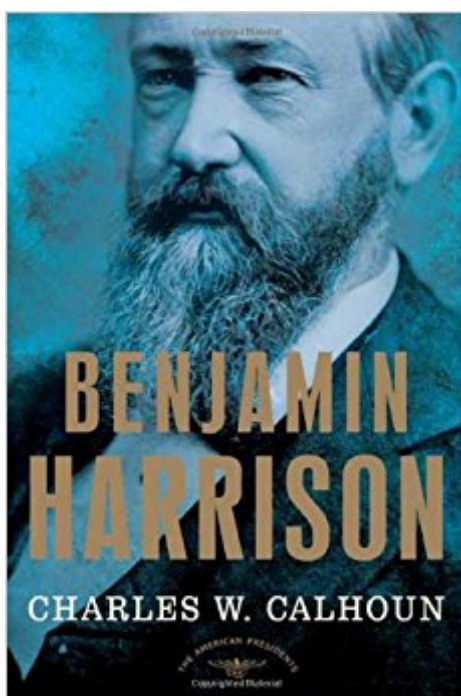


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# Benjamin Harrison: The American Presidents Series: The 23rd President, 1889-1893



## Synopsis

The scion of a political dynasty ushers in the era of big governmentPolitics was in Benjamin Harrison's blood. His great-grandfather signed the Declaration and his grandfather, William Henry Harrison, was the ninth president of the United States. Harrison, a leading Indiana lawyer, became a Republican Party champion, even taking a leave from the Civil War to campaign for Lincoln. After a scandal-free term in the Senate-no small feat in the Gilded Age-the Republicans chose Harrison as their presidential candidate in 1888. Despite losing the popular vote, he trounced the incumbent, Grover Cleveland, in the electoral college. In contrast to standard histories, which dismiss Harrison's presidency as corrupt and inactive, Charles W. Calhoun sweeps away the stereotypes of the age to reveal the accomplishments of our twenty-third president. With Congress under Republican control, he exemplified the activist president, working feverishly to put the Party's planks into law and approving the first billion-dollar peacetime budget. But the Democrats won Congress in 1890, stalling his legislative agenda, and with the First Lady ill, his race for reelection proceeded quietly. (She died just before the election.) In the end, Harrison could not beat Cleveland in their unprecedented rematch. With dazzling attention to this president's life and the social tapestry of his times, Calhoun compellingly reconsiders Harrison's legacy.

## Book Information

Series: The American Presidents

Hardcover: 224 pages

Publisher: Times Books; First edition (June 6, 2005)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0805069526

ISBN-13: 978-0805069525

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.6 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 13.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars 39 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #402,056 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #46 in Books > Science & Math > Mathematics > Geometry & Topology > Differential Geometry #73 in Books > Science & Math > Mathematics > Geometry & Topology > Topology #1014 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > United States > US Presidents

## Customer Reviews

Calhoun dusts off an almost thoroughly forgotten chief executive, known primarily for serving

between Cleveland's two terms, to disclose a harbinger of the modern, activist president. Although born in his grandfather's house--and Grandfather was William Henry Harrison, the president famed for dying one month after inauguration--Benjamin Harrison (1833-1901) wasn't to the manor born. He had to establish himself as an attorney before marrying, and become a hardworking high earner before his political ambitions bore fruit. He lost more elections than he won before his 1888 presidential victory; even then, he lost the popular vote because of huge Democrat majorities in the South. He passed more legislation, spent more money, and did more hands-on diplomacy than had any previous president. His single great failure was his legislation ensuring the voting rights of southern blacks. Democrats successfully stalled the bill in the Fifty-first Congress, and after they regained Congress in 1890 and the White House in 1892, the issue was dead until the 1960s. One of the most revelatory entries in the American Presidents series. Ray Olson Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

Charles W. Calhoun is a professor of history at East Carolina University. A former National Endowment for the Humanities fellow, Calhoun is the author or editor of four books, including *The Gilded Age*, and a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*. He lives in Greenville, North Carolina.

The American Presidents series is a nice set of short bios of many of our Presidents. Most are well done, providing brief entree to the lives and performance of our chief executive. This volume examines Benjamin Harrison, the grandson of President William Henry Harrison and one of those who became president while winning fewer popular votes than his opponent. The book begins with his youth and his Civil War experience. He was one of the many Republican presidents in the latter part of the 19th century who had served during that bloody conflict. He entered the bar in 1854 and married Caroline. His law business languished; he became interested in politics. Thus began his career, although he was not always successful in his elections. The war intervened, and Harrison became an officer. After the war, his legal career became lucrative. However, politics beckoned and he became a figure in Republican politics in Indiana. He served in a variety of roles, before being nominated for President in 1888. He won by collecting more electoral votes--but fewer popular votes--than the incumbent, Grover Cleveland. His presidency was a vigorous one--both domestically and in terms of foreign policy. He hewed to a strong tariff policy, but one made more flexible for bilateral negotiation with other countries. He was open toward labor and was dismayed by the withdrawal of voting rights for southern blacks and fought hard (and, in the end,

unsuccessfully) to address that and restore voting rights. In foreign policy, with James G. Blaine as his secretary of State, he played a strong hand, becoming very much involved in development and implementation of foreign policy. He did not triumph in his quest for reelection, as Grover Cleveland won back the presidency. Thereafter, he became once more a high profile attorney. The book does a nice job of depicting his final years and some internal family turmoil. Another good entry in the series. For me, I prefer longer and more detailed biographies, but this will serve well those who prefer something accessible and brief.

Benjamin Harrison's one term in office presents a singular fact of presidential minutiae: he is the only president to defeat an incumbent (Grover Cleveland in 1888) only to turn around and be ousted by the same man in the next election. What were the circumstances that led to this volte-face? Charles Calhoun does an excellent job in this biography helping us to understand the dynamics that led to Harrison's reversal of fortunes. Harrison's election in 1888 had actually been a new model of campaigning, with record amounts of money being raised, primarily from industry, and one of the first and most massive media blitzes launched to stoke interest nationwide in his candidacy. He was also one of the first presidents to launch a so-called front porch campaign from his mansion in Indianapolis. Reporters, well wishers and the American people would have to come to him instead of he to them. Given the uncharismatic nature of Harrison's personality, it was probably a wise choice. In the first two years of his presidency, Harrison presided over a very active legislative agenda, skillfully negotiating through Congress passage of the Sherman Antitrust Act, The McKinley Tariff Act, and The Sherman Silver Purchase Act, all hot button issues of his day. These ambitious pieces of legislation were in a manner a harbinger of Teddy Roosevelt's activist domestic agenda to come. But Harrison never seemed to be able to get much off the ground in the last two years of his presidency after he lost his Republican majority in the House. It may seem ironic by today's standards that it was the Democrats who were rallying against an activist agenda. In the first half of Harrison's administration, the Republican Congress was the first to present a \$1 billion-dollar federal budget, earning it the moniker The Billion Dollar Congress. Harrison's downfall came in part at the hands of his own party. He was somewhat of a cold fish, at least in political circles, and seemed frequently overshadowed by bigger than life personalities that surrounded him, most notably, his own charismatic Secretary of State James Blaine. Calhoun provides good insight into this complicated relationship. Calhoun also does an admirable job detailing the legislative battles surrounding the issue of the gold standard and whether America should embrace a bi-metallism standard with silver. Deflationary pressure on the economy had dropped prices to the point where

the agricultural and industrial sectors were both suffering from increasing layoffs and labor unrest. Many Republicans in the West with entrepreneurial interests in silver mining had much to gain by moving to a bi-metal standard, making them strange bedfellows with Democrats who advocated for an inflationary policy to raise prices and ultimately wages. On civil rights, Harrison was well intended, although he did not accomplish much. He supported legislation that would have granted federal funding to schools regardless of the race of its students. He also endorsed a proposed constitutional amendment to overturn the Supreme Court ruling in the Civil Rights Cases that in 1883 had struck down much of the Civil Rights Act of 1875 as unconstitutional. The time had not come for such progressive measures to meet with congressional approval. Grover Cleveland usually shoulders the blame for the Depression of 1893, and deservedly so. But the policies of Benjamin Harrison help set the stage for this economic disaster, much as the policies of Calvin Coolidge in the next century foreboded the disastrous administration of Herbert Hoover. Harrison ultimately succumbed to supporting inflationary policies that came back to haunt the country in 1893. Cleveland only exacerbated the problem by choking the money supply and cutting off the new silver standard at an inopportune time. The result was one of the worst depressions in American history. Just prior to that point, the gilded age had come into full swing as income inequality hit levels never previously seen in America. Now, its policies were coming home to roost. Harrison had been an ardent supporter of protectionist tariffs. The American people have been told that such tariffs would benefit labor. But when the steel industry, in particular, was hit with layoffs and depressed wages, labor began to understand that there was not necessarily a correlation between protectionism in trade and protecting jobs. Harrison's administration was not defined by foreign affairs. He was fortunate enough to preside over a time of relative peace with respect to American interests abroad. He did flex his muscles by invoking the Monroe Doctrine, as many of his predecessors had, to keep European powers from expanding interests into South and Central America. But perhaps his most significant step was thwarting German expansion in the tiny South Pacific island of Samoa, believing that it was important for the United States to have a toehold in that region. To stand his ground, Harrison had pledged American support and responsibility for a government beyond its own borders. This policy marked a small step for foreign policy that would accelerate dramatically in subsequent administrations. By the time the election of 1892 was around the corner, Harrison simply had little fire left in his belly for the fight. Not only did he have only tepid support from his own party to run again, but his wife became gravely ill and died right before the election, basically removing Harrison from the campaign trail at a critical time. All in all, Harrison is probably most remembered for allowing the economy to begin a downward spiral on his watch. But in all fairness, he should

probably also be remembered for taking steps to allow the United States to take its place in the world as an industrial power, a county of entrepreneurs and inventors. He was a decent man, but his integrity was not a prominent enough quality to overcome his other flaws and missteps. Calhoun does an excellent job summing up the man and his presidency.

Well written with lots of insights. This book gives us a good glimpse into one of our forgotten Presidents, who deserves to be remembered. Though a party operative, he proved to be a courageous and progressive President, bucking the party machine. In a time when government was more about business interests, he pushed through legislation that addressed some of the needs of the common man. The Republican party at this time was paying lip service to the needs of the freedman and their rights. Harrison sought to do more there. Some of the biographies in this series on American Presidents can sound like high school term papers, but this one by Calhoun is well written and rich with insight.

I am reading the presidents' biographies in chronological order. This was one of the shorter accounts (some 166 pages excluding notes, bibliography and index, and pages sized at only 8 1/2" by 5 3/8") so it could have been a little more comprehensive. But it must be recalled Harrison was a one-term president with no cataclysmic events during his term. The writing was direct, objective and readable. And perhaps most important, it was an enjoyable book to pick up. I recommend it.

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