

LAST IN A SERIES

The Presidency of Benjamin Harrison

By Charlie McBriarty

On March 4, 1889, Benjamin Harrison took the oath of office to become the 23rd President of the United States at the age of 55. This date was significant in several respects. Forty-eight years earlier on the same date, Benjamin's grandfather William Henry Harrison became the ninth president of the nation. One hundred years earlier on that same date the Constitution of the United States was ratified and the official term of the first President of the United States commenced. However, it was not until April 30, 1789, that Washington's inauguration was held on the balcony of Federal Hall in New York City.

The early March weather in Washington was not bright and sunny for either of the two Harrisons' inaugurations. William Henry's day included heavy rain mixed with snow. Undaunted by the weather and unadorned by a hat or rain gear, he took nearly two hours to deliver his 8,460-word inaugural address. This address set a record that has been unsurpassed for its length. Some believe the time he spent on that cold, wet March day caused his declining health leading to his death less than five weeks later.

The weather for Benjamin's inauguration day did not include snow, but it was a dreary, rainy day. During the ceremony, outgoing President Grover Cleveland was courteous enough to hold his umbrella over their heads. Fortunately for both the incoming and outgoing presidents, Benjamin's inaugural address was much briefer than his grandfather's. The address cited religion and education as prime factors contributing to the nation's growth and noted this could and should be stimulated by extending early statehood for the territories. The new president pledged to provide a protective tariff to stimulate further economic growth and supported a pension program to benefit veterans and their families. He advocated noninterference in foreign affairs and continuation of the Monroe Doctrine as a means of achieving global peace. Additionally, he acknowledged his goal of modernizing the Navy.

Benjamin Harrison has been characterized as a person of principle who had a keen mind, an exceptional memory and a strong work ethic. He was a charismatic orator, and was known as someone who stood by his principles rather than bend to outside or political pressure. Unlike many of his predecessors, Harrison did not depend upon party

bosses when selecting his cabinet. Rather, he tended to choose men he knew from his previous experiences during his Civil War time in the Army, while living and working in Indiana and with fellow members of the Presbyterian Church. An example of Harrison's work ethic was his interaction with members of the cabinet. Typically, each week he met individually with members of the cabinet, and twice a week he convened two full cabinet meetings.

Harrison's presidency can best be viewed as two vastly different two-year terms. Between 1889 and 1891, the 51st Congress changed an eight-year pattern of divided party control when Republicans won majority control in both the House and the Senate. Equally as important was the strong financial situation that remained from President Cleveland's administration. As a result, several major pieces of legislation were enacted during this two-year period. Combined, these measures firmly established the strength and power of the federal government.

In 1889 a total of four territories became states, including North and South Dakota, Montana and Washington. The next year Idaho and Wyoming were granted statehood. These six new states were the most added since Washington's presidency and remain the highest number to be admitted by any administration.

The pension program for veterans and family members of the American Civil War was passed as the Dependent and Disability Pensions Act in 1890. This measure granted generous pensions to veterans and their families, and funds were also distributed to veterans not directly involved in combat. A similar measure had been vetoed by President Cleveland three years earlier. In addition, four significant actions were taken in 1890:

- The Sherman Antitrust Act that eliminated trade restrictions imposed by business conglomerates
- The Sherman Silver Purchase Act requiring the US Treasury to purchase a definite amount of silver each month to stabilize the monetary system
- The Morrill Land-Grant Colleges Act, which stimulated the establishment of state colleges and universities
- The McKinley Tariff Act, which imposed tariffs of up to 49% on manufactured goods.

During this two-year period the first-ever billion dollar budget was approved. Passage of this measure, coupled with the expenditures involved in the actions taken by the 51st Congress, resulted in its being tagged the "Billion Dollar Congress."

On March 3, 1891, the day before the end of the 51st Congress, five measures were enacted, including the Forest Reserve Act, the Land Revision Act, the Immigration Act, the Merchant Marine Act and the Chance Act (International Copyright)—quite an array of activity by any Congress.

While Congress was busy enacting these measures, President Harrison also had his share of successes along with a few disappointments. In his first year he undertook the expansion of US influence abroad by holding the First International Conference of American States in Washington. This organization has continued and today is known as the Pan-American Union. On the other hand, he was not successful in implementing his efforts to promote voting rights and extend the civil rights of African-American citizens.

His inaugural promise to strengthen the Navy was successful. Before the end of his term, the Navy was routinely patrolling in both the Atlantic and Pacific, and the number of modern ships had grown from three to 22. In addition, he successfully founded the Coast Guard Academy, and he instituted the practice of flying the Stars and Stripes over public buildings and schools that continues today.

By the November 1890 Congressional elections, the surplus funds were depleted, giving the Democratic Party candidates for the House sufficient votes to regain control of the House of Representatives. This left Harrison with little influence in Congress and diminished power in the Republican Party—and his final two years in office were unproductive.

Although his popularity within the Republican Party was waning, he became the party's nominee for president in the 1892 presidential election, facing Democrat Grover Cleveland as his opponent. Harrison conducted a lackluster campaign, focusing his attention on his ailing wife, who died midway through the campaign. Cleveland easily won the election, garnering a majority in both the popular and the electoral votes.

After he left office, Harrison returned to his Indianapolis home where he resumed his practice of law. In 1894 he spent several months at Stanford University giving lectures. He was not persuaded to follow the advice of several colleagues to seek his party's presidential nomination in 1896. He chose instead to campaign for William McKinley, who became the nation's 25th president.

In 1896, at the age of 62, Harrison married the niece of his late wife's secretary and they had one child in 1897. For the next five years, he acted in several public service capacities and continued to accept speaking engagements. In February 1901 he became ill, and on March 13, 1901, he died of pneumonia at his home.

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