888* (New York, 1959), 368–71.

⁸Henry L. Stoddard, *As I Knew Them: Presidents and Politics from Grant to Coolidge* (New York, 1927), 164.

⁹Republicans had used the slogan "Grandfather's Hat Fits Ben" in the 1888 election, and so critics used the image of the short Benjamin Harrison in an oversized top-hat belonging to William Henry Harrison. For more on the *Puck* cartoons of the era, see Richard West, *Satire on Stone: The Political Cartoons of Joseph Keppler* (Urbana, Ill., 1988).



Puck cartoon, 1890, by Frederick Opper. Political cartoonists produced several variations on this disparaging image of Harrison, almost buried by his grandfather's legacy.

Courtesy President Benjamin Harrison Research Library

ated the law and believed passionately in its supremacy. When, as president, he learned of violations of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, he was as likely to lament the flouting of law in the abstract as he was to decry the human impact of such racial injustice. Harrison's extreme reserve makes it even harder to see where he stood on racial issues. He often wrote and spoke of civil rights abuses in abstract terms as violations of the law, thereby robbing his statements of most of their power but

also shielding him from the vociferous criticism of his southern Democratic opponents. In his inaugural address, for instance, Harrison condemned the “evil example of permitting individuals, corporations, or communities to nullify the laws because they cross some selfish or local interest or prejudices.”¹⁰ Sievers concludes that on the issue of race, Harrison, “although no torch-bearer like [his first assistant postmaster and Republican campaign specialist James] Clarkson, at least would not abandon the Negro.”¹¹

Harrison’s racial attitudes and actions were especially important because racial violence—a persistent problem throughout the post-Civil War South—reached new levels of frequency and intensity during his presidency. The precipitous rise in lynching during the Harrison administration was a brutal reality for African Americans. A reign of terror, the likes of which had not been seen since Reconstruction, swept through the southern states in particular. In 1891, 127 African Americans were lynched.¹² For black Americans supremacy of the law and enforcement of the Constitution were not matters of abstract theory but daily issues of survival. The Republican president and congressmen were aware of the plight of black voters and black citizens in general, but all too often they failed to act decisively. Harrison’s 1891 southern swing was therefore vital to African Americans’ interests, because every action and every utterance would be filtered through the prism of southern race relations. Would Harrison support the rights of black citizens and rebuke white southerners for violence and fraud?

Race relations constituted one key issue for post-Civil War presi-

¹⁰James Richardson, ed., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789–1897* (10 vols., New York, 1897), vol. 9, 5444.

¹¹Sievers, *Benjamin Harrison, Hoosier President*, 82.

¹²For more on lynching and the South see W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (Urbana, Ill., 1993). The figure used here is taken from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889–1918* (1919; New York, 1969), 29. According to the organization’s records, the number of southern blacks lynched during 1891 broke down by state as follows (*ibid.*, pp. 43–101): Alabama: 15; Arkansas: 9; Florida: 8; Georgia: 8; Louisiana: 12; Mississippi: 20; North Carolina: 2; South Carolina: 1; Tennessee: 13; Texas: 10; Virginia: 2. The total number of recorded lynchings of blacks in the southern states in 1891 was 100; in contrast, during the same year in the 8 eastern and midwestern states and territories where any lynchings of blacks were recorded (Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and West Virginia) the total number was 13.

dents; another was the related issue of southern politics. The removal of the last federal troops from the South in the spring of 1877 brought to a close the tumultuous Reconstruction years. Thereafter, Republicans in particular were anxious to assert new policies meant to increase the party's popularity. Yet the political landscape pointed the Republicans in two separate directions. On the one hand, the party had been formed to stop the expansion of slavery, and had increasingly committed itself during the war and Reconstruction years toward racial justice, most notably in its advocacy of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. One alternative for Benjamin Harrison and his fellow Republicans as they took power in 1889 would have been to reassert the legacy of their martyred hero, Abraham Lincoln, and openly and vigorously pursue greater justice for black Americans.¹³

On the other hand, the Republicans were deeply conscious that twenty-four years after Appomattox, they were still a sectional party. With few exceptions, they had not found reliable ways to develop a significant southern following. Southern racial politics developed into a zero-sum game: what would benefit one race would hinder the other. Because the Reconstruction experiment had come to a close, many Republican leaders believed the wisest policy that the party could pursue was one of moderation and tolerance toward white southerners. By 1891, Harrison had developed a third strategy for dealing with the South, demonstrating his uncertainty about the best direction in which to lead the party. A closer look at all three strategies will help to establish the context of Clapp and Harrison's oratorical confrontation.

Upon taking office, Harrison initially encouraged the formation of southern state-level organizations united around the issue of a high tariff. The groups would be known by a variety of names but would not be labeled explicitly as Republican. African Americans were barred from participation in this political network; indeed, that was a large portion of the rationale behind the attempt. There were, Harrison and other Republicans believed, many white southerners economically sympathetic to their

¹³For more on the increasing displays of sectional reconciliation, see Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865 to 1913* (New York, 1987); Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865–1900* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1993); David W. Blight, “‘For Something Beyond the Battlefield’: Frederick Douglass and the Struggle for the Memory of the Civil War,” *Journal of American History*, 75 (March 1989), 1156–78; and Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001).

party who could not bring themselves to support a group allied with African Americans. In theory this might have been true, but the strategy ignored the political realities of the post-Reconstruction South. As a result, leading Republicans abandoned the idea after electoral losses in 1889, and concluded, in the words of historian Stanley Hirshson, that “the Bourbons [conservative Southerners] were not to be trusted and that only federal regulation of elections could solve the sectional problem.”¹⁴

The year 1890 marked a turning point for the Harrison administration and for the country. At the president's urging, the party adopted a second strategy toward the South, sponsoring two major bills which returned directly to the fundamental question of racial justice. One bill, sponsored by New Hampshire Senator Henry W. Blair, concerned federal funding for education, which would have affected southern states in particular. If the Blair bill was controversial, the Federal Elections Bill inspired outrage among white southerners.¹⁵ Derisively labeled the “Force Bill” by its opponents almost immediately after its introduction by Massachusetts congressman Henry Cabot Lodge, the bill sought to renew the spirit of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments of the Constitution by guaranteeing federal oversight of federal elections. It proposed to send federal supervisors to cities with a population of more than 20,000, to any congressional district upon the request of 100 voters, and to counties or parishes upon the application of 50 voters.¹⁶ While Lodge's bill applied to the whole country, most people read the measure as being directed squarely at the South. After heated debate, the bill passed the House on a party-line vote (with only two Republicans breaking ranks), 155–149. In the Senate, after concerted backroom dealing, Lodge's bill failed even to come up for debate during the first session and thereafter was put on the back burner and filibustered to death.¹⁷ By the time the Federal Elections Bill died,

¹⁴Hirshson, *Farewell to the Bloody Shirt*, 205. For a more in-depth discussion of the tariff plan, see pp. 174–89.

¹⁵For more on the Blair bill, see *ibid.*, 192–200. The bill would have affected southern states in particular because it tied funding rates to illiteracy rates, which were highest throughout the South. Hirshson stresses that in 1890, unlike previous years, the bill met considerable opposition in the North, even among Republicans. Historian Rayford Logan, on the other hand, points out that although Republicans failed to carry the bill, opposition among Democrats, particularly southerners, was more important. See Logan, *Betrayal of the Negro*, 66–70. The most in-depth study of both the Lodge and Blair Bills is Daniel Wallace Crofts, “The Blair Bill and the Elections Bill: the Congressional Aftermath to Reconstruction,” Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1968.

¹⁶Hirshson, *Farewell to the Bloody Shirt*, 204.

¹⁷Logan contains a particularly strong discussion of the Lodge Bill; see *Betrayal of the Negro*, 63–87.

1890 had turned to 1891, and Republicans, who held the presidency and both houses of Congress, had reintroduced divisive racial and sectional issues into the national discussion without translating their efforts into any legislation.

The chief result of all this Republican politicking was that the party now received all of the criticism and ire of southern Democrats, who used the opportunity to whip up racist fears to levels unseen in years. On the state level, southern Democrats were even able to translate their sentiment into political action, most noticeably in Mississippi. Although efforts had begun even before the proposed Lodge Bill, white demagogues used the specter of an all-intrusive, Republican-controlled federal government controlled by Republicans to ratify a state constitution that effectively disfranchised almost all African Americans, chiefly through poll taxes and literacy tests.¹⁸ It soon became apparent that neither Congress nor the president could—or would—make a decisive response.

Northerners were well aware of the bitter debate triggered by the Lodge and Blair bills, but many were distracted by another political development throughout parts of the Great Plains and the South. Whereas the Lodge Bill threatened to reintroduce sectionalism into American politics, the growing popularity of the Farmers' Alliance threatened the premise of the two-party system. The demands that grew out of the group's meeting in Ocala, Florida, in December 1890 have stood ever since as a landmark declaration of dissatisfaction with the political status quo. Endorsing the free coinage of silver, the direct election of senators, and a subtreasury system for grain distribution, storage, and credit, the Ocala platform followed on the heels of an election in which Alliance candidates won governorships in four states of the former Confederacy.¹⁹ Harrison watched these

¹⁸Mississippi became the model on which other Southern states rewrote their constitutions between 1890 and 1910. For an excellent discussion of this trend see C. Vann Woodward, "The Mississippi Plan as the American Way," in *Origins of the New South, 1877–1913* (1951; Baton Rouge, La., 1997), 321–49. The best and most exhaustive recent work on disfranchisement is Michael Perman, *Struggle for Mastery: Disfranchisement in the South, 1888–1908* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2001); see also J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880–1910* (New Haven, Conn., 1974). While not discounting the importance of racism, Kousser believes partisanship was the decisive motivation for white southerners to disfranchise voters.

¹⁹The states were Georgia, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas. For more on the Populists and their Alliance predecessors, see Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York, 1978); John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (1931; Lincoln, Neb., 1961); Robert C. McMath, Jr., *American Populism: A Social History, 1877–1898* (New York, 1993); and McMath, *Populist Vanguard: A History of the Southern Farmers' Alliance* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1975).

developments with great concern and predicted that “if the Alliance can hold full one half of our Republican voters in such states as Kansas and Neb. our future is not cheerful.”²⁰ One of the purposes for the 1891 trip was to strengthen the ties between Republicans and local communities in an effort to check the Alliance’s strength.

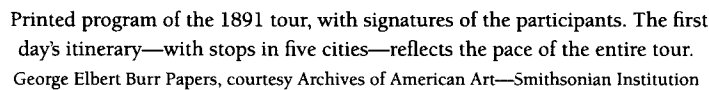
By the beginning of 1891 the Republican president and congress had made their last effort to enforce the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments via new federal laws, and their failure resulted in anemic morale. In contrast, many southerners hailed the rise of the Farmer’s Alliance as the dawn of a political revolution. In Mississippi, whites rejoiced in their ability to disfranchise African Americans by law. The election of 1890 energized Alliance members and white southern Democrats alike, all at the expense of Harrison’s Republican Party. The Republicans suffered disastrous losses that overturned their majority in the House; the new political landscape meant that Harrison would be working from a position of weakness, rather than the strength he had enjoyed during his first two years in office. As the president plotted new paths, his national tour in April and May of 1891 became an important platform for giving voice to new strategies, especially his southern policy and his proposals for ameliorating racial animosity.²¹

Harrison did not make the journey alone. A small contingent, including his wife, both of his adult children, his daughter-in-law, and a niece, accompanied him. The remaining members of the official party were all men: Postmaster General John Wanamaker, Secretary of Agriculture Jeremiah Rusk, and Marshal of the District of Columbia Dan Ransdell, the last of whom served under Harrison in the Civil War. In addition to the official party, a stenographer, the heads of the various railroads, and three newspaper reporters traveled with the president.²²

²⁰Benjamin Harrison to Howard Cale, November 17, 1890, in BH Papers, series 1, reel 29.

²¹In 1888, Republicans had controlled the House 173–156, and the Senate 47–37. After the 1890 election, the numbers dropped precipitously. Democrats controlled the House 231–88, but the Republicans held on to control in the Senate. Within the South, Republican House membership dropped from 13 in 1888 to just 4 in 1890.

²²For a list of those who traveled with Harrison, see Shriver, *Through the South and West*, xvi. A substantial portion of the Harrison clan lived in the White House, including their grown daughter Mary McKee and her children, their son Russell’s wife and one child, a niece, and the president’s father-in-law; see Sievers, *Benjamin Harrison, Hoosier President*, 52–57.



Harrison carefully planned the stops on the tour. At times addressing audiences in as many as seven places in a single day, he set a rapid pace. He thought carefully about how his speeches would be covered, but above all, he was concerned with the content of the speeches and how they fit into his political agenda. While he varied the details, Harrison concentrated on three common themes in his speaking: the benefits of economic diversification for all classes, in all locations; the contrast between the sectionalism of the Civil War and the reunion of the present; and, most important, the supremacy of the law. Such divergent appeals, similar to those he had made to southern groups in the first years of his presidency, had the potential benefit of reaching a broad spectrum of people and the potential drawback of repelling as many listeners as they attracted. The people who were galvanized by an emphasis on sectional reconciliation might be repulsed by the message of enforcing the Constitution, and it was uncertain which groups would find the economic diversification message most appealing.

At first glance, Harrison's themes seemed likely to yield bland newspaper copy. The economic implications, however, were important and wide-ranging. The Republican Party had regularly sought high protective tariffs in order to encourage the development of American industry. The South, however, was still primarily agricultural, with cotton dominating the region's way of life. As a result, the Democrats who represented southern states traditionally advocated not higher tariffs, which would make manufactured goods more expensive, but rather new markets for their agricultural surpluses. Since the mid-1880s, however, advocates of the so-called New South, who aspired to the coexistence of agriculture and industry, had become increasingly vocal, and Harrison sought to translate what seemed to be a changing economic landscape into political gain. An alliance between northern and southern capital might be a boon for the Republican Party. The cities that he visited during his southern swing were thought to be particularly fertile ground for the message, especially Atlanta, home to the recently deceased promoter of the New South, *Atlanta Constitution* editor Henry Grady.²³

It was particularly fitting, therefore, for Harrison to appeal to an Atlanta audience on the basis of shared economic interest. In an April 16 speech in the city, Harrison claimed that emancipation had "opened up to diversified industries these States that were otherwise exclusively agricultural, and made it possible for you, not only to raise cotton, but to spin and weave it."²⁴ Georgia was no longer a one-crop state, Harrison maintained, and thus it was more prosperous than it had been during slavery.

Harrison devoted the longest speech of his tour almost entirely to the subject of foreign markets and tariffs. Speaking in Galveston, Texas, on April 18, Harrison addressed what he thought would be issues of paramount concern to residents of the port city. First touching on the efforts he had made to improve funding for the navigation of the Mississippi River, Harrison then turned to trade. He appealed to his audience to consider whether they wanted the United States or European countries to control trade to the "sister republics that lie south of us." He urged an economic interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine when he contended that the trade was "naturally in large measure ours—ours by neighborhood,

²³For more on the New South, see Paul M. Gaston, *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking* (New York, 1970); Woodward, *Origins of the New South*; and Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York, 1992).

²⁴Shriver, *Through the South and West*, 15.

ours by nearness of access, ours by that sympathy that binds a hemisphere without a king."²⁵

The president closed his speech by clarifying the benefits of a more robust trade and a diversified economy for the South and by sharing his hope for economic growth in all parts of the country. "The vision I have," he stated, "all the thoughts I have, of this matter, embrace all the States and all my countrymen. I do not think of it as a question of party; I think of it as a great American question."²⁶ Harrison's call for a national interest superior to sectional matters was rhetorically effective. He curtailed his discussions of slavery and the past and spoke about the potential for the future. The speech was truly national in its outlook. Harrison could have given it in New Orleans or New York and received a similar response. By not pandering to the particulars of southern interests, Harrison demonstrated that he thought of the region not in contrast to, but as part of, the rest of the country.

Harrison used the Civil War as another way of trying to establish a bond with his southern listeners. The audience might have been hard pressed to believe that this small man with the rotund belly had once served in the Union Army, but Harrison made sure to discuss his own experiences and to include references to his Confederate counterparts. The president used this tactic most explicitly at Chattanooga and Atlanta on April 15 and 16, because he had fought in the vicinity of both cities in 1864.

In Tennessee, Harrison started his address by commenting that the last time he had seen Chattanooga, "[i]ts only industries were military, its stores were munitions of war, its pleasant hill-tops were torn with rifle pits, its civic population the attendants of an army campaign." He contrasted these images of war with images of peace, noting that in the place of guns were homes, in the place of armies, happy children. There had been "two conquests—one with arms, the other with the gentle influences of peace—and the last," the president hastened to add, "is greater than the first." What had been a region divided by economic and political systems was now "not only in contemplation of the law, but in heart and sympathy, one people."²⁷ Harrison found the war a useful metaphor for discuss-

²⁵Ibid., 30.

²⁶Ibid., 33.

²⁷Ibid., 11–12.

ing economic, political, and social development in the last quarter of the century. He did not touch upon any of the causes of the war, nor on which side was right, but rather on the benefits of a unified country. In this respect, he favored the theme of reconciliation, increasingly common among whites of both the North and South, instead of a more radical emancipationist memory of the war.²⁸

In Atlanta, Harrison once again opened with an allusion to the far different circumstances that had prevailed in the city at the time of his last visit. The president could have drawn more direct contrasts between past devastation and present prosperity, but perhaps sensing that such rhetoric would stir up too many negative reactions, he refrained from doing so. He did, however, make a direct appeal to southern veterans: "We can all say with the Confederate soldier who carried a gun for what seemed to him to be right," Harrison proclaimed, "that 'the Lord knew better than any of us what was best for the country and for the world.'"²⁹

Audiences might have expected Harrison to emphasize his Civil War service, but the fact that he referred to the war and its veterans only three times during his days in the South suggests that the president thought the war was of decreasing relevance to the politics of the 1890s.³⁰ Indeed, his Galveston speech, in which he made no allusions to the Confederacy, was more characteristic of Harrison's southern addresses than his speech at Atlanta.³¹ The president's neglect of sectional and racial issues did not bode well for African Americans, who had been so important to the entire Republican legislative agenda in 1890, but who now were absent from the party's discourse. Bringing economic issues to the forefront did not automatically negate African American interests, but Harrison never explained how people of color fit into his economic vision. On the contrary, Harrison's silences suggest that he realized that the Lodge Bill's defeat signaled the end of any serious national-level political discussion of African American rights.

²⁸For more on the emancipationist vision and its declining prominence in the 1890s, see Blight, *Race and Reunion*.

²⁹Shriver, *Through the South and West*, 15.

³⁰The third reference occurred in El Paso, Texas, during his last speech in a former slave state. Harrison referred to the number of GAR members present in the audience, and commented that it was one of the few wars that "brought blessings to the 'victors and vanquished'"; *ibid.*, 40.

³¹Part of Harrison's restraint in addressing war issues can be explained by the fact that many of the leaders of the war and the era were dying. During his administration, and particularly the years following the southern tour, the list included Jefferson Davis, William T. Sherman, Admiral

The most explosive and the most important theme that the president touched upon while traveling through the South was the supremacy of the law. Harrison never described what he thought such supremacy should look like. His appeals were strongest when coupled with a corollary of equality before the law, as they had been in Atlanta. When he paired supremacy of the law with a discussion of majority rule, however, Harrison's argument was much less impressive to African Americans and their allies. Majority rule could be interpreted in a number of ways, some of which were extremely pernicious when viewed in the context of the racial situation of the time. Harrison might have meant one thing when he said majority rule, and members of his audience may have heard something entirely different.

The first instance in which Harrison touched on the theme at any length was in Knoxville, at the end of the first day of his journey. Harrison claimed that law was the bedrock of American society and was based on the fact "that a majority of our people, taking those methods which are prescribed by the Constitution and law, shall determine our public policies and choose our rulers." It was not clear, however, whether Harrison was referring to national, state, or local government. He further obfuscated the matter when he added, "we may safely divide upon the question as to what shall be the law; but when the law is once enacted no community can safely divide on the question of implicit obedience to the law."³² By introducing the concept of community, Harrison seemed to imply that supremacy of the law was centered at the local level. If so, then his pleas for communities to unite behind enacted laws almost constituted an open endorsement of Jim Crow segregation. Given Harrison's other comments on this issue, it is more likely that he was referring to federal laws and making veiled reference to the importance of observing the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. But by not making his appeal explicit, the president left himself open to interpretation by the white natives of Knoxville, who held the overwhelming numerical majority and the political power in their city and clearly believed that they did not need Harrison to validate their leadership.³³

David Porter, Rutherford B. Hayes, and James G. Blaine. Homer E. Socolofsky and Allan B. Spetter, *The Presidency of Benjamin Harrison* (Lawrence, Kan., 1987), 185–86.

³²Shriver, *Through the South and West*, 11.

³³1890 census figures show the overall population of Knoxville was 22,535: 16,106 whites, and 6,423 blacks. The remaining residents were Chinese (2) and "civilized" Indian (4).

On April 16, in Tallapoosa, Georgia, Harrison slightly revised his speech so that his appeals were more explicit. He directly included the Constitution in his remarks and tried to focus his discussion on elections. In this way he left his speech less open to interpretation than he had in Knoxville, but he once again inserted the problematic word “majority” into his text. So, although he was alluding to the Constitution when he stated that “every man shall exercise freely the right that the suffrage law confides to him, and that the majority, if it has expressed its will, shall conclude the issue for us all,” Harrison again occluded the issue.³⁴ In a southern county that was ninety-percent white, listeners would have focused on the term “majority” in Harrison’s speech, rather than the “every man” element. Harrison wanted to imply that the Republicans, as the majority party on the national level, should have been able to pass the Lodge Bill without the objections of Democrats. The president probably thought that he was performing a delicate balancing act, in which he praised white southerners for some things while rebuking them for others. Such abstract and indirect rebukes, however, had far less impact than Harrison intended.

Again and again, the old soldier showed his fondness for the flanking movement over the frontal assault. At most, he focused on constitutional issues for a sentence or two in any particular southern location. Because he usually counterbalanced the issue of law with that of the easing of sectional tension between the white North and South, Harrison’s pleas were effective rhetorical parallels at best. In the minds of the white members of his audience, they were, more than likely, disregarded details. At times, Harrison could sound a clarion call to justice, as he did in Atlanta when he urged: “while exacting all our rights let us bravely and generously give every other man his equal rights before the law.”³⁵ Or, he could make explicit appeals as he did in Little Rock: “[t]he commonwealth rests upon the free suffrage of its citizens and their devotion to the Constitution.”³⁶ Even in these cases, however, justice and law were similes through which Harrison discussed racial interaction in the South. Law became the code word for race. By putting complex issues in such abstract legal terms, Harrison sheltered himself from white southern abuse, but also limited the effect of his words on local and national audiences.

³⁴Shriver, *Through the South and West*, 16.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 15.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 25.



El Paso, Texas, like many other cities, welcomed Harrison with a parade.
 The photograph is by George Elbert Burr, official photographer for the tour.
 George Elbert Burr Papers, courtesy Archives of American Art—Smithsonian Institution

By April 21, 1891, Harrison had left El Paso, Texas, behind and was heading toward the New Mexico and Arizona Territories. As southerners contemplated his visit, newspaper editors began dissecting accounts of the various speeches, banquets, and parades that had taken place. They wondered if the conciliatory posture that he had adopted would persist, or if the president would embrace yet another political position as he contemplated 1892 and a possible run at reelection.

Early on, papers such as the *Atlanta Constitution* emphasized the warmth and enthusiasm with which the president had been greeted. This kind of reception was important, the editors believed, because it illustrated to Harrison that the old antagonisms of the Civil War had died off. According to one Atlanta editorial, as soon as he crossed into the South, Harrison “found himself surrounded by loyal Americans, and his environment has been so thoroughly national that he has forgotten that he is in a strange section.”³⁷ Such remarks were commonplace, as communities

³⁷*Atlanta Constitution*, editorial, “Mr. Harrison in the South,” April 20, 1891, in BH Papers, Scrapbook volume 10, p. 155, series 16, reel 146.

attempted to demonstrate their good will toward the president. But at the same time, many southern papers reminded Harrison that their hospitality was conditional. Were he to reintroduce the Republican-sponsored Elections Bill, he would get the proverbial cold shoulder. Thus, the same editorial reminded Harrison: "When the president reflects upon the logical consequences of the views which he has so freely expressed during his stay in the south, he will see that he cannot consistently advocate or endorse any policy that revives the old war issues, divides the sections, and oppresses half the republic in the interests of partisanry in the other half."³⁸

Other newspaper editors refused to give Harrison even a modicum of credit. The seeming spontaneity and enthusiasm of the crowds that greeted him throughout the southern tour were questionable, according to the *Charleston News and Courier*: "The receptions that have been and will be extended to the President in the South are purely matters of politeness. They are entirely lacking in sincerity on both sides." The same editorial made it abundantly clear that the racial issues raised by the Elections Bill were still fresh: "If he be impressed by the fitting glimpses that he shall get of the Southern people and return to Washington with the impression that the South is not yet sufficiently subdued to accept the Force bill and negro rule . . . his long journey will not have been in vain."³⁹

As editors saw more of Harrison's speeches, many realized that the president had consistently favored conciliation over confrontation. Some southern editors reacted with suspicion, in particular when they heard of Harrison's celebration of the prosperous and diversified economies of the new South. These editors pointed out that this state of prosperity existed because white southerners (not intrusive Yankee Republicans) controlled their local communities. A *New Orleans Daily Picayune* editorial voiced this most directly: "[d]uring his hurried trip through the South the President cannot have failed to . . . have noted the vast development that has taken place since this section has been freed of the curse of Federal interference."⁴⁰ The *Mobile Daily Register* took a similar angle, focusing instead on what Harrison did not say. "Mr. Harrison," the paper claimed, "should have acknowledged that his advocacy of the passage of the force

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹*Charleston News and Courier*, editorial, "The President's Journey and its Object," April 17, 1891, in BH Papers, Scrapbook volume 10, pp. 132–33, series 16, reel 146.

⁴⁰*New Orleans Daily Picayune*, editorial, "The President's Trip," April 19, 1891, in BH Papers, Scrapbook volume 10, p. 146, series 16, reel 146.

bill was an error, and that it was plain and evident to him that the Southern people . . . can very safely be trusted to manage the public affairs of their own commonwealths with a proper degree of honesty and discretion."⁴¹

If some newspapers had inserted racial and regional commentary when Harrison had not touched on such issues, editors were especially critical when the president did address those matters. The *Memphis Appeal-Avalanche* judged that Harrison's admonishment of Mayor Clapp was misplaced; the natives of Memphis needed "no preaching upon that text." The phrase "supremacy of the law" was an endorsement of the Lodge Bill, a "partisan device contrived out of a spirit of sectional hate and for the republican benefit." "When such laws are supreme," the piece continued, "there is an end of liberty." The editorial further suggested that Harrison must have seen that the crowd gathered to hear him was racially mixed, a fact that the newspaper considered sufficient proof that "the relations of the races were harmoniously maintained."⁴²

The *Atlanta Constitution*, which had printed an editorial favorable to the president only a few days before, noted that Harrison "did not respond directly to Mayor Clapp's suggestive remark in regard to the preservation of Caucasian supremacy, yet the matter was clearly in his mind." The editorial further opined that Harrison had evaded comment on the issue, not because he was addressing a southern audience, but because of "his knowledge that Mayor Clapp, in declaring for Caucasian supremacy in this country, represents the unanimous sentiment of the American people, without regard to sectional lines or party divisions." In a parting shot at the minority of the popular vote that Harrison had received in the 1888 election, the editorial noted that if majorities really did rule, then "Mr. Harrison would not at this moment be president of the United States."⁴³

In the North, meanwhile, the tour had impressed at least one of the president's critics. A largely negative editorial in the anti-administration *New York Evening Post* nevertheless praised Harrison's speeches throughout the South. His advocacy of a more peaceful understanding between

⁴¹*Mobile Daily Register*, editorial, "What the President Did Not Say," April 22, 1891, in BH Papers, Scrapbook volume 10, p. 171, series 16, reel 146.

⁴²*Memphis Appeal-Avalanche*, editorial, "Supremacy of the Law," April 19, 1891, p. 4.

⁴³*Atlanta Constitution*, editorial, "Mr. Harrison's Memphis Speech," April 19, 1891, in BH Papers, Scrapbook volume 10, p. 142, series 16, reel 146.

North and South was “utterly at variance with his record as a narrow sectional partisan,” according to the piece. “Day by day the President has been uttering sentiments which not only were characterized by a spirit of patriotism,” the editorial continued, “but which also showed that his dull eyes were hourly opening to a clearer perception of the true sources of national feeling and national prosperity.” According to the *Evening Post*, Harrison had finally realized “what all Americans most desire—the unification of our people.” Although the jury remained out on Harrison’s future, according to the *Evening Post*, it could not help but be brighter than his past.

Northern editorials such as the one in the *New York Evening Post* reveal that southerners were not alone in their notion of what constituted “the people.” Many northern whites shared the view that “the people” meant the respectable white people of both North and South. This was made clear by the contrast that the New York paper saw between Harrison’s conciliatory speeches in the South and his “actions in the past, when he figured as the champion of the bloody shirt and the advocate of the Force Bill.”⁴⁴ These efforts toward enforcing the Constitution had drawn the ire of not only the white South but also significant segments of the North.

Perhaps the most insightful perspective on the tour came from the African American press. These papers had developed during the 1880s and become important mouthpieces for black political opinions. Their editors had good reason for concern about the president’s policies. Optimistic after the announcement of Harrison’s 1890 legislative plans, they now were concerned that the president was taking a more politically expedient path and abandoning the interests of black citizens. The *Washington Bee* provided the most positive reaction to the tour. Hailing the trip as “the most remarkable one ever made by any President,” the *Bee* had nothing but superlatives to describe the president and his reception: “The ovations which he received, and the applause given . . . indicate a change in the popular sentiment of the south.” Never had the race seen a better champion of their rights than Harrison, who had “accomplished more in the way of arousing the south to a consideration of its own interest, and its obligations to the country at large than any other living man.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴*New York Evening Post*, editorial, “The Way to ‘Unification,’” April 21, 1891, in BH Papers, Scrapbook volume 10, p. 163, series 16, reel 146.

⁴⁵*Washington Bee*, editorial, “President Harrison,” May 28, 1891, p. 2.

By July, T. Thomas Fortune, the acerbic editor of the influential *New York Age*, was singing a vastly different tune in regard to Harrison's southern travels. One editorial began by remarking on the nice time Harrison had on his trip and observing that both the president and the average citizen had the right to expect such a warm welcome. Fortune warned, however, that there was a side to southern hospitality that was being overlooked. Quoting at length from the *Nashville American*, he pointed to the resentment still in the hearts of many white southerners.

Let him not lay the flattering unction to his soul that he has won even the smallest place in the hearts of the Southern people. . . . Mr. Harrison came as a distinguished guest and as such was received. But his pleasant speeches, though happy in language and sentiment, deceived nobody. The Southern people remembered that he calumniated them before all the world, and the hollow mockery of his newspaper compliments will not erase the recollection of his efforts to deliver them over as the lawful prey of the Negro barbarian and the scallawag [sic] thief.⁴⁶

Fortune went on to remind Harrison of some simple facts. There was no question, he wrote, of the Republican-party loyalty of one class of southerners: "the masses of black men who were true to the Union." He contrasted these black voters with "the masses of the white men who were traitors to the flag and are to-day nullifiers of the Federal Constitution and villifiers of all who oppose their usurpation and tyranny." Then Fortune laid down what he believed to be two immutable laws: "The white South is Democratic. The black South is Republican. If President Harrison will keep this in mind he will not cast any Republican pearls before Democratic swine so to speak."⁴⁷ Although he did not venture a solution as to how Harrison could overcome the fact that fewer and fewer African Americans were voting in the South, Fortune, who had been an ardent supporter of the Lodge Bill, recommended any measures designed to ensure African Americans' full constitutional rights.

Taking a similar stance, the *Indianapolis Freeman* spent little time on

⁴⁶*New York Age*, editorial, "Information for the President," July 18, 1891, p. 2.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

the tour itself, instead focusing on the larger context of the journey. The editors observed that northern black voters in key states such as Indiana had provided Harrison's margin of victory in 1888. Despite this, not a single plum of patronage, among the many available to the president, had found its way to black Hoosiers. The sight of the president going to southern communities with the olive branch extended to white southerners was too much for the editors of the *Freeman* to bear. Harrison had returned to Washington without a vigorous racial agenda, and months had now passed. In July, the paper observed that "President Harrison has obtained the support of colored men by promises which he is either unable or unwilling to keep."⁴⁸ In November, still smarting at Harrison's neglect of his black constituency, the *Freeman* took a shot at both the president's appointments *and* his appearance: "Harrison the short, belongs to that class of statesmen and philanthropists who are never quite prepared to admit competency in a Negro."⁴⁹

What did Benjamin Harrison himself believe? The president was certain that he had accurately gauged the reception on the ground, and his own judgments were reinforced by a series of congratulatory letters and telegrams from political allies. One of the first came from fellow Hoosier Clem Studebaker, lauding Harrison's "splendid" journey and assuring the president that "you have the party to your back almost as one man, and the country at large well pleased with what you have done." In his letter of reply, Harrison evaluated the trip: "No description of it has been at all adequate. It was indescribable in the enthusiasm and magnitude and beauty of the receptions and the cordiality of the people." He admitted to initial trepidation of such a daunting tour, "[w]hen I started I felt that I had laid out a great undertaking, and shrunk a little from it; but I have reached home without the smallest accident or untoward incident, and in a first rate condition of health."⁵⁰

Harrison received praise for his trip and for his speeches from a variety of sources. One letter from the United States' legation to Portugal called the journey "a *march of triumph*." Andrew Carnegie, preparing to set sail

⁴⁸*Indianapolis Freeman*, editorial, "Has President Harrison Any Real Claim Upon the Colored Vote?," July 25, 1891, p. 4.

⁴⁹*Indianapolis Freeman*, editorial, "The Negro Judgeship," November 21, 1891, p. 4.

⁵⁰Clem Studebaker to Harrison, May 13, 1891; Harrison to Studebaker, May 18, 1891, both in BH Papers, series 1, reel 31.

from New York harbor for his summer vacation, took time to telegraph the president: "Permit me to express the pleasure we have had in following you in your journey. The whole people irrespective of party are proud of such a Pres[iden]t. [T]here is but one voice and that of Praise and Gratitude for what you have done." Harrison was told by a prominent New York Republican that "[y]our speeches have made a profound impression upon the people. . . . I never saw such a change in sentiment in thirty days. The newspapers have seemed to vie with each other in saying kind & complimentary words." William B. Allison laid on perhaps the thickest layer of praise, deeming Harrison's speeches "most admirable" and going on to claim that "No living man could have more surely touched the chords of life; or made a better impression." There is little doubt that to Harrison and many other Republicans the tour was a success. It assuaged recent wounds and gave party followers hope for the upcoming election.⁵¹

Unfortunately, Harrison and the Republicans harbored false hopes. Harrison's popularity among voters had not increased since the 1888 election, which he won in the electoral college, and by 1891 the president, a few congratulatory letters to the contrary, was not well regarded by most of the Republican elite. The tour had not persuaded large numbers of southerners to change their party allegiance, and it had done little to stem the growth of an upstart third party. Consequently in 1892 the nation turned its eyes to the candidacies of Grover Cleveland and Benjamin Harrison. Even given the conventions of the time, in which sitting presidents were not supposed to campaign actively, neither candidate showed particular enthusiasm. The excitement of the campaign came from the new People's Party (the heirs of the Farmers' Alliance) and their candidate, James B. Weaver, who tallied 8.5 percent of the popular vote, an impressive showing for the candidate of an infant party. The election revealed that, as Harrison had suspected, the terrain of southern politics was shifting. Unfortunately for the president and his party, the Populists had been able to organize most of the anti-Democratic vote. In the South, still overwhelmingly Democratic, the insurgent Populists drained further votes from the Republican column. Harrison neither won over any Democratic foes nor checked the growth of a new party, and these combined

⁵¹George S. Batahilles to Harrison, May 14, 1891; Andrew Carnegie to Harrison, May 14, 1891; D. S. Alexander to Harrison, May 14, 1891; William B. Allison to Harrison, May 20, 1891; and see also William McKinley to Harrison, June 18, 1891, all in BH Papers, series 1, reel 31.



An item from the 1892 reelection campaign. Contrary to the message on this rattler, Harrison lost the election to Grover Cleveland.

Courtesy President Benjamin Harrison Research Library

factors help explain the Hoosier's defeat. African Americans, meanwhile, grudgingly supported Harrison in 1892, largely to prevent a further diminution of their political importance on the national scene. Perhaps the *Indianapolis Freeman* summed up black voters' dissatisfaction with Harrison best when the editor asked why there was "any just, logical, or sensible reason why the colored voters of the Northern States . . . should clamor for the renomination of Mr. Harrison?" The editorial concluded that the "pressing interests of our future as a race, are too valuable to be jeopardized or sacrificed through a spirit of false fealty and sentimentality for

any man who has been weighed in the balance, and found wanting in the true essentials of leadership."⁵²

In sum, all of Harrison's 1891 efforts in the South did little to quell the tide of criticism directed at his party and his administration. What then do we make of his journey? Was that week in April an ephemeral moment in the history of American politics? The impulsive answer would be "yes." With a longer perspective, however, it is apparent that Benjamin Harrison was engaging in the type of activity that would intrigue his Republican presidential successors over the next century. Historians of twentieth-century politics have analyzed Richard Nixon's southern strategy and Ronald Reagan's appeal to southern voters during the 1980 election. That year a Republican candidate won ten of the eleven states of the former Confederacy, and the term "Reagan Democrat" was born.⁵³ American life changed dramatically in the years between the Reagan and Harrison administrations, but in the end, those who believed that white southerners ultimately would feel at home in the Republican Party proved to be prophetic. To be sure, there were many necessary catalysts to the change in partisan affiliation, but nevertheless, the roots of the modern transformation run deep.

There remains a critical question with respect to 1891: what went wrong? Most historians look back on this era and decry the weakness of presidents who could not escape the shadows of the great Abraham Lincoln at one end of the period and Theodore Roosevelt at the other. They also chide the Republican Party for abandoning African Americans after Reconstruction, even though it is evident that the nation as a whole showed little enthusiasm for rebuilding the South, particularly after the end of Grant's first term in 1873. The most frequent refrain from recent academics centers on the theme of racial justice, i.e., that presidents should have been more willing to use force—in the form of military troops—to enforce the Constitution. In Harrison's era, however, the political willpower simply was not there. The president's 1891 journey had decisively proven

⁵²*Indianapolis Freeman*, editorial, July 25, 1891.

⁵³The two best studies placing race and modern Republicanism in a larger interpretive framework are George Brown Tindall, *The Disruption of the Solid South* (Athens, Ga., 1972); and Dan T. Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963–1994* (Baton Rouge, La., 1996). I embrace the wide perspective employed by both authors. A more sympathetic look at Nixon and race can be found in Dean J. Kotlowski, *Nixon's Civil Rights: Politics, Principle, and Policy* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001).

that. If military force was not an option, then various coalitions between whites—northern and southern—and blacks, based on trust and goodwill, were, in theory, a potential alternative.

Yet, as many southern editorials from 1891 had made clear, the power struggle between black and white was so severe that it negated any possible compromise. Some state-level exceptions existed, as in North Carolina, where Republicans and Populists forged bi-party governments between 1894 and 1898, but these were few and far between. As northern Republicans like Harrison tried to make inroads with southern whites, they realized that none of their gestures of compromise were reciprocated by their southern counterparts. When the Republicans tired of such conciliation, they gambled by introducing their 1890 legislation dealing with education and voting rights. To many suspicious white southern eyes the proposed laws looked like a second reconstruction, and the southern elites who had regained power were not about to lose it again. Once it became clear that Mississippi's methods for disfranchising its black population would not be forcefully rebuked by the federal government, other southern states followed suit. Disfranchisement, the official sanction of segregation in the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling, and the horrific number of lynchings during the 1890s proved to black Americans that they had few friends willing to protect them.

Indeed, despite the talk of the sections coming together in racial harmony, what was more immediate in the wake of Harrison's journey was sectional discord. Hyper-sectionalism, rather than hyper-nationalism,⁵⁴ best characterized the United States. The southern tour consequently confirmed historian Rayford Logan's claim that Harrison's attempt "to reopen the 'Southern question' had provoked a counteroffensive from which the South emerged even more triumphant than it had in 1877."⁵⁴ That was the ultimate tragedy of the president's journey. Had Benjamin Harrison possessed the skills to balance his divergent constituencies, he would be remembered as one of our most significant statesmen. Instead, his flanking movements with respect to the political problems of the day remind us how confounding the relationship between race, region, and Republicanism had become in late nineteenth-century America.

⁵⁴Logan, *Betrayal of the Negro*, 87.