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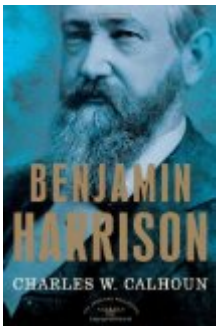
Charles W. Calhoun. *Benjamin Harrison.* New York: Henry Holt, 2005. xvi + 206 pp. $20.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8050-6952-5.



Reviewed by Mark W. Summers

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For most students, the Gilded Age presidents pass in a blur, the one dispensable part of an upper-division course. Every president is treated with the equal unfairness of misleading brevity. Grant drank and Hayes would not, Garfield was shot and Arthur had side-whiskers, McKinley had the backbone of a chocolate éclair and Grover Cleveland had an illegitimate child. And then there was Benjamin Harrison, his administration doomed to be remembered as the flavorless filler between two beefy slices of Cleveland's. Beyond the fact that the American Presidents series cannot afford to overlook him, does inconsequentiality so monumental deserve its own biography?

It does--if the biographer is Charles W. Calhoun. In this brief, readable account, the eminent historian of Gilded Age politics describes Harrison as a much more impressive chief executive than he is given credit for being. Rising to the top untouched by scandal or demagoguery and without the blatherskiting and ruthlessness that Indiana politics seemed to thrive on, Harrison made a good judge, a respectable Republican senator, and a quietly efficient one-term president. In foreign policy, his Secretary of State, James G. Blaine, got most of the headlines, but Harrison was the one spending late nights getting the work done. The Billion Dollar Congress made the Administration's domestic record, but not without quiet nudging and tweaking from the man in the White House. Spoils were too important to leave to the politicians, or at least to the buccaneers of the party; and the bosses met a frigid blast of disapproval when they asked the Administration to shut its eyes, hold its nose, and fork over the offices. Harrison did more than administer, however. As Calhoun points out, he set the pattern for future presidents, of speaking tours and using his office to preach the civil religion of the republic. He may have been the best president since Grover Cleveland, the most moral since Rutherford B. Hayes, and the most attuned to America's need for a role in world affairs since Thomas Jefferson. Leaving a country as peaceful and nearly as prosperous as the one his predecessor gave him was no small achievement. Gaudy presidents and disastrous presidencies always are more exciting, but the country hardly appreciates them as much as later

biographers do. Within a year, Americans probably looked back wistfully to the Harrison years.

All of this readers can draw from the book, and with it a grudging respect for this extremely decent executive. Of course, such a book should have been written; and of course, Calhoun was the very best scholar to handle it. And yet, it is hard to take his argument at face value that Harrison was, as Henry Adams claimed, an "excellent president." There are too many stories of his peevishness and impatience when a more emollient manner would do. In a closely balanced political system, Harrison just barely won in 1888, and that, by the standard of Gilded Age presidential elections, was normal. His very solid defeat in 1892 was not. Even Henry Adams looked for something beyond excellence when he voted.

The massive losses in the 1890 midterm elections may have had something to do with public conservatism, fearful of activist government per se, as Calhoun claims. Other historians, however, might suggest that what offended voters was not that Congress was up and doing, but rather what it was doing. And, from the Democrats' viewpoint, it was active in filling the pockets of the rich, rewarding veterans regardless of merit, and trying to pass a bill aimed (perhaps incidentally) at locking Republicans into a permanent majority. The angry farmers of the prairies were not against government action, and the Populists-to-be were not conservatives. But in Republican strongholds, they sent the incumbents howling. Calhoun does not glide over the Administration's faults, but other readers may see the cool response given to civil service reform and the debacle that ended in a massacre at Wounded Knee, not to mention the attempt to annex Hawaii after a sugar planters' coup, as darker marks than this book does, just as they see the low level activism of Harrison as perhaps less of a break from the past than his biographer has. They may also have the feeling that the panic within months of Harrison's departure from Washington might have had roots in what the late Administration had done or failed to do. Harrison's excellence in office was so dubious a commodity that he had only a tepid support for a comeback in 1896. It is not at all clear that even if he had been willing, the Republican party would have obliged him.

Harrison was a lucky man, in some ways. Escaping defeat in 1888, he was even more fortunate that victory escaped him in 1892. For the hard times that broke out soon after his retirement, he would have none of the blame and none of the headaches. But perhaps he was luckiest in his biographer, who gives first-rate coverage to a second-rate administration.

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