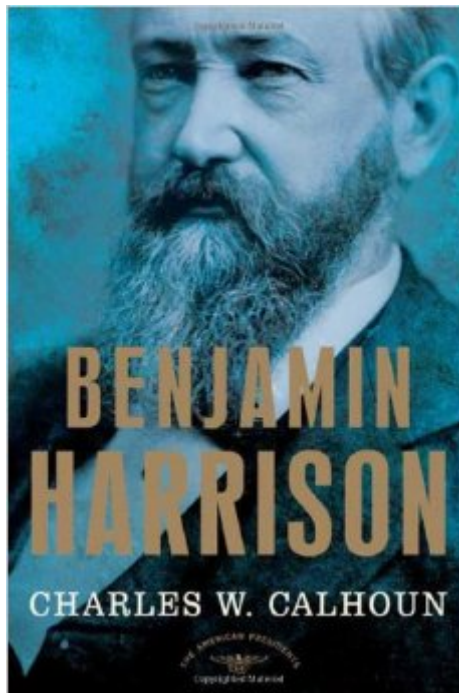


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Benjamin Harrison: The American Presidents Series: The 23rd President, 1889-1893



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.

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Customer Reviews

If you ask most people what they know about Benjamin Harrison they might tell you two things they

remember from history class...that he was the grandson of a president (William Henry Harrison) and that his term was sandwiched in between the two non-consecutive terms of Grover Cleveland. Beyond that, Benjamin Harrison remains a mystery to most, but author Charles Calhoun has done a crisp and clear job of relating Harrison's life and term in office. This is the third of the American Presidents series I have read and I think that these books serve better in telling the stories of the more obscure presidents. The brief length of the Harrison book (as well as the ones I've read about Arthur and Harding) give just enough overview regarding these men. They are nice "starter" books, which might, one would hope, prompt the reader to seek out deeper accounts of the lives of these presidents. That said, Calhoun's book offers a good flow of information. Harrison is usually rated in the middle of the presidential mix, and Calhoun creates no impression that Harrison should be moved up or down. He was a solid, if stoic president with some notable legislative accomplishments. While never rising to the stature that a more forceful president might have, Harrison nonetheless fought for rights of blacks to vote and was keen on providing a pension for Union veterans of the Civil War. It was fascinating to read that Frederick Douglass said of Harrison, "to my mind, we never had a greater president". That's certainly high praise coming from one of the leading abolitionists of the nineteenth century and a man who knew Abraham Lincoln personally. Harrison had a few challenges abroad, but his four years were generally quiet as the country saw the passage of such landmark legislation as the Sherman Anti-Trust Act.

Benjamin Harrison lived most of his adult life in Indianapolis, and his handsome brick Victorian home on Delaware Street has long been a memorial open to the public. Yet even the citizens of his hometown are vague on who he really was. Many confuse him with his grandfather, William Henry Harrison, "Old Tippecanoe" as he was called, who also served in the White House, albeit for only thirty days. Some see the signature of "Benj Harrison" on the Declaration of Independence and assume that the Indianapolis resident was in Philadelphia in 1776. If they only stopped to think, they would realize that the city of Indianapolis was not founded until 1821 and that their Benj Harrison was not born until 1833. The signer was the great-grandfather of the 23rd President. Charles Calhoun has done a scholarly job of helping stamp out the ignorance and confusion surrounding Benjamin Harrison, the last President to sport a beard and the first to decorate a Christmas tree in the White House. He and his wife Caroline were occupants of the Executive Mansion when electricity was first installed, replacing the gaslight fixtures. The old story goes that they were both afraid of the strange new utility and refused to touch the light switches. Harrison was the second shortest of our Presidents, coming in at 5' 6" and was affectionately referred to as "Little Ben" by the

1000 soldiers of the 70th Indiana Regiment who followed him into the Civil War. His bravery in battle was recognized by General Joseph Hooker ("Fighting Joe") who awarded Harrison a battlefield promotion to Brigadier General. Calhoun makes a good case that Harrison could be considered one of the earliest "activist" Presidents, long before Theodore Roosevelt became the poster boy for the position.

The 23d United States president, Benjamin Harrison (1824 -- 1901), is best known for serving between the two nonconsecutive terms of Grover Cleveland, the 22nd and 24th president. Harrison, the grandson of president William Henry Harrison, received a minority of the popular vote in 1888, but he defeated Cleveland in the electoral college. Harrison's presidency is obscure, and it tends not to be rated highly by scholars. In his highly sympathetic biography, "Benjamin Harrison" (2005), Charles Calhoun makes a strong case for Harrison, arguing that he "pointed the way" to the modern American presidency. Calhoun, professor of history at East Carolina University, has written several books on the United States in the Gilded Age. This short biography is part of the American Presidents series edited by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Sean Wilentz. For a short study, Calhoun's book offers a detailed consideration of Harrison and his presidency. In contrast to the usual portrayal of Gilded Age presidents, Calhoun sees Harrison as an activist who sought to expand Federal power and to reach out directly to the electorate in support of his policies. As Calhoun puts it, Harrison "harbored a philosophy of government that emphasized possibilities more than restraints." Harrison put the matter succinctly himself, during his unsuccessful campaign for reelection. Speaking in Galveston, Texas, Harrison described the Federally financed harbor in the city as an example of the "work which a liberal and united Government could do." Harrison continued, "This ministering care should extend to our whole country. We are great enough and rich enough to reach forward to grander conceptions than have entered the minds of some of our statesmen in the past.

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