

# Book review on benjamin harrison: the american presidents series: the 23rd presid...

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Expectedly, many people in the US are still vague on who Benjamin Harrison really was. Some confuse him with his grandfather, William Harrison, while others confuse him with his great-grandfather, Benjamin Harrison. Well, it is this kind of confusion that Charles Calhoun seeks to demystify in his book *Benjamin Harrison: The American President's Series: The 23rd President, 1889-1893*. Not only does the author succeed in giving a clear picture of President Benjamin Harrison's life, but he also does this in a convincing way. The book is rich with vivid details, and gives a good account of the events that led to the president's election and defeat in the subsequent elections. As a matter of fact, the book is an eye-opener into one of the little known presidents, and the author does a convincing job of revealing who President Benjamin Harrison is and some of the president's achievements, which many do not know. However, for those seeking some dirty dossiers about the president, they will not get them in this book; the author does not dwell so much on those.

It is no doubt that President Benjamin Harrison came from a family with a rich history in the American Politics. As Calhoun (8) puts it " few American presidents have descended from lines more distinguished for public service than the one that produced Benjamin Harrison." During the 17th century, more than five Benjamin Harrison's had participated in the development of Virginia. One of the most famous in the Harrison's family was Benjamin Harrison V - a representative of Virginia in the Continental Congress. Later, Benjamin Harrison V headed the Declaration of Independence committee and went on to become the governor of the State of Virginia. Another prominent figure in the Harrison's family was Benjamin V's son, William

Henry. William Harrison, popularly known as Tippecanoe, also went on to win the US presidency later.

On August 20, 1833, Benjamin Harrison was born to John Scott Harrison - William Harrison's third son- and Elizabeth Irwin. Although born to a family with a longstanding history in the American politics, Calhoun depicts a man who had to struggle in order to make a mark in the US politics. This contradicts the popular belief that people born in some families have an easy sailing in the public and political life. In his early childhood, Benjamin Harrison inculcated the culture of reading the bible and attending church, and this Christian foundation later played a major role in his public life. The young Harrison also began to hone his public speaking skills at an early age, which served him well at a later date. The young Harrison also had clear vision on the nation's economy and the systems of government. On the economy, for instance, Harrison believed that commerce was absolutely necessary for the welfare, happiness, and prosperity of the country. These are some of the things which shaped Benjamin Harrison's ideals.

With his training as a lawyer, Benjamin Harrison soon became a " master at penetration analysis and irresistible persuasion" . These skills, combined with his devotion to hard work, a good understanding of the nation's history and problems, won the hearts of many republicans and it was only a matter of time before he became the party's presidential candidate. However, before then, Harrison had to prove his worth. It is essential to note that Harrison had served as an attorney in the state of Indianapolis, and as a secretary of the Republican's committee in the same state. Benjamin Harrison had also served as a reporter in the supreme court of Indianapolis,

and as the commander of the Seventh Regiment of Indiana Volunteers, rising through the ranks to become the brigadier general. Although these events made Harrison gain some fame, it was not enough to win the 1876 attempt to be a governor in the state of Indiana. It was not until 1881 that Benjamin Harrison succeeded to become the state's representative to the senate. In the senate, Benjamin Harrison supported the protection of the nation's industries to foster development, and also supported reforms in the public service. The senator also persistently criticized President Cleveland's veto of bills meant to take care of veterans' pension. This made Harrison win the support of the veterans, and it proved to be crucial in winning the Republican's party nominations in 1888.

Benjamin Harrison was also a true believer in government activism, and strongly believed in the government's ability to foster economic development; these were some of the things which resonated well with the Republican Party philosophy at that period. Also, an impressive track record as a soldier, lawyer, senator, and party spokesman helped Harrison to win the party's presidential ticket.

During the election period, Harrison proved to be eloquent and he effectively sold the party's philosophy. Although he lost the popular vote, Benjamin Harrison went on to win the majority vote in the Electoral College. Harrison's slow and steady rise to the national politics as narrated by the author shows a man determined to break barriers and achieve the highest degree of success; this is contrary to the belief that the President made an easy way to victory given his family's rich political history. Although he is not among the president's rated highly by historians, we see a president who was

determined to carve a niche for himself, and fighting for the ideals of the Republican Party. This is only the tip of the iceberg; Charles Calhoun goes ahead to show a president who achieved a lot in a span of four years. Calhoun (3) writes “ once in power, Harrison and his party governed energetically. On the domestic front, Harrison was a legislative president far more than most other nineteenth-century chief executives.” This is an eye-opener. Was it not for Calhoun’s book, who would have ever thought that President Benjamin Harrison did something worth writing home? Calhoun depicts a crafty president who employed a number of strategies to achieve his agenda while in office. For example, the president would issue veto threats to influence the shape of legislation, give well-timed messages to drum up public support, and convene informal dinners at the White House to consult with the congressmen and sell his agenda. Using these strategies “ Harrison’s first Congress passed an impressive array of measures, which included the McKinley Tariff Act, the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, the Sherman Silver Purchase Act, the Dependent Pension Act, the Forest Reserve Act, and many others” .

On foreign policy, the president managed to pursue a program aimed at increasing the country’s trade. The president also managed to steer the country through medium-sized crises and substantially expanded the country’s navy. President Harrison also “ carried the presidency to the people”; he traversed to almost all the corners of the country explaining the party’s vision to the nation. As a born-again Christian, the president always reminded the nation of religious themes that emphasized republicanism such as the need for equal opportunity, and the need for order. The president also

empathized on the need for strong American institutions that allowed people to make a good living, save for their old age, and make a better prospect for future generations; these calls resonated very well with the Republican Party's ideals.

At some point, Henry Adams wrote that Benjamin Harrison “ was an excellent President, a man of ability and force; perhaps the best President the Republican Party had put forward since Lincoln's death” . However, when Harrison was up for re-election, he lost badly to a man he had defeated four year earlier. How can someone explain such a contradiction? Well, Charles Calhoun vividly explores such a strange ambivalence in President Benjamin Harrison's life; a president's life compounded with success and failure in equal measure.

Well, after reading Calhoun's book, readers will appreciate that the presidency requires a mix of personal qualities and political skills. Anyone who falls short of these important ingredients can as well forget about electoral success in the quest for the nation's presidency. Although President Benjamin Harrison was a true statesman, a good public orator, a man with intellect and high moral principles, he did not resonate well with the party leaders. As a result, these subtle things greatly impaired the president's performance of essential party tasks. Moreover, the president did not stir the public with magnetic solutions to their problems.

Having lost the popular vote in the 1888 presidential elections and won the Electoral College vote on a slim margin, President Benjamin Harrison failed to improve on his weak political strength. Instead, the president's political strength declined with time. Therefore, it is a little wonder that the president

lost the 1892 elections to Grover Cleveland in a dramatic reversal of events. The 1892 elections provided many firsts. It was the first time two candidates who had served as presidents faced off, and it was also the first time a president who had lost in the elections earlier went on to win a second term. Nonetheless, the seeds of President Harrison's loss in the 1892 elections had been engrafted earlier during his administration.

For instance, during the mid-term elections in 1890, the Republicans had lost control of the House of Representatives. Two years later, during the Republican Party's convention, a revolt within the party ranks threatened to tear the party apart. President Harrison's main challengers - James Blaine and William McKinley - showed a very good performance against the incumbent, and this denied the president a united party ballot. The president's failure to listen to advice, and impulsive treatment of the Republican Party leaders alienated many of his supporters. Also, the way the president handled the party's support of James Blaine cost him his re-election. The president remained very bitter about this, and kept on seething with anger instead of concentrating on winning re-election with a united party.

The president's failure to resolve some important national issues led the voters to think of him as an uncaring president who did not want to listen to them. For example, the McKinley Tariff enacted in 1890 angered millions of people. The public felt that the high prices they were experiencing stemmed from the government's protection of corporations. Also, the president had failed to act decisively on labor strikes. The public felt that by failing to act on the strikes, the president was supporting monopoly in industries and the

banking sector. Again, the public was not satisfied with the Republican's legislations during the president first term in office. For example, the Congress had allowed a very ambitious Civil War veterans' bill, which unnecessarily stretched the country's budget. To some people, this money was wasted on non-priority issues. These are some of the things Calhoun lays as the main causes of the president's loss. Nonetheless, the author paints a picture of a man who was denied re-election on frivolous grounds, but left future successors with a feel of the great promise of presidential energy.

### **Works Cited**

Calhoun, Charles W. Benjamin Harrison: The American Presidents Series: The 23rd President, 1889-1893. Ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 2005.