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Benjamin Harrison and the Matter of Race

*George Sinkler**

One of the most controversial aspects of the history of the Republican party after the Civil War, 1865-1900, is its relationship to the southern Negro. The party, by its verbal pronouncements, appeared to be the Negro's benefactor during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. According to historian Vincent P. DeSantis, however, "the Republican party turned out to be among the poorest friends that the southern Negro had after Reconstruction for while they talked much they took few steps to remedy the situation or to meet their obligations to the freedmen." Leslie H. Fishel contends that the great mistake of the Negro during this period was to marry himself to the Republican party and to remain faithful to the marriage vows long after the party had ceased its concern (1880) for him. Historians David Donald and Stanley P. Hirshon both suggest that Republican party policy with regard to the Negro for the years 1877 to 1893 held that the black man was inferior, politically undependable, and should be subordinated—not abandoned—to a white dominated party in the South. Such a move, it was hoped, would attract southern whites into the party and at the same time retain the Negro vote.¹ Whatever the validity of these scholars' contentions, identification of Republican President Benjamin Harrison's reactions to racial matters should provide additional insight into the dynamics of race adjustment after the Civil War.

Harrison, as much as any other President, wrestled mightily with the Negro question. Characteristically, most of what he had to say on matters of race was uttered in a political context. He was well aware of race prejudice in the North and spoke of the "cruel shackles of prejudice which bound every black man . . ." in that region.² During the presidential campaign of 1888 candidate Harrison spoke before three hundred Negroes of a segregated political club in Indianapolis. He declared his sincere respect for the colored people of the United States and dated this respect from an incident in his youth when he refused to betray a fugitive slave whom he had discovered eating walnuts in his grandfather's orchard at North Bend, Ohio. Harrison asserted that the Negro in 1888 had come a long way from

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¹ Vincent P. DeSantis, "The Republican Party Revisited, 1877-1897," H. Wayne Morgan (ed.), *The Gilded Age: A Reappraisal* (Syracuse, 1963), 107; Leslie H. Fishel, Jr., "The Negro in Northern Politics, 1870-1900," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLII (December, 1955), 466; Stanley P. Hirshon, *Farewell to the Bloody Shirt: Northern Republicans and the Southern Negro, 1877-1893* (Bloomington, 1962), 11-12. Professor David Donald wrote the introduction to Hirshon's work.

² Speech to the Illinois delegation sent to Indianapolis to congratulate Harrison upon his nomination, July 19, 1888, Charles Hedges (comp.), *Speeches of Benjamin Harrison and a Complete Collection of his Public Addresses from February, 1888 to February, 1892* (New York, 1892), 53.

the days of black codes in antebellum Indiana. He told his listeners that education would make possible the ultimate inclusion of the Negro in American nationality and citizenship and would point the way "to that perfect emancipation which will remove remaining prejudices and secure to you in all parts of the land an equal and just participation in the government of the country. It cannot be much longer withheld from you."³

As the Republican presidential nominee, Harrison was faced with the problem of formulating a policy on the race issue in the South, commonly referred to as the Southern Question. He denied to the editor of the *New York Tribune*, Whitelaw Reid, that he was going to skirt the race question in his campaign: "I feel very strongly upon the question of a free ballot. It is one of the few essential things. I have never failed in any campaign to speak upon it and to insist that the settlement of that question preceded all others in natural order . . . I would not be willing myself to purchase the Presidency for a compact of silence upon this question." Reid agreed.⁴

Harrison came out strongly for what he called a pure ballot in his letter of acceptance of the Republican nomination:

Our colored people do not ask any special legislation in their interest, but only to be made secure in the common rights of American citizenship. They will, however, naturally mistrust the sincerity of those party leaders who appeal to their race for support only in those localities where the suffrage is free and the election result doubtful, and compass their disfranchisement when their choice cannot be coerced.⁵

After Harrison's election in November of 1888, the search for a politically feasible solution to the Southern Question picked up momentum in the presidential mail. Some southerners wanted to know what they could expect from the new administration with regard to the Negro. The old Rutherford B. Hayes formula of economic prosperity for the South, of splitting the colored vote and bringing about political division in the South on issues other than race, was suggested again.⁶ The President-elect was asked to improve the caliber of federal appointments, to enforce voting laws, and to put down violence in the South. Southern and northern Republicans alike warned Harrison of the general southern fear of Negro domination.⁷

³ Speech, June 30, 1888, *ibid.*, 33-35.

⁴ J. Whitelaw Reid to Harrison, September 25, October 6, 1888; Harrison to Reid, September 27, 1888, Benjamin Harrison Papers (Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington).

⁵ Acceptance speech, September 11, 1888, *Public Papers and Addresses of Benjamin Harrison* (Washington, 1893), 1-7.

⁶ G. B. Cowlam to Judge W. D. Kelly, 1888, Harrison Papers; see also letters from Richard Pearson, November 12, 1888, and M. B. Hewson, November 16, 1888, *ibid.* For discussion of Hayes formula see George Sinkler, "Race: Principles and Policy of Rutherford B. Hayes," *Ohio History*, LXXVII (Winter, Spring, Summer, 1968), 149-67.

⁷ C. E. Mitchell, Arkansas lawyer, to Harrison, November 21, 1888; Francis B. Pardie, Alabama, to Harrison, 1888; Henry Booth, Alabama, to Harrison, December 4, 1888; M. C. Cole, Chicago, to Harrison, 1888; H. G. [Parsons?], Washington, D. C., to Harrison, February 5, 1888, *ibid.*

Many letters urged Harrison to form a predominantly white man's Republican party in the South while at the same time "giving to the colored man a fair proportion of the patronage, according to his qualifications . . .," as one Louisiana congressman, H. Dudley Coleman, put it.⁸ There seems little doubt that in the South at least, the Negro had become the ugly duckling of the Republican party. A very learned Negro lawyer, Charles A. Roxborough of Plaquemine, Louisiana, seemed to approve of the idea of a white man's party in the South, at least until the Negro had obtained more schooling:

My race *must* become educated before they can hope to succeed as a political factor or otherwise. . . . I believe in the New South . . . a new organization of the Republican party built up with the progressive and enterprising white men in this New South I would not have you to understand me, by this, that the colored men should not receive appointments as well, for I believe that we are entitled to consideration, but they too ought to possess the same qualifications⁹

On the other hand, Frederick Douglass, former Maryland slave turned abolitionist, orator, and political spokesman for his race, was not pleased with the thought that Harrison might give his blessing to white men's parties in the South. In an interview granted approximately one month after Harrison's inauguration, he spoke of the administration's "lack of vigor and courage in enforcing the law."¹⁰

But belief in and a plea for equality before the law had formed an integral part of Harrison's inaugural address in March, 1889. In his speech the President expressed wonder as to how long the issue of race would "continue to hang upon the skirts of progress" in the South. He thought that economic interests should or could transcend racial considerations and called for an alliance between Negroes and southern Whigs who favored the protective tariff.¹¹

In his first annual message to Congress, Harrison also had much to say on the subject of the Negro in American life. He absolved the Negro of any blame for his presence in the United States, his poverty, and his ignorance. These were "our shame not theirs," he told the country. Negroes had done well. "They have as a people showed themselves to be friendly and faithful toward the white race under temptations of tremendous strength." After raising the fundamental question of the rights of Negroes in American life,

⁸ H. Dudley Coleman to George Seldon, November 13, 1888, *ibid.*; see also Coleman to H. H. Hanna, November 27, 1888, *ibid.* For other letters expressing similar opinions see Frederick Speed, Mississippi, to Harrison, December 8, 1888, and letters from Robert A. Hill, M. P. Pierce, S. J. Wright, J. B. Kinkead, J. H. Thomason, A. A. Garner, Robert Barber, J. Ogden, and David N. Freeman to Harrison, *ibid.*

⁹ Roxborough to Harrison, February 21, 1889, *ibid.*

¹⁰ Interview with Frederick Douglass, *Chicago Tribune*, April 27, 1889, scrapbooks, IX, 88, *ibid.*

¹¹ Inaugural address, March 4, 1889, Hedges, *Speeches*, 197.

the President, unlike many before or after him, took the position that the Negro problem should not be sidestepped:

This generation should courageously face these questions, and not leave them as a heritage of woe to the next. The consultation should proceed with candor, calmness, and great patience, upon the lines of justice and humanity, not of prejudice and cruelty. No question in our country can be at rest except upon the firm base of justice and the law.

Harrison also rejected the popular theme that the southerners be allowed to work out the Negro problem for themselves:

If it be said that those [southern] communities must work out this problem for themselves we have a right to ask whether they are at work upon it. Do they suggest any solution? When and under what conditions is the black man to have a free ballot? When is he in fact to have those full civil rights which have so long been his in law? When is that equality of influence which our form of government was intended to secure to electors be restored?¹²

Harrison had raised crucial questions, some of which await answers today. His talk was plain and relatively uncluttered by political considerations. His statement that "the colored man should be protected in all his relations to the federal government, whether as litigant, juror, or witness in our courts, as an elector of members of Congress, or as a peaceful traveller upon our interstate railways" reflected the omnipresence of the dual nature of the American federal system as it was then regarded. Harrison implied that violation of *intrastate* civil liberties was beyond the pale of federal competence or protection. He was careful to stay away from anything which might imply that he was usurping state prerogative: "No evil, however deplorable, can justify the assumption either on the part of the Executive or of Congress of powers not granted, but both will be highly blameable if all the powers are not wisely but firmly used to correct these." A stronger plea for the Negro would be difficult to find in the presidential rhetoric of the period.¹³

Harrison's incoming correspondence contained no dearth of opinion on the subject of the Negro. Several carpetbaggers,¹⁴ Negroes,¹⁵ and

¹² First annual message to Congress, December 3, 1889, James D. Richardson (comp.), *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789-1897* (10 vols., Washington, 1896-1900), IX, 55-56.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Ebenezer Wakely, Chicago lawyer, Republican, and ex-soldier, then living in Georgia, to Harrison, 1888; D. C. Martin, secretary of the Republican State Committee, Land Office, Gainesville, Florida, to Colonel Alexander Lynch, January 8, 1890, Harrison Papers.

¹⁵ One is impressed with the number of articulate Negroes writing letters to the President at this time: John R. Lynch, chairman of the Republican State Committee, Jackson, Mississippi, to Harrison, November 17, 1888; W. H. McCarver, chairman of the Republican Executive Committee of Texas, Carthage, Texas, to Harrison, November 17, 1888; Edward H. Sutton, Baltimore, Maryland, to Harrison, 1888; Andrew J. Chambers, New Rome, North Carolina, to Harrison, August 8, 1888; petition of thirty bishops of the African Methodist Church to Harrison, November 23, 1889, *ibid.*

northerners¹⁶ viewed southern resurgence and entrenchment in the national government, together with the inability of the government to protect the rights of Negroes, with alarm. One of the most sensible and seemingly sincere letters on the Southern Question was that of Emory Speer, a Georgia born federal judge from the southern district of that state, calling for equal justice before the law for the Negro in the South. In contrast to Speer, the Reverend Richard McIlwaine, president of Hampden-Sidney College in Virginia, told Harrison that the Negro, "by the ordinance of nature and God," was inferior and unfit for the place he was seeking in American life.¹⁷

One of the major themes of Harrison's campaign had been "a free and equal ballot." He had noted that the nation in 1888 was protesting against the mistreatment of the Jews by the Russians and the Irish by the English and asked why a little of that sympathy should not go to the Negro in the South: "Should we not at least in reference to this gigantic and intolerable wrong in our own country, as a party, lift up a stalwart and determined protest against it?" In March, 1888, he told a Chicago audience that the *unfinished* business of the Republican party was "to make the constitutional grant of citizenship, the franchise to the colored man of the South, a practical and living reality."¹⁸

The Negro public was also concerned about the question of voting in the South in 1888 and in some quarters responded warmly to Harrison's interest in the subject. Upon his nomination in June, 1888, "fifteen thousand colored voters of Kansas . . .,"¹⁹ the editors of two colored papers,²⁰ and a colored congressman from Mississippi had congratulated the Republican standard bearer and urged him, in the words of Congressman John R. Lynch, not to fail "to call attention to the criminal suppression of the Republican votes, *white* and *colored*, in several . . . Southern States [and] take a bold and outspoken position in favor of a rigid enforcement of the Constitution and the laws of the land . . ."²¹

Having expressed himself in favor of civil equality before the law, at least on the federal level, Harrison committed himself to the right of the Negro to vote in federal elections and to be protected in the exercise of the franchise. If the Negro had not legally possessed the ballot, the country and

¹⁶ Henry Hand, Carthagenia, Mercer County, Ohio, to Harrison, August 23, 1888; Colonel George W. Williams, Worchester, Massachusetts, to Harrison, 1888; Benjamin F. Pierce, Massachusetts, to Harrison, November 28, 1888, *ibid.*

¹⁷ United States Judge Emory Speer, Georgia, to Harrison, 1888; the Reverend Richard McIlwaine, D.D., Prince Edward County, Virginia, to Harrison, November 26, 1888, *ibid.*

¹⁸ Speech at Detroit, February 22, 1888, Hedges, *Speeches*, 10-15; speech at Chicago, March 20, 1888, *ibid.*, 21-22.

¹⁹ This number was given by C. A. Grinstead, Topeka, to Harrison, June 25, 1888, Harrison Papers.

²⁰ Magnus L. Robinson, editor of the Washington, D.C., *National Leader*, to Harrison, June 28, 1888; W. Calvin Chase, Washington *Bee*, to Harrison, July 9, 1888, *ibid.*

²¹ John R. Lynch to Harrison, July 2, 1888, *ibid.*

THE NATIONAL LEADER.



MAGNUS L. ROBINSON, EDITOR.

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Beloved Sir



Accept my congratulations
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Capital. I assure you that the National Leader
will be found in the lead advocating your
election to the presidency. The Chicago Convention
did wisely, and as a Virginia voter I breathe
freer, believing, predicting that the Republican
ticket of Harrison and Morton will be triumphly
elected. The colored people will look to you
for an expression of sympathy as to their political
status in the South. Give us your view as to
the condition of our people in the South?
Again accept our greetings

Truly yours for victory
Magnus L. Robinson
1348-28th Street New

6372

FACSIMILE LETTER FROM NEGRO EDITOR TO HARRISON.

Located in Benjamin Harrison Papers, Library of Congress.
Provided by George Sinkler.

its politicians probably would have ignored him; but whatever their racial proclivities, Republican politicians could not forget that below Mason and Dixon's line potential Republican ballots were being cast with increasing infrequency. Some Americans seemed sincerely discomfited by southern prostitution of the ballot, the so-called talisman of Greek, Roman, and Anglo-Saxon liberties. Harrison was one of them.

During the first half of the year 1890, in the wake of attempts by various southern states to disfranchise and segregate the Negro, interest in this aspect of the race problem was very high. The subject was almost constantly before Congress and the public.²² Harrison's expressed interest in what he called a "pure" ballot for all colors had culminated in a recommendation in his annual message of 1889 for federal legislation to protect Negroes in their voting rights in national elections.²³ This legislation as drawn up became known variously as the Federal Elections Bill, the Force Bill, and the Lodge Bill. The proposed election law would have made false registration, interference with registration by violence, intimidation, or bribery a crime, and stealing the ballot box or ballots a felony. The major impetus for the bill was the feeling on the part of the Republicans that the Democrats were stealing elections—especially in the South. For the first time in sixteen years the Republicans were in control of both houses of Congress as well as the executive branch of the federal government and were in a position to determine legislation. The house passed the elections bill, but it floundered in the Senate where the fight for the legislation was led by Henry Cabot Lodge.²⁴

In his second annual message Harrison noted that the elections bill was meeting with resistance: "It is said that this legislation will revive race animosities, and some have even suggested that when the peaceful methods of fraud are made positively impossible, they may be supplanted by intimidation and violence." Harrison rejected the logic of such arguments. The only thing that might cause animosity, he thought, was "the fact that some electors have been accustomed to exercise the franchise for others as well as themselves . . ." In the face of southern opposition to the proposed law, Harrison made an admirable stand for the free ballot: "No choice is left to me but to enforce with vigor all laws intended to secure to the citizen his constitutional rights."²⁵ Three and a half pages of the third annual message to Congress were devoted to the subject of election frauds and the need for legislation. In his fourth and final annual message and in his letter of acceptance for a second party nomination for the election of 1892, Harrison again called for a free ballot, deplored its corruption in the South but despaired of being able

²² Hirshon, *Farewell to the Bloody Shirt*, 190.

²³ First annual message, December 3, 1889, Richardson, *Messages*, IX, 55-56.

²⁴ Hirshon, *Farewell to the Bloody Shirt*, 190, 200-205.

²⁵ Second annual message, December 1, 1890, Richardson, *Message*, IX, 128-29.

to do anything about it.²⁶ Apparently if a positive presidential attitude of itself could have passed the Federal Elections Bill, the measure would have passed. It did not do so.

The defeat of the Federal Elections Bill has caused some scholars to label 1890 as the racial watershed of the abandonment of the Negro by the Republican party and the nation.²⁷ That such legislation was presented in the wake of the southern drive legally to segregate Negroes and just thirteen years after another "supposed" abandonment in 1877 seemed not to have disturbed the holders of this view.

In 1881 a bill that would have given federal assistance for eight years to public school systems of the various states on the basis of the number of the state's illiterates above the age of ten was introduced in Congress by Henry W. Blair of New Hampshire. The major purpose of the Blair Education Bill was to reduce illiteracy, especially among the recently freed Negroes. This pioneer effort in behalf of federal aid to education passed the Senate but remained bottled up in the House through 1888 and was defeated in the Senate for the last time in 1890.²⁸

As a United States senator, Benjamin Harrison had supported the Blair Bill in 1884.²⁹ He continued to call for federal aid to education in his

²⁶ Third annual message, December 9, 1891, *ibid.*, 208-11; fourth annual message, December 6, 1892, *Public Papers*, 156; letter of acceptance, September 3, 1892, *Public Papers*, 20.

²⁷ One historian, Stanley P. Hirshon, said that the Bloody Shirt technique and the Negro were discarded between 1891 and 1893, *Farewell to the Bloody Shirt*, 17-18, 249, 258. According to Paul Buck, "the defeat of the Lodge Bill [1890] marked the final passage of the sectional issue in its Civil War guise from politics The Republican Party tacitly accepted the fact of white supremacy in the South. It never again hoisted the Bloody Shirt to its masthead A strongly partisan Republican Congress had made its final surrender in obedience to the clearly expressed sentiment of the nation," *The Road to Reunion, 1865-1900* (Boston, 1938), 281. The Negro was abandoned in 1901, according to Rayford Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901* (New York, 1954). Howard K. Beale spoke of the "relegation of Reconstruction to unimportance after Hayes' removal of the troops in 1887," *The Critical Year: A Study of Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction* (New York, 1958), 214. C. Vann Woodward said: "In the mood of reconciliation there were few who mourned the cause of the Negro or gave much thought to the revolution in Northern sentiment on this," *Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction* (Boston, 1951), 214.

²⁸ Allen J. Going, "The South and the Blair Education Bill," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLIV (September, 1957), 268, 272-73, 275-76; Hirshon, *Farewell to the Bloody Shirt*, 192-93. Why the Blair Education Bill failed is not the concern of this paper. Yet it is strange that the very remedy which politicians and the country at large had said was the solution to the race problem could not get through Congress. Even so-called friends of the Negro such as Albion Tourgee and General Samuel C. Armstrong of Hampton Institute were against the bill. Tourgee felt that two thirds of the money would go to the whites if the money was administered by the South. See letter of Tourgee to Harrison, December 7, 1888, Harrison Papers. Armstrong once favored the bill but changed his mind. He thought that the bill gave too much money in too little time. The money might be stolen. It denied the principle of self-help. Armstrong may have been afraid that federal aid would eclipse private institutions such as the one he headed at Hampton. See letter of Armstrong to Harrison, [1889], Harrison Papers.

²⁹ Going, "The South and the Blair Education Bill," 274; Hirshon, *Farewell to the Bloody Shirt*, 194.

letter accepting the Republican nomination in 1888, and he asked Congress for the Blair Bill in his first annual message in 1889.³⁰ By the time he asked for it again in his final annual message in 1892, however, his initial ardor for federal aid appeared gone. Instead, he seemed happy to see that many of the “southern states were advancing their school systems liberally . . . to the great advantage of the children of both races.”³¹

Harrison also came face to face with the question of race in the matter of federal patronage. When it came to the matter of jobs, there was no lack of racial activity on the “political breadline.” The President was charged with ignoring “the color element in the distribution of federal jobs.”³² A rumor that a Negro was going to get a Cabinet post caused a Charlestonian to say that the Negro would benefit more by having his right to vote protected first.³³ A Negro public school principal from Montezuma, Georgia, wrote: “It is too early for such a step.” He would settle for minor positions “for the col’d brethern of the party”³⁴ Two lawyers wanted the colored politician from South Carolina, Robert Smalls, to be consulted in the distribution of patronage in that state.³⁵

Colored Republicans of Louisiana met in Washington and complained to the President about what they considered the unfair distribution of the federal patronage to the black but loyal friends of the government and party since Reconstruction. They charged that out of a total of eighteen appointments for their state, only two or three had gone to Negroes. They noted also that northern Negroes were being discriminated against in the distribution of federal jobs. These men contended that the Negro vote was crucial in such northern states as New York, Indiana, and Ohio and said: “under our form of government numbers is the basis of political power By what rule of equity is the same denied us? It is unAmerican, unRepublican, and unjust, and can proceed upon only one assumption [,] that of race prejudice.”³⁶

Senator Matt Quay recommended a leading Negro politician, Norris Wright Cuney of Texas, to be collector of the Port of Customs at Galveston.

³⁰ Acceptance speech, September 11, 1888, *Public Papers*, 5; first annual message, December 3, 1889, Richardson, *Messages*, IX, 55.

³¹ Annual message, December 3, 1892, *Public Papers*, 21. Professor Allen J. Going found that after the defeat of the Blair Bill, southern appropriations to their Negro schools grew smaller and the impetus for disfranchisement greater. See “The South and the Blair Education Bill,” 290.

³² J. R. G. Pitkin to Harrison, January 3, 1889, Harrison Papers.

³³ W. A. Grant to Harrison, January 7, 1889, *ibid.*

³⁴ L. H. Brown to Harrison, February 11, 1889, *ibid.*

³⁵ W. W. Dudley to Harrison, March 12, 1889; Samuel W. Melton, Columbia, South Carolina, to Elijah W. Halford, Harrison’s private secretary, April 22, 1889, *ibid.* In defense of Smalls, Melton said, “I know he has the good wishes of the white people of Beaufort County—not for his politics, but because he is a manly, decent, honest Republican and stands for decency.”

³⁶ Unsigned petition, April 1, 1889, *ibid.*

Cuney was eventually appointed but not without some revealing grumbling from the *New York Times*:

If President Harrison wants to win votes from the white democrats of Texas, he could hardly have set about it in a worse way than by making the appointment of N. Wright Cuney . . . Cuney is a colored party worker and appears to be more heartily disliked by the Texas Democrats than any other man of his race in the State. He made himself obnoxious to the whites by vigorously denouncing the so-called outrages on Negroes and criticizing the State authorities for not protecting the colored man from the aggressions of the whites. Democratic newspapers all over the State branded Cuney as a slanderer of the fair name of Texas . . . Cuney was strongly endorsed by the Republicans of the State . . . and the commission he desired is his.³⁷

A rather rare letter came from a colored office holder from the North who complained that the northern Negro was being ignored by dispensers of the federal spoils of office. Why were southern Negroes always rewarded with the plums of office if the black brother in the North held the balance of power in close elections? Why did six major appointments go to southern Negroes, while the North received only one, recorder of deeds in the General Land Office in Indiana, the job held by the complainant himself? Why did northern congressmen pass over "intelligent, educated, and representative colored citizens" from their section? "It is hardly fair Mr. Secretary," concluded J. M. Townshend, "to argue that colored Republicans shall not expect to receive political recognition."³⁸

There seems to have been unusual discontent among racial as well as national minorities in Indiana in 1889. Harrison was warned about possible trouble in his own home city of Indianapolis: "our Irish friends are seeking recognition with zeal and energy which is characteristic of their race We need not expect anything from the Germans. The colored people and the laboring men are urgently demanding recognition," said one informant.³⁹ Instructions sent out to the party managers in the state of Indiana read in part: "The colored men and the Irish Republicans are not cultivated as much as they should be. They should be sent as delegates to conventions, and recognized in other ways."⁴⁰

According to Louis T. Michener, chairman of the State Central Committee in Indiana, fourteen leading Negroes in Indianapolis felt that the President had snubbed them in their request for political recognition for the northern

³⁷ Joseph Bradfield to Harrison, July 22, 1889, enclosing a clipping from the *New York Times*, July 21, 1889, from which the above quotation was taken, *ibid.*

³⁸ J. M. Townshend, recorder, General Land Office, Indiana, to Elijah W. Halford, July 31, 1889, *ibid.* The six major colored appointments were listed by Townshend as follows: Norris Wright Cuney, collector of the Port of Customs at Beaufort, South Carolina; John R. Lynch, fourth auditor of the Treasury, Mississippi; John Spellman, specialist in the Land Office, Mississippi; Mr. Handy, United States registrar or receiver, in post office, Alabama.

³⁹ J. W. Hess to Harrison, 1889, *ibid.*

⁴⁰ See memorandum of state Republican chairman, Louis T. Michener, October 5, 1889, *ibid.*

Negro and protection for the black brother in the South. They threatened to stay at home on election day and “permit the Republican party to be defeated.” Chairman Michener was moved to mount a Republican offensive for the protection of the Negro in the South.⁴¹ However, several days later when he again corresponded with the President’s private secretary, Elijah W. Halford, his ardor for an offensive in behalf of the Negro seemed to have cooled. The tone of his letter, although much subdued, contained a very revealing statement:

I make it a rule never to introduce this [Negro] question in talking over the future with the people whom I meet, but nearly every man who visits me, or whom I meet through the state introduces the subject and declares himself to be in favor of legislation which would give the colored men protection, and gives reasons galore for the faith that is in him. I know of but one white man in this state who is of a contrary view I merely tell you these things in order that you may fully realize the strength which pervades the people of our party.⁴²

Meanwhile, the Republican boss in Georgia pressed the President to appoint a colored postmaster at Athens: “In order to hold our forces and keep all elements solid in support of the Administration a few colored [colored?] men will have to be appointed as postmasters. Mr. Davis, though classified as a colored man, is in fact as near white as any man can be with colored blood in his veins.”⁴³

When a Negro woman was appointed assistant to the plate printer in the government print shop in Washington to work side by side with him over a small machine all day, the printers were displeased and Senator Joseph R. Hawley of Connecticut tried to enlist the aid of the President in heading off a racial incident. “It seems to me,” Hawley advised Harrison, “that the colored woman could be assigned to some equally profitable duty Nobody who is reasonable wants a rub-a-dub discussion of the race question over the case.” According to Hawley the printers would not object to the Negro woman working in the “same building where white people are employed in the same room.” Hawley assured the President that he did not share these personal prejudices against Negroes: “I am an old abolitionist

⁴¹ Michener to Elijah W. Halford [the President’s private secretary was asked to relay these thoughts to the President], October 1, 1889, *ibid.* The distinguished group of Negroes responsible, in part, for Michener’s plea to the President in their behalf included Dr. S. A. Elbert, J. S. Hinton, Professor W. D. McCoy, Levi Christy, the Reverend J. A. Clay, the Reverend Gissell, the Reverend Morris Lewis, B. J. W. Carr, R. E. Martin, W. Allison Sweeney, Ben Thornton, and Horace Heaton.

⁴² Michener to Halford, October 5, 1889, *ibid.* The tone and contents of this letter suggests that some other communication must have passed between Michener and Halford between Michener’s crusading letter of October 1 and his rather subdued one of October 5, 1889. However, a search of the small collection of the Louis T. Michener Papers (Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress) has failed to turn up such a letter from Halford.

⁴³ A. E. Buck, Republican committee chairman, Atlanta, Georgia, to Elijah W. Halford, January 26, 1890, Harrison Papers.

and have entertained colored men with bed and board in my own home.”⁴⁴ Unfortunately neither the disposition of the case nor Harrison’s reaction to it is known.

The defeat of the Federal Elections Bill and the rumors of a white man’s party movement caused the colored voters of Ohio also to give Harrison a verbal drubbing: “His failure to accord us a decent recognition in the distribution of his official favors is unfair, unjust, and ungrateful The old game of turkey for the leaders and turkey buzzard for us is played out Let them win their own victories—if they can—without our help.” These Ohio voters quoted one of their number to declare that should he ever again vote for the Republican party, “may my hand be palsied and my tongue cleave . . . to the roof of my mouth.”⁴⁵

The drive of the northern Negro for political recognition posed for Harrison a problem with southerners according to the New York *Herald*. When it was rumored that Harrison was about to appoint a prominent Negro lawyer, John Mercer Langston of Virginia, to a United States circuit judgeship, a North Carolinian allegedly said: “If Mr. Harrison thinks he will help the Republican cause in Ohio and Indiana by the appointment of a Southern Negro to the bench, he is very much mistaken”⁴⁶ The Cincinnati *Commercial Gazette* explained the northern Negro’s state of mind on the patronage issue: “The colored voters would like to see something in the way of official recognition given to someone else beside Fred Douglass, B. K. Bruce, and John R. Lynch.”⁴⁷ Langston and another Negro politician from Indiana, J. M. Townshend, both defended the Republican record for Negroes.⁴⁸ The New York *Sun* reported “the colored wing of the Republican Party of Indianapolis . . . in open revolt against Harrison”⁴⁹ However, in 1892, Frederick Douglass was employed to keep colored delegates in line for Harrison’s attempt for a second nomination and was apparently successful.⁵⁰ While it was not possible to ascertain Harrison’s own reaction to these varieties of patronage problems, they do demonstrate that the issue of race was certainly a factor in the distribution of federal jobs.

When lynching of Negroes increased in the South after 1890,⁵¹ this fact did not escape Harrison’s presidential notice. In his first annual message to Congress in 1889, the President affirmed his stand against lawlessness in

⁴⁴ Senator Joseph P. Hawley to Harrison, February 10, 1890, *ibid.*

⁴⁵ Newspaper clipping from the Cincinnati [?] *Inquirer*, July 1, 1891, scrapbooks, XIII, 105-106, *ibid.*

⁴⁶ Clipping from the New York *Herald*, August 16, 1891, *ibid.*, 186.

⁴⁷ Clipping from the Cincinnati *Commercial Gazette*, July 16, 1891, *ibid.*, 8, 117, 124-25.

⁴⁸ Clipping from the Cincinnati *Commercial Gazette*, September 5, 1891, *ibid.*, 60-61. For Townshend’s comments see clipping from the Washington *Daily Journal*, September 25, 1891, *ibid.*, 116.

⁴⁹ Clipping from the New York *Sun*, June 21, 1891, *ibid.*, 90.

⁵⁰ Frederick Douglass to L. T. Michener, June 21, 1892, Michener Papers.

⁵¹ Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (Dallas, 1963), 269-73.

the South. "Surely no one," he said, "supposes that the present can be accepted as a permanent condition."⁵² Yet early in 1890 the short lived Afro-American League for the advancement of Negro rights conveyed to Harrison its conviction that the political parties had "ceased consistently to concern themselves with the denial to Afro-Americans of the rights and immunities guaranteed to them by the fundamental law of the land."⁵³ And in 1891 a delegation from the Virginia State Baptist Convention visited the President and implored him to do something about racial violence in the South. Harrison had just returned from a four week tour of the country during which he had said very little on the subject of southern oppression of the Negro, but he promised the delegation a letter discussing the problem. In the ensuing letter the President was obviously defensive about his record on civil rights: "I have endeavored to uphold the law as the single admissible rule of conduct for good citizens. I have appealed against race discrimination as to civil rights and immunities, and have asked that law abiding men of all creeds and colors should unite to discourage and suppress lawlessness. Lynchings are a reproach to any community . . ." On the other hand, the federal nature of the political system made Harrison feel that he had to limit his actions to verbal thrusts:

I have not time to explain to you the limitations of federal power further than to say that under the Constitution and laws, I am, in a large measure, without the power to interfere for the prevention or punishment of these offenses. You will not need to be assured that the Department of Justice will let no case pass that is one of the federal jurisdiction without the most strenuous endeavors to bring the guilty persons to punishment.

The President closed the letter with the promise that he would do what he could to "arouse the conscience of our people and to stimulate efficient efforts to reestablish the supremacy of the courts and public officials as the only proper agency of law enforcement."⁵⁴

Seven months later lynching received its first public presidential notice in Harrison's annual message to Congress on December 6, 1892. The message included what must have been the first plea for a federal antilynch law, a law which is still an unrealized dream more than three quarters of a century later:

⁵² First annual message, December 3, 1889, Richardson, *Messages*, IX, 56-57.

⁵³ Newspaper clipping sent to Harrison by T. Thomas Fortune, H. C. C. Astwood, *et al.*, of the Afro-American League, January 22, 1890, Harrison Papers. For more on the Afro-American League, see Leslie H. Fishel, Jr., and Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro American: A Documentary History* (Glenview, 1967), 325.

⁵⁴ Harrison to the Reverend H. H. Mitchell and others of the Virginia State Baptist Convention, May 21, 1892, *Public Papers*, 293-94.

EXECUTIVE MANSION
WASHINGTON.

May 21st, 1892.

Rev H. H. Mitchell and others,

Committee &c.

Gentlemen:-

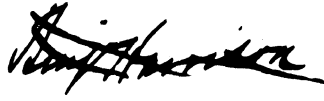
When you called upon me on the 13th day of May, just prior to my departure with Mrs Harrison, I expressed myself somewhat fully to you orally upon the subject of the Memorial which you submitted, and promised to respond in writing at the earliest practicable moment.

Those who have read my public addresses and official papers must be aware of the fact that I have felt the reproach which lawlessness has brought upon some of our communities. I have endeavored to hold up the law as the one single admissible rule of conduct for good citizens. I have appealed against race discriminations ^{As to avoid rights community} and have asked that law abiding men of all creeds and all colors should unite to discourage and to suppress lawlessness. Lynchings are a reproach to any community; they impeach the adequacy of our institutions for the punishment of crime; they brutalize the participants and shame our Christian civilization. I have not time to explain to you the limitations of the Federal power further than to say that under the Constitution and laws I am, in a large measure, without the power to interfere for the prevention or punishment of these offenses. You will not need to

be assured that the Department of Justice will let no case pass that is one of Federal jurisdiction without the most strenuous endeavors to bring the guilty persons to punishment. I will give the matter you have suggested the most serious consideration and you may be assured that my voice and help will be given to every effort to arouse the conscience of our people and to stimulate efficient efforts to re-establish the supremacy of the courts and public officers as the only ^{proper} ~~and~~ agency for the detection and punishment of crime and as ^{the only security} ~~a sure defense~~ of those who are falsely accused.

With great respect,

Very truly yours,



FACSIMILE OF HARRISON'S LETTER TO MEMBERS OF VIRGINIA STATE
BAPTIST CONVENTION.

Located in Benjamin Harrison Papers, Library of Congress.
Provided by George Sinkler.

The frequent lynchings of colored people accused of crime is without the excuse, which has sometimes been urged by mobs for failure to pursue the appointed methods for the punishment of crime, that the accused have an undue influence over courts and juries. Such activities are a reproach to a community where they occur, and so far as they can be made the subject of federal jurisdiction the strongest repressive legislation is demanded.⁵⁵

Racial discontent seems to have been greater during Harrison's administration than those of previous Presidents. As one newspaper stated: "President Harrison is in a peck of trouble about the color question. He pretends to be at ease but he is not."⁵⁶ While no written testimony from the President was unearthed on the subject, even the White House kitchen and stables were not without racial significance—according to the newspapers. Editors of the day took delight in calling attention to the complexion of the servants. One newspaper said, for example, and with apparent glee: "The servants [in Harrison's employ] are both black and white. The two waiters in the dining room are polite young darkies. Downstairs there is a black cook, but there will probably be a Frenchman when the [social] season begins. Over in the laundry, at the other end of the basement, there are two white women employed, so the service is about equally distributed." The President's carriage was still driven by one Albert Hawkins whose "shinning [*sic*] black face," however, did not show up quite so brilliantly in Harrison's "dark green livery as it did in the Cleveland cream broadcloth."⁵⁷ For an undisclosed reason, according to the Boston *Herald*, Hawkins, who reportedly drove for Grant, Hayes, Garfield, Arthur, and Cleveland, was later dismissed by Harrison. The Buffalo *Express* carried still another rumor: "It is said that Mrs. Harrison prefers a white coachman . . ."⁵⁸ The Pittsburgh *Dispatch* charged at one point that "all of the colored domestics" had been replaced by "Caucasians" and that either the President or his wife removed seven Democrats and "dismissed nine colored servants and put in nine white ones." However, on October 20, 1889, the Cincinnati *Commercial Gazette* said that Harrison's white German steward had taken another job and that "the White House kitchen is presided over by a colored woman cook." The colored cook, Dolly Johnson, was described as "a full, fine-looking woman, light of color and probably not much under thirty . . ."⁵⁹ Another Negro servant was described in this manner: "Mary is as black as the ace of spades and shows

⁵⁵ Fourth annual message, December 6, 1892, Richardson, *Messages*, IX, 332.

⁵⁶ Washington *Sunday Herald and Weekly National Intelligencer*, November 10, 1889, scrapbooks, IX, 15, Harrison Papers; see also an undated note from Blanche K. Bruce, ex-Negro senator from Mississippi in Harrison Papers.

⁵⁷ Newspaper clipping from the Cincinnati *Commercial Gazette*, September 29, 1889, scrapbooks, IX, 12, *ibid.*

⁵⁸ Boston *Herald*, August 7, 1890, *ibid.*, 91; Buffalo *Express*, July 25, 1890, *ibid.*, 192.

⁵⁹ Pittsburgh *Dispatch*, October 14, 1889, *ibid.*, 11; Cincinnati *Commercial Gazette*, October 20, 1889, *ibid.*, 12.

her white teeth on the slightest occasion.”⁶⁰ The validity of the charge that the Harrisons discharged all of their colored servants has not been determined. However, the discussion of the servants in the newspapers, with careful attention to their color and complexion, affords testimony on the racial tenor of the times.⁶¹

Harrison was, of course, conscious of this racial feeling and race prejudice in American life, North and South. He was rather lenient in his assessment of the status, hopes, and aspirations of the Negro. No evidence has been found that he expressed himself on the subject of race mixing, but his strong recommendation of the unsuccessful Federal Elections and aid to education bills reflected a genuine effort to reopen the attack upon the smoldering race problem, a step unique among Presidents during the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Harrison spoke vigorously, positively, strongly, and clearly on the race problem in his annual messages to Congress, and he called for a more complete inclusion of the Negro in American life. More unique was the comparative absence of the usual political hedging in his racial dialogue. However, he did not always take full advantage of opportunities outside official channels to influence public opinion. Although he considered himself powerless in the face of violation of Negro rights on the state level, further investigation might well show that in his strong advocacy of the Federal Elections Bill, the Blair Education Bill, and antilynching legislation, Harrison exerted greater leadership, no matter how unsuccessful, in matters of race than any of the post-Reconstruction Presidents prior to the twentieth century.

⁶⁰ Philadelphia *Press*, June 1, 1890, *ibid.*, 140-41.

⁶¹ One newspaper also took notice of an integrated egg roll on the White House grass: “It was suggestive to see how utterly unconscious of any ‘color line’ the children were. Pretty, belaced, and befurbeled [sic] Caucasian children tumbled and chased eggs down the green slopes with little Ethiopian companions so black, charcoal would make a white mark on them. The colored nurse would put her own cute little [youngster] in the same baby carriage with the child of her mistress, little white hands and little black hands gripping their Easter eggs in peaceful harmony. The children knew no race question or sectional issue.” Washington *Evening Star*, April 22, 1889, *ibid.*, 86. See also the April 7, 1890, issue of the same paper, *ibid.*, 101.