

The Last Reconstruction President? Benjamin Harrison and the Fight for Voting Rights

Charles W. Calhoun
East Carolina University

The reader will note that the main title of this article, “The Last Reconstruction President,” is followed by a question mark. That’s because what I have to say is in the manner of a speculation, but, as I hope will become clear, my aim is to invoke a particular perspective for an appreciation of Benjamin Harrison’s leadership.

It has been an enduring truism, if not to say cliché, of American history that the disputed presidential election of 1876 ended in a compromise that marked the end of the noble endeavor that was Reconstruction, with its attendant defense of African American rights. As I have argued elsewhere, this interpretation of an enormously complex series of events is seriously flawed, if not dead wrong.¹ But I will not here revisit the much-disputed question of an alleged compromise of 1877. Instead, I take as my framework the often-overlooked question of what happened *after* 1877 to what we may term the “Reconstruction impulse.” By that I mean the desire among Republicans to carry forward the ideals and objectives of Reconstruction. I would submit that that impulse to uphold democracy in the South did not entirely die out in 1877, that it persisted among many late-nineteenth-century Republicans who hoped somehow to see its aims truly fulfilled. And I would argue that among those Republicans few emerged as more earnest exemplars of that persistent Reconstruction impulse than Benjamin Harrison.

Benjamin Harrison had been a champion of African American voting rights for years before he ran for president in 1888, and the issue played an important role in his campaign for the White House that year. And, once in office, he made voting rights legislation a signal element in his administration’s agenda. When that project narrowly succumbed to legislative barter, I would submit, the Reconstruction impulse finally died, not to be resuscitated for more than half a century.

At the outset, it is important to note that Benjamin Harrison’s support for African American voting rights reflected his fundamental commitment to republicanism—republicanism with a small *r*—the ideal of representative government in which sovereignty resides in the people and that only their consent, normally expressed through voting, can endow governmental power with legitimacy. As early as his college days, Harrison, a deeply religious man, looked upon politics as a moral enterprise, in which “members of civil society owe to that society . . . certain duties for the neglect of which God will not hold them guiltless.” Throughout his life, he believed that “the repository of all power, the originator of all policy, is the people” and that “the foundation of our structure of government is the principle of control by the majority.” And the essence of republican rule by the majority was the equality of all persons. “Every man,” Harrison insisted, “is possessed of an immortal spirit of equal value in the sight of God,” and “The theory upon which our Government is builded is that every qualified elector shall have an equal influence at the ballot-box with every other.” This God-given equality and majority rule

¹See, for instance, Charles W. Calhoun, *Conceiving a New Republic: The Republican Party and the Southern Question: 1869–1900* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006). I am grateful to John McKivigan and Charles Hyde for inviting me to participate in the 2025 Frederick Douglass Symposium. I salute Charlie and his team for all they have accomplished since my last visit to the Benjamin Harrison House more than a decade ago.

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represented the indispensable foundation of the Republic. American representative government faced its greatest challenge in the Civil War, and Harrison believed that the Union and republicanism triumphed at the end of the war, because, he said, “God has desired that this experiment of free government should have a more perfect trial.”²

But how would that “more perfect trial” play out? What kind of nation was the United States going to be after the war? Would it truly be a republic? In the immediate aftermath, Benjamin Harrison believed that the formerly enslaved African Americans must be free to enjoy basic rights. But, like many other members of his party, he expressed an initial hesitancy about Black suffrage, believing that those who had recently emerged from bondage might lack the understanding and education necessary to exercise the franchise capably. But the recalcitrance of southern Whites and the oppressive regimes they immediately established under President Andrew Johnson’s so-called plan of restoration, quickly changed Harrison’s perspective. He soon came to believe that African Americans must have the right to vote if they were ever going to protect themselves and their interests and ensure their effective freedom and full participation in the governance of the newly reconstituted republic. And yet, even after the establishment of new southern state governments under congressional Reconstruction, even after the enactment of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, and even after the passage of Federal Enforcement Acts to uphold those amendments and African Americans’ right to vote—even after all these measures—violent resistance against Blacks and southern White Republicans persisted. In 1874, Harrison told a campaign audience in Lafayette: “That land”—meaning the South—“is full of blood; and . . . who can doubt that these rivers of blood which the Southern earth has drunk since the war . . . call with a mighty voice for the condemnation of the world and the vengeance of God?”³

It was clear to Harrison and many other like-minded Republicans that more must be done to achieve the full and unfettered exercise of the elective franchise in the South. But that year, 1874—the year he made the Lafayette speech—turned out to be a pivotal year in the devolution of Reconstruction. In the congressional elections that year, for the first time since before the Civil War, the Democratic Party—dominated by its southern wing—won control of the national House of Representatives. The new House would include sixty-one former Confederate officers. This election, in 1874, ushered in a long period of divided government at the national level, during which neither party held clear control of all three entities, the presidency and both houses of Congress, and this divided government persisted until Benjamin Harrison assumed power in 1889. During this decade and a half of governmental stalemate, the prospects for the passage of necessary new legislation to close the loopholes in Reconstruction and protect the right to vote remained essentially nil.

Nonetheless, few Republicans were more fervent than Harrison in their belief that the Republican Party must not abandon the formerly enslaved. In 1876 he declared, “We entered into an obligation [as] solemn as a covenant with our God to save these people from the dastardly outrages that their rebel masters are committing upon them in the South.” But the Democrats won the Senate as well as the House in 1878, and they promptly attempted to repeal existing

² Benjamin Harrison, untitled and undated essay, ca. 1851–1852, Benjamin Harrison Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., hereafter cited as Harrison Papers; *Speeches of Benjamin Harrison*, comp. Charles Hedges (New York: United States Book Company, 1892), 12, 56, 241, 545; Benjamin Harrison, *Views of an Ex-President*, comp. Mary Lord Harrison (Indianapolis: Bowen-Merrill, 1901), 13.

³ Unidentified newspaper clipping [Harrison, speech at Lafayette, Indiana, September 30, 1874] Scrapbook #1 Harrison Papers.

Reconstruction laws wholesale. Only the veto of their efforts by President Rutherford B. Hayes prevented them from doing so. To Harrison, it seemed that the “serpent” of states’ rights had not been destroyed by the war but was again “gathering its wounded parts together to strike terror and destruction to the Union.” In 1880, three years after the supposed abandonment of Reconstruction, Harrison told a campaign audience that “the underlying and overlying question of the hour . . . is the issue of free elections and an honest count. . . . When every black friend of the flag under which we marched, . . . is made secure in all of his personal and political rights, then, and not until then, is the contest over.”⁴

But as time wore on, Harrison’s hopes about what could be done grew dim. In 1883, the Supreme Court nullified the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which aimed to establish equal access to public accommodations. Harrison, who now held a seat in the Senate, told a gathering of African Americans in Indianapolis that it might take a constitutional amendment to secure those rights, but he also confessed his doubt “whether in the present condition of parties in this country, we could ever pass such [an] amendment again.”⁵

By the early 1880s the solid Democratic South had fully formed, and it went far toward putting Grover Cleveland in the presidential chair in 1884. At that time, the three states of Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina all had majority Black populations. African Americans overwhelmingly sided with the Republicans, but because of the Democratic Party’s suppression of the Black vote, Cleveland won all three of those states. Had the Black vote been cast and counted, Cleveland would have lost those states, which would have given the presidency to his Republican opponent James G. Blaine. This fraudulent outcome in 1884 essentially nationalized the issue of vote suppression in the South. For the first time, Northern Republicans saw that Democrats’ repressive tactics in the South led to defeat in a national election in which they were directly involved and interested. The bulldozing of Black voters in the South, Harrison charged, was not only wrong in itself, but it also resulted in the “disfranchisement of white Republicans in the north.” “The men who put down the Rebellion,” he argued, should “insist upon having an equal voice at least with the Confederates in the administration of the Government.”⁶

Less than two weeks after Cleveland’s inauguration, Harrison wrote a fellow Hoosier: “The disfranchisement of Republicans in the South is a question, the gravity of which cannot be exaggerated; but,” he added ruefully, “what can we do?”⁷ The Democrats taking power had few incentives to enforce existing federal voting protections in the South, and, even under Republican administrations, securing convictions had proved nearly impossible. And the prospect for any new enforcement legislation seemed dead. Perhaps, Harrison speculated, the only solution was to try first to bolster the Republican Party in the South by splitting the White vote on the tariff or other financial questions.

The next year, 1886, Harrison’s own bid to retain his Senate seat brought home to him the impact of unfair election methods. Hoosier Democrats had gerrymandered the state’s legislative districts, so that even though the aggregate tally for Republican candidates in the legislative elections that year surpassed the Democrats by some 10,000 votes, the Democrats managed to win a slight plurality of General Assembly seats and elect a Democrat to replace Harrison in the Senate. For Harrison, this anti-democratic maneuvering brought back to center stage the issue of

⁴ *Indianapolis Journal*, 2 October 1876, 29 September 1879, 21 August 1880.

⁵ *Indianapolis Journal*, 23 October 1883.

⁶ Benjamin Harrison to M. C. Garber, 6 December 1884, Harrison Papers.

⁷ Benjamin Harrison to W. W. Slaughter, 14 March 1885, Harrison Papers.

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equal suffrage. On the eve of the presidential election year of 1888, he decried the “abominable, cruel, bloody . . . treatment of the poor blacks in the South,” and declared that “the one overwhelming, towering first question of the day is the restoration of equal suffrage throughout this land.”⁸

Harrison’s accent on this theme continued into the winter and spring of 1888, in the run-up to the Republican National Convention that year. He reminded audiences of the anomalous consequence of emancipation, which increased the population base in the South for assigning congressional seats and electoral votes, but because of the suppression of Black voting, White voters in those states wielded substantially more power than their counterparts in the North. Harrison condemned as a “farce” the fact that in several districts in Alabama, for instance, the total vote cast for congressmen did not reach 2,000 per district, while in most northern districts the average vote ranged from 30 to 50,000. Hence, the issue of the right to vote, he insisted, “is the dominant question at the foundation of our Government, . . . embracing all others, because it involves the question of a free and fair tribunal to which every question shall be submitted for arbitrament and final determination.” Harrison gave attention to financial issues, but he scoffed at the worshippers “at the shrine of Mammon” who feared that raising the suffrage question would “disturb the public pulse” and damage trade. “[T]here is no peace,” he declared, and “there can be no security for commerce, no security for the perpetuation of our Government, except by the establishment of justice the country over.”⁹

Harrison, of course, went on to win the Republican nomination that year. And we know that the ensuing fight with Cleveland and the Democrats became known as the great tariff battle of 1888, and that Harrison himself spoke frequently on the tariff issue in his front-porch campaign. But if Harrison modulated his treatment of the suffrage question, he also rejected suggestions that the party ignore it. As he told one advisor, “I would not be willing myself to purchase the Presidency by a compact of silence upon this question.” The “question of a free ballot,” he said, “is one of the few essential things,” whose settlement should precede “all others in natural order.” Such, too, was the belief of Republican Party orator Frederick Douglass, who campaigned for Harrison and told an audience in 1888, “the whole question of the future of the negro in the south is involved in the election now before you.” And, Douglass added, “Great as is the question of the Tariff, the question of national integrity, of national honor is greater. It is far more important that the nation’s soul shall be preserved than that nation’s pocket shall be protected.” For his part, Harrison drew an explicit link between economic issues and the suffrage question. “There would be no tariff question now,” he said, “if the labor vote of the south had not been suppressed.” As he told a visiting delegation of voters, “this great question of a free ballot, so much disturbed by race questions in the South, would be settled this year if the men of the South who believe with us upon the great question of the protection of American industries would throw off old prejudices and vote their convictions upon that question.”¹⁰

But not many White southerners threw off their old prejudices in 1888. The Solid South remained solid, and Cleveland won every former slave state. But, except for Connecticut and New Jersey, Harrison won a solid North and the presidency. He also carried with him clear

⁸ Benjamin Harrison, *General Harrison at Danville* (pamphlet, n.p., November [1887]), 5; *Indianapolis Journal*, 21 December 1887.

⁹ Harrison, *Speeches*, 16, 21.

¹⁰ Benjamin Harrison to Whitelaw Reid, 27 September 1888, Reid Family Papers, Library of Congress; Frederick Douglass, manuscript speech on behalf of Benjamin Harrison, Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress; Harrison, *Speeches*, 162.

Republican majorities in the House and the Senate, the first time the Republicans had won both the presidency and the Congress since the early 1870s. Now in 1889/90 they were in a position to act.

During the transition period before they took power, Republicans debated the priority they should give to the many issues facing the country. That they would tackle the tariff was clear, but Harrison and others again argued that they should not turn a blind eye to the suffrage question. Before heading to Washington, he told his old comrades in the local Grand Army of the Republic [GAR] post that he hoped to hear “a bugle call throughout the land demanding a pure ballot. A free ballot, honestly expressed and fairly counted, is the main safeguard of our institutions, and its suppression under any circumstances cannot be tolerated.” Critics such as the *New York Times* labeled Harrison’s GAR speech a “loose declamation” and “not very becoming for a President-elect.” Frederick Douglass, on the other hand, insisted that Black suffrage “affects the fundamental principles that underlie . . . our republican government,” and he urged Harrison to do whatever was necessary to secure “a genuine republican government in the south.” The point was underscored a few weeks later by the cold-blooded murder of an Arkansas Republican who had mounted a legal challenge to the fraudulent methods used against him in his recent run for Congress.¹¹

Harrison fully understood the urgency. In his inaugural address, he frankly attributed the economic backwardness and other problems of the South to “the prejudices and paralysis of slavery [that] continue to hang upon the skirts of progress.” “The freedom of the ballot is a condition of our national life,” he declared, “and no power vested in Congress or in the Executive to secure or perpetuate it should remain unused upon occasion.” He argued that if states refused to defend the right to vote, Congress should act. He especially cited congressional elections, over which Congress’s right to impose regulations stood clearly embedded in the Constitution. “The people of all the Congressional districts,” Harrison said, “have an equal interest that the election in each [district] shall truly express the views and wishes of a majority of the qualified electors residing within it.”¹²

Harrison took office on March 4, 1889, but the fifty-first Congress elected with him would not convene until the following December. The intervening months witnessed turmoil in the South that underscored Harrison’s call for action. The state of Florida had seen flagrant violations of existing federal election law during the 1888 campaign, but when Harrison’s attorney general launched an investigation, armed groups resisted the serving of arrest warrants and the calling of witnesses. They murdered at least one potential witness and a deputy marshal, and, ultimately, the Florida prosecutions yielded only three convictions. Reports reached Washington of “a rapidly growing revolutionary tendency in the South, tending towards a guerrilla system of warfare.” General William T. Sherman declared publicly that “these negroes must have the rights which the Constitution gives them . . . and the war won’t be over until that is done.” In Virginia, in the fall of 1889, the gubernatorial election campaign witnessed widespread fraud and intimidation. Hoosier Republican Congressman J. B. Cheadle, campaigning in Virginia, reported that “there is not even a semblance” of “a republican form of

¹¹ *New York Times*, 2, 3 January 1889; *The Papers of Frederick Douglass*, Series 1, ed. John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979–1992), 5:399–403; Kenneth C. Barnes, *Who Killed John Clayton?: Political Violence and the Emergence of the New South, 1861–1893* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), 70–78.

¹² James D. Richardson, *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789–1902* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of National Literature and Art, 1903), 9:8, 13.

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government” in that state. He urged Harrison to use his upcoming annual message to alert Congress and the country “to the imperative duty of securing to the humblest citizen his right of suffrage.” Similarly, Louis T. Michener, Harrison’s good friend and political advisor, sent the White House a message from a meeting of Black leaders in Indianapolis, who called for “some action [to] . . . give to the colored people of the South, some protection in the exercise of their rights as citizens.” Michener acknowledged that new voting rights laws might lead to bloodshed, but, he wrote, “better blood-shed than slavery and outrages and murder for political reasons in this civilized nation.”¹³

Once again, Harrison needed no prompting. In his December 1889 annual message, he put the question directly to White southerners and the nation at large: “When and under what conditions is the black man to have a free ballot? . . . When is that equality of influence which our form of government was intended to secure to the electors to be restored?” He called upon Congress to use “its well-defined constitutional powers” to “secure to all our people a free exercise of the right of suffrage.” “This generation,” Harrison said, “should courageously face these grave questions, and not leave them as a heritage of woe to the next.” At last in power after fifteen years of divided government, Harrison and congressional Republicans fully appreciated the grave responsibility of the moment. As one Kansas representative put it, “If the Republican party allows this opportunity to pass without effecting a remedy, I fear its opportunity will not return.”¹⁴

In short order, committees in the House and Senate set about framing new protective legislation. They considered several approaches, but followed the president’s lead in favoring an expansion of federal supervision of congressional elections. The Lodge Federal Elections Bill, named for Massachusetts representative Henry Cabot Lodge, outlined the mechanism for the enhanced supervision: When a body of citizens within a congressional district requested intervention, the local federal judge could designate supervisors to oversee the registering of voters, the conduct of elections, and the counting of votes. These federal supervisors would forward their vote tabulations, along with those of state officials, to a federal board of canvassers who would decide which candidate for Congress won. Should the canvassers’ decision come under challenge, a federal judge would resolve the dispute.

Heretofore—since the end of Reconstruction—Democratic state and local election officials had determined outcomes in congressional elections. The bill’s provision that federal canvassers and federal judges could henceforth potentially perform that key function alarmed White southerners and their northern Democratic allies. Such a reworking of the system could possibly recast the political make-up of the South, with consequent reverberations for the political stalemate in the nation at large.

For that reason, the Democrats fought fiercely against the Lodge Bill in the summer of 1890. They branded the measure a “force bill” designed to resurrect the so-called horrors of Reconstruction. In the House of Representatives, Speaker Thomas Reed exercised iron control, and the Republicans passed the bill fairly quickly. In the Senate, however, with its obstructionist rules, the Democrats dragged out debate on a pending tariff bill to prevent the chamber from

¹³ Calhoun, *Conceiving a New Republic*, 229–230; E. E. Baldwin to John Sherman, 9 May 1889, John Sherman Papers, Library of Congress, hereafter cited as Sherman Papers; *Indianapolis Journal*, 26 September 1889; J. B. Cheadle to Benjamin Harrison, 16 November 1889, L. T. Michener to E. W. Halford, 1 October 1889, Harrison Papers.

¹⁴ Richardson, *Messages and Papers*, 9:55–56; Harrison Kelley to Albion W. Tourgée, 7 January 1890, Albion W. Tourgée Papers, Chautauqua County Historical Society, Westfield, New York, hereafter cited as Tourgée Papers.

moving on to the Lodge Bill. As Republicans considered their options, eyes turned to President Harrison, who complained that the situation in the Senate was “very annoying and discouraging.” In White House meetings, he told senators that voting for the bill was their “highest duty.” His office staff cultivated public support by providing the press with extracts from Harrison’s inaugural address and annual message endorsing elections legislation. Newspapers reported that he was “leaving no stone unturned to let the Republican Senators know that he wants the [Lodge] bill passed.” “It can be authoritatively stated that President Harrison’s views have undergone no change whatever,” reported the *Indianapolis Journal*. “He believes in a federal election bill, and is very deeply concerned in the prospect of a failure to pass the bill.”¹⁵

But Republicans could not muster enough votes to limit debate on the tariff, and some who placed greater emphasis on the tariff began to suggest that the elections bill be shelved. Finally, Republican senators agreed to open the way for the tariff by delaying the Lodge Bill and giving it first priority in the next session of Congress in December 1890. Senate backers expressed confidence in the bill’s passage at that time, but others had doubts. As Frederick Douglass pointed out, “What if we gain the tariff and many other good things if in doing it the soul of the party and nation is lost?”¹⁶

While these events unfolded, 1890 also witnessed the midterm congressional election campaign. Railing against Republican activism in several areas, the Democrats accused their opponents of inflicting the country with tariff-driven high prices and profligate spending by the “Billion Dollar Congress.” In their condemnation of the elections bill, they pulled out all the stops. The result brought a massive shift in the House of Representatives, reducing the Republicans to eighty-eight seats while the Democrats garnered two-hundred thirty-five. In a sense, the Lodge Bill proved a godsend to Democrats, especially in the South, where they raised the specter of a revived Reconstruction. As a result, Republicans saw their congressional representation from the old slave states fall from twenty-five seats to four. Some southern Republicans believed that the Lodge Bill backers had paved the way for the Democrats. One discouraged Alabama Republican wrote the national party chairman, “The Republican Party must get out of the ‘Negro rut’ if they desire any success in this country.”¹⁷

But when the Republican members returned to Washington for the second session of the outgoing Congress, in December of 1890, many Republicans saw the midterm election as an object lesson in why new legislation was needed. President Harrison agreed. He saw the recent election as a “disaster”—all the more reason to use his annual message to voice his fervent support for the Lodge Bill. Numerous times over the years, he argued, Congress had enacted legislation regulating national elections. But existing Federal law remained “just short of effectiveness,” because state authorities still held “all control over the certification which establishes the *prima facie* right to a seat in the House of Representatives.” The Lodge Bill would rectify this flaw. The President dismissed the Democrats’ overwrought warnings of a new “force bill.” “Every law,” he noted, whatever its subject, “has force behind it.” “The qualifications of an elector,” he said, “must be sought in the law, not in the opinions, prejudices,

¹⁵ Elijah W. Halford Diary, 14, 15 August 1890, Benjamin Harrison to Mary Scott Dimmick, 16 August 1890, Benjamin Harrison Papers [privately held at the time of my research by Benjamin Harrison Walker, whose collection was subsequently deposited at the Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site, Indianapolis]; *New York Times*, 19 August 1890; *Chicago Tribune*, 18 August 1890; *Indianapolis Journal*, 17 August 1890.

¹⁶ Frederick Douglass to George F. Hoar, 2 September 1890, George F. Hoar Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.

¹⁷ J. H. Purnell to M. S. Quay, 19 December 1890, Sherman Papers.

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or fears of any class, however powerful. The path of the elector to the ballot box must be free from the ambush of fear and the enticements of fraud.”¹⁸

Old-time Radical Republican, Albion Tourgée, saluted the president for the “courage and statesmanship” of his “firm convictions.” Nonetheless, in the Senate, Democrats launched a prolonged all-out attack against the Lodge Bill. They claimed that the midterm elections represented an “emphatic, resounding condemnation” of the measure, after which, as one southern Democrat put it, the Republicans could not “warm the cold fingers of this cadaver.” The Republicans’ aim, said another Democrat, was simply to subject the South to “negro ascendancy and party despotism.” While the Democrats filibustered, the Democratic press branded Harrison “a schemer” conspiring to help Republicans bring his “pet measure” to a vote. But as one congressional ally noted, the president “feels deeply the humiliation, and I believe he would rather die trying to protect the rights of American citizens, than to live and not make the effort.”¹⁹

Republicans went toe-to-toe with the Democrats in the debate, but, as it turned out, Republicans were not unanimously behind the Lodge Bill. The principal dissenters were senators from western silver-mining states who colluded with southern Democrats to win support for the free coinage of silver. As one Colorado Republican senator baldly put it, “There are many things more important and vital to the welfare of this nation than that the colored citizens of the South shall vote.” In the end, after weeks of debate, enough western Republicans joined the Democrats in a move to cut off consideration of the bill and take up another subject. The motion carried, and with that dramatic stroke, the Lodge Bill was dead. As one Harrison ally lamented, “The confederacy and the Western mining camps” had joined forces to “betray the Republican party and the rights of citizenship for silver.”²⁰

President Harrison did not disguise his disappointment. In a rare newspaper interview, he asserted, “That the majority shall rule is an underlying principle of our institutions. . . . It will not do for the people of any section to say that they must be let alone; that it is a local question to be settled by the States of whether we shall have honest elections or not.” But the chance for a resuscitation of the Lodge Bill seemed remote, given the Democratic control of the next House recently elected. Whether the suffrage question would become “a dominant issue” in the future, Harrison told the interviewer, would depend “upon how much the public conscience is quickened regarding the principle of right.” On that point, he was not hopeful. A few months later, in August 1891, he told a Vermont audience, “the prejudices of generations are not like marks upon the blackboard, that can be rubbed out with a sponge. They are more like the deep glacial lines that the years have left in the rock, but the water, when that surface is exposed to its quiet, gentle, and perpetual influence, wears even these out.”²¹

In his third annual message at the end of 1891, Harrison again raised the issue of “a free ballot and equal representation,” but he forbore recommending a reconsideration of the Lodge Bill. Instead, he proposed a bipartisan commission, to be appointed by the Supreme Court, to investigate how to secure “to every elector a free and unmolested exercise of the suffrage.” Even

¹⁸ Benjamin Harrison to Howard Cale, 17 November 1890, Harrison Papers; Richardson, *Messages and Papers*, 9:128–129.

¹⁹ Albion W. Tourgée to Benjamin Harrison, 2 December 1890, Harrison Papers; *Congressional Record*, 51st Congress, 2nd Session, 245, 459; *New York Times*, 30 December 1890; Harrison Kelley to Mr. and Mrs. Albion W. Tourgée, 1 January 1891, Tourgée Papers.

²⁰ *Congressional Record*, 51st Congress, 2nd Session, 873; John C. Spooner to J. M. Bundy, 27 January 1891, John Coit Spooner Papers, Library of Congress.

²¹ *New York Tribune*, 17 March 1891; Harrison, *Speeches*, 543.

this modest proposal had no chance of enactment. Moreover, while prospects for federal action to protect the right of suffrage faded, the dangers to African Americans' physical safety multiplied. Harrison became the first president to publicly attack lynching, which he said "shame[s] our Christian civilization." He urged Congress to enact "the strongest repressive legislation" wherever lynching came under federal jurisdiction. But, again, he could not realistically hope that the Democrats would act. In the South, Harrison's attempts at moral suasion fell on deaf ears, and vigilante violence continued.²²

Despite the Senate vote killing the Lodge Bill, Harrison's efforts had won him honor and appreciation among the nation's Blacks. Frederick Douglass, who had held office during the administration, said it was "To the President [that] the credit is due for creating the bill in the first place, and then" using "[h]is moral influence, as well as his official indorsement and assistance" on its behalf. Harrison's efforts, Douglass said, "should endear him to the colored people as long as he lives."²³

White Democrats in the South had quite another view. Indeed, after the defeat of the Lodge Bill, Democrats in the southern states felt freer to institute "legal" suppression of the Black vote through such mechanisms as poll taxes, literacy tests, and the grandfather clause. Moreover, the bill's defeat proved a pivotal moment in American politics. Democrats North and South tarred the measure with the odious label "force bill" and portrayed it as a measure not to protect Black voting but to oppress southern Whites. Grover Cleveland, running against Harrison again in 1892, condemned the bill as "a most atrocious measure" and "a direct attack upon the spirit and theory of our Government." In his campaign for re-election that year, Harrison recognized the futility posed by a public attitude growing increasingly negative, and so he forbore calling explicitly for new federal legislation. Instead, he repeated his suggestion for a commission to study election wrongdoing, and expressed the hope that it could be "corrected by the states." The compilers of the Republican campaign textbook for 1892 took a full retreat from the Lodge Bill, claiming that although Republicans regarded free and fair elections as "dear," the party was in "no sense committed to this bill, or to any other particular method of curing the evil of dishonest elections."²⁴

Cleveland won the election, and the Democrats carried Congress. Benefitting from vote suppression schemes, Cleveland amassed huge majorities in the South, contributing to his national edge of more than 360,000 votes. In the new House, Democrats would hold a 60-percent majority, though a smaller six-seat margin in the Senate. Theodore Roosevelt, a member of Harrison's administration and a future president, concluded that the 1892 election demonstrated "the inadvisability of legislation providing for Federal control of elections" because "the people at large . . . would not sustain such an attempt." When the Democrats took power, they lost little time in repealing voting rights legislation that had originated in the enforcement laws of the early 1870s. In subsequent years, southern Democrats perfected their suppression of Black suffrage, and Republican calls for measures to protect the right to vote dwindled. In 1896, Republican William McKinley ran for president almost exclusively on economic issues. When he won, he gave an inaugural address that claimed that "free and fair elections are . . . more universally

²² Richardson, *Messages and Papers*, 9:210–211; *Public Papers and Addresses of Benjamin Harrison* (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1893), 294.

²³ *Indianapolis Journal*, 1 June 1892.

²⁴ *New York Times*, 14, 19 July 1892; *Proceedings of the Tenth Republican National Convention Held in the City of Minneapolis, Minnesota, June 7, 8, 9, and 10, 1892* (Minneapolis: Harrison & Smith, 1892), 141; Republican National Committee, *The Republican Campaign Text-Book for 1892* (New York: Brodix Publishing, 1892), 197–199.

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enjoyed to-day than ever before.” Along with this flight of fancy, McKinley hailed the recent election as demonstrating unity in the country and promised White southerners he would do nothing to disturb it.²⁵

During the fifteen years of government stalemate preceding Harrison’s term, the insidious Myth of the Lost Cause had become accepted more and more widely, and Americans, both northern and southern, acquiesced in the myth’s practical application in Jim Crow repression. By 1896, Harrison himself reportedly conceded that the so-called “force bill” had become “a dead issue.” Republicans, he said, would “leave all that business to the local authorities.”²⁶ Nonetheless, one can argue that Benjamin Harrison’s fight on behalf of federal voting rights legislation during his administration marked him as truly the last Reconstruction president. The effort failed, however, and the defeat of the Lodge Bill brought the effective end of Reconstruction. And the ensuing years witnessed a rapid atrophy of the Reconstruction impulse. Indeed, the Lodge bill turned out to be the last significant attempt at civil rights legislation until the middle of the twentieth century.

In his post-White House years, Harrison felt deep anxiety over the country’s direction. He refused to speak for McKinley’s re-election in 1900. Surveying the nation, he feared that a “canker of greed” had “eaten into the hearts” of Americans. He warned that aggressive competition among corporations drove them to exploit labor in the headlong quest for profits. And he condemned those among the wealthy who engaged in selfish practices such as the evasion of taxes, which deepened society’s inequities. Still, turning increasingly again to his deep Christian faith, Harrison, like many Social Gospel proponents, maintained hope for a moral regeneration in politics. Two months before his death, he wrote to a friend “In the old Republican days the subject of slavery and of the saving of the Union made appeals to the consciences and liberty-loving instincts of the people. These later years have been full of talk about commerce and dinner pails, but I feel sure that the American conscience and the American love of liberty have not been smothered. They will break through this crust of sordidness and realize that those only keep their liberties who accord liberty to others.”²⁷

²⁵ Theodore Roosevelt to Benjamin F. Tracy, 20 November 1892, Benjamin Franklin Tracy Papers, Library of Congress; Richardson, *Messages and Papers*, 10:15, 18

²⁶ *Richmond Times*, 6 October 1896. For a perspective on the development of the Lost Cause Myth, see David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

²⁷ Harrison, *Views of an Ex-President*, 331–357, 363, 500, 508–509; Benjamin Harrison to P. S. Kennedy, 5 January 1901, Harrison Papers.