

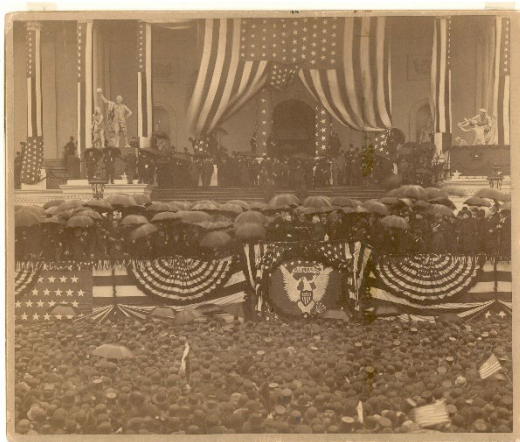
The Making of a Soldier President:

Benjamin Harrison and the Civil War Veterans' Movement

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When President Benjamin Harrison stood at the United States Capitol to make his inaugural address in March 1889, he emphasized the debt that he and his government owed to the nation's soldiers. "Such occasions as this," he noted, "should remind us that we owe everything to their valor and sacrifice."¹ The new President knew much about the sacrifices that such men had made. As an officer in the Union Army, Harrison had shared with his men the innumerable trials that confronted them on the battlefield, on the march, and around the campfire, in the process of which he established a relationship that would continue for the rest of his life.



Inauguration of Benjamin Harrison, March 4, 1886,
Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site Collections.

Writing to his wife Caroline during the war, Harrison had often expressed his concern for, and identification with, the men under his command. In December 1862, Harrison had written from Gallatin, Tennessee to share his anxieties about his men's health, noting the hardship entailed in hard marching and lamenting the rapidity with which sickness had spread through the ranks. "Gallatin is one vast Hospital," he explained, and many of the hospitals in which his men were treated were "said to be very filthy and poorly provided."² As the war went

on, Harrison frequently had cause to describe the difficulties of military life as his men were laid up by illnesses or struck down by sunstroke.³ Nor did Harrison himself escape the hardships of war. Writing to Caroline from outside Atlanta in August 1863, Harrison explained that a recent bout of illness had left him feeling "run down," and that his skin was covered in sores.⁴ Marching through Georgia the following year brought additional problems. "My skin is all broken out in blotches and small sores resulting from insect bites," he complained.⁵

Despite these hardships, Harrison's concern for the men under his command ensured that he was an admired and popular presence. From Gallatin in 1862, Harrison told Caroline of a fourteen-mile round trip he had made to visit some of the men under his command, including

*The Elaine Kops-Bedel and Eric Bedel Presidential Research Fellow is a prestigious annual research fellowship with the Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site in partnership with the Rothermere Institute at the University of Oxford. This specialized research draws from primary sources in the Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site's extensive original collection, as well as other prominent state and national research archives.

¹ Benjamin Harrison, 'Inaugural Address,' 4th March 1889, millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/march-4-1889-inaugural-address.

² Benjamin Harrison to Caroline Harrison, 20th December 1862, Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site.

³ Benjamin Harrison to Caroline Harrison, 12th April 1863, Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site; Benjamin Harrison to Caroline Harrison [copy], 6th June 1864, Box 16 (Folder 1 – Civil War), Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site.

⁴ Benjamin Harrison to Caroline Harrison, 4th August 1864, Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site. See also Benjamin Harrison to Caroline Harrison, 23rd November 1862, Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site.

⁵ Benjamin Harrison to Caroline Harrison, 12th July 1864, Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site.

some of those who were confined in the city's hospitals. "The boys seemed glad to see me," he informed her, explaining that he had had some "familiar talks with them that they seemed to like." There seemed to be a "capital feeling towards me in the regiment," he added. The day before, Harrison continued, he had visited a hospital where several of his men were convalescing, and they had been delighted to see him. "One young fellow started right up in bed when he saw me, and with tears in his eyes seized me with both hands and held on to me for five minutes," he wrote. "All seemed delighted and cheered to see me."⁶ Such was Harrison's esteem for his men, in fact, that he was unwilling to leave them. Writing to Caroline in June 1864, Harrison explained that he could not foresee when he would return home because he could not leave his regiment to the command of another. "I have got to love them for their bravery and for dangers we have shared together," he explained. "I have heard many similar expressions of the men toward me."⁷

The combination of Harrison's military experiences, his concern for his men, and his popularity in the ranks would run like a red thread through the rest of his life. The Union Army had enlisted more than two million men during the internecine conflict, and although more than



Gen. BENJAMIN HARRISON, 1865.
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Benjamin Harrison, 1865.
Benjamin Harrison Presidential
Site Collections.

350,000 of them had perished, those who survived were a significant presence in the postwar United States. Yet, as historians like Brian Matthew Jordan and James Marten have shown, the Union veteran occupied a complicated position in the post-war United States.⁸ Frequently, respect for the nation's veterans was accompanied, sometimes even overshadowed, by criticism of their demands or undermined by those who were keen to move on from the issues that had divided the country. From his return to Indianapolis to the U.S. Senate and eventually to the White House, however, Benjamin Harrison would continue to advance the cause of his former comrades, urging his fellow citizens and lawmakers to recognize their sacrifices and to fulfill the contract between the state and its citizen soldiers. His admiration for the Union veteran was returned in equal measure. Both as a Senator and then as President, Harrison drew upon the considerable political clout of the nation's veterans and played a pivotal role in the elaboration of an incipient veterans'

welfare state by promoting more liberal benefits for veterans and their families. His solicitude for the nation's veterans was far more than a political ploy, however. Rather, Harrison's reputation as a soldier's president was the result of a mutual admiration forged in battle and sustained through the return to peace.

"They Mean to Be Felt in Politics."

By the time that Benjamin Harrison returned to Indianapolis in June 1865, this modest and quiet lawyer had earned a reputation for martial courage and valor. When Civil War had broken out five

⁶ Benjamin Harrison to Caroline Harrison, 20th December 1862, Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site.

⁷ Benjamin Harrison to Caroline Harrison, 18th June 1864, Benjamin Harrison Papers, Library of Congress [henceforth LC].

⁸ Brian Matthew Jordan, *Marching Home: Union Veterans and their Unending Civil War* (London: Norton, 2015); James Marten, *Sing Not War: The Lives of Union and Confederate Veterans in Gilded Age America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

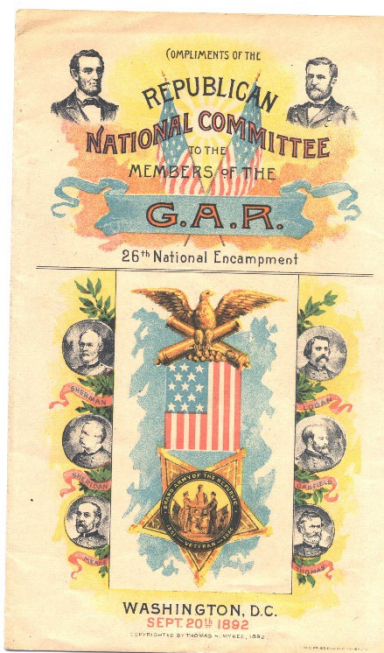
years earlier, Harrison had been keen to enlist, but he had worried about leaving his young family without adequate means of support. In 1862, however, Harrison had volunteered to recruit a regiment. By August, the new regiment, the Seventieth Indiana Volunteers, had been mustered in and Harrison, despite his anxieties about his lack of military experience, had been commissioned as its colonel. During the following three years, Harrison and his men had earned acclaim on the battlefield. They had helped General Sherman to take Atlanta, marched through Georgia, and, eventually, paraded down Pennsylvania Avenue in the Grand Review that marked the end of hostilities. By the time the war ended in April 1865, Harrison had been promoted to brevet brigadier general, a reflection of his and his regiment's contribution to the Union cause.

Upon their return to Indianapolis in June 1865, Harrison's regiment were feted for their success on the battlefield. In his earliest addresses, however, Harrison combined a celebration of his regiment's wartime exploits with anticipation of their return to civilian life. Speaking at an event to welcome the return of four Indiana regiments later that month, Harrison predicted that, contrary to the apprehension of some local residents that the returning soldiers might have forgotten the ways of civilian life, their readjustment would actually be both smooth and successful. "You will have to brighten your wits and quicken your pace," he warned his listeners, if they were to match the returning soldiers in their civilian pursuits. Nor would the returning Union veterans be content to confine their activities to the civic sphere; rather, he proclaimed, "they mean to be

felt in politics as well as business."⁹ When the Twenty-Fifth and Fifty-Ninth Indiana Infantry regiments returned to Indianapolis in July, Harrison was again among the prominent local figures who welcomed them home, and he combined his pride in their service with concern for their postwar lives; he spent some time, according to one local journalist, "giving them some very good advice by which to be governed in the future, urging them to go to work at once, and not stand idly with the expectation that they would be aided in their efforts to maintain life."¹⁰

If Harrison's earliest postwar addresses reflect his concern for his former comrades, they also provided him with plenty of evidence about their symbolic significance and potential political power. Far from slipping into a decade-long 'hibernation,' as some historians once claimed, veterans were prominent participants in the nation's public life almost from the moment they stacked their weapons.¹¹ The Grand Army of the Republic, established in 1866, would quickly emerge as the nation's premier veterans' organization, but numerous smaller groups were established across the country during the postwar period, and they took a prominent place in the nation's public life. They were a driving force in the rituals of celebration and mourning that accompanied the war's end; they participated in electoral contests at the local, state, and national level;

and they provided each other with economic and social sustenance. From the moment he returned



Republican National Committee pamphlet appealing to members of the Grand Army of the Republic.

⁹ Quoted in Harry J. Sievers, *Benjamin Harrison, Hoosier Statesman: From the Civil War to the White House, 1865-1888* (New York: University Publishers, 1959), 5-6. See also "The Reception Yesterday," *Indianapolis Sentinel*, 17th June 1865.

¹⁰ "The Reception Yesterday," *Indianapolis Sentinel*, 21st July 1865.

¹¹ Gerald Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1987), 266-275. Scholars have increasingly rejected the so-called 'hibernation thesis.' See, for example, Jordan, *Marching Home*.

to Indianapolis, Harrison was an enthusiastic member of this emerging veterans' movement. In July, he helped to plan Major General William Tecumseh Sherman's visit to Indianapolis, taking the responsibility of arranging the reception and banquet, and he was among the men who rose to address the audience gathered in his former commander's honor.¹² When General Ulysses S. Grant visited the city in September, Harrison was again on the committee that welcomed him to the city, affirming his place at the centre of the local veterans' community.¹³

Despite Harrison's dedication to his law practice and, eventually, his burgeoning political career, he continued to play an active role in this veterans' movement throughout the immediate postwar period. As a member of the Grand Army of the Republic, he was a regular participant in the wide range of reunions, encampments, and camp-fires that came to comprise such an important part of the veterans' calendar. In 1869, he also joined the recently formed Society of the Army of the Cumberland, and helped to arrange its second annual meeting in Indianapolis that year.¹⁴ When the Grand Army held its own annual reunion in the city in 1875, Harrison again played an active role. Writing to her daughter Mary, Caroline Harrison noted that Benjamin had spent the week circulating among the veterans who crowded into the city, and that he had insisted on hosting some of his old comrades for dinner.¹⁵ Just over a week later, Harrison also helped to establish a new organization for the members of his old regiment: the Seventieth Indiana Regiment Association. Elected as the organization's first president, Harrison was a regular attendee in its activities during the following years, and although his emerging political career sometimes prevented his attendance, he was re-elected as president at each of its annual reunions.¹⁶

The significance of this incipient veterans' movement lay not simply in the opportunity to meet old comrades or reminisce about the war but also in the electoral significance of the so-called soldier vote. As Harrison himself had declared in June 1865, the Union's veterans were eager to assert themselves in the political arena, and he had travelled across Indiana to support the election of Ulysses S. Grant in 1868 and 1872. When Harrison himself stepped into the political arena, therefore, it was unsurprising that his campaigns frequently highlighted his military credentials and appealed directly to his fellow veterans. In 1872, Harrison ran for the Republican nomination in the state's gubernatorial election, and many of his admirers stressed his military credentials. "Many of the soldier boys," the *Indianapolis Journal* reported, "know that Gen. Ben has both the courage and the ability to meet and rout, whether on the battlefield or on the stump."¹⁷ When Harrison ran for the Governorship in 1876, his supporters again emphasized his army service, not least because his opponent had remained in the state legislature throughout the war.¹⁸ Criticized by Democrats for dwelling too much upon the issues of the war – or "waving the bloody shirt," as it

¹² 'Meeting of Army Officers and Ex-Officers,' *Indianapolis Sentinel*, 25th July 1865; 'The Banquet to General Sherman,' *Indianapolis Sentinel*, 26th July 1865.

¹³ Sievers, *Benjamin Harrison*, *Hoosier Statesman*, 17.

¹⁴ Sievers, *Benjamin Harrison*, *Hoosier Statesman*, 32.

¹⁵ Caroline Harrison to Mary Harrison McKee, 10th October 1875, Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site.

¹⁶ 'Citizen Soldier,' *Indiana State Sentinel*, 21st October 1875; 'The Seventieth Reunion,' *Indianapolis News*, 4th October 1878; 'Veterans of the War,' *Indianapolis Journal*, 19th September 1884; 'The Seventieth Indiana,' *Indianapolis Journal*, 9th October 1885; 'Successful Reunion of the Survivors of the Seventieth Regiment of Infantry,' *Indianapolis Journal*, 17th September 1886; 'Comrades Meet Once More,' *Indianapolis Journal*, 14th October 1887. In 1888, the survivors of the First Brigade, Third Division, Twentieth Army Corps also elected Harrison as the president of their association. 'The Seventieth Indiana,' *Evansville Journal*, 14th September 1888.

See also Sievers, *Benjamin Harrison*, *Hoosier Statesman*, 77.

¹⁷ *Journal*, 27th January 1872.

¹⁸ 'Ben. Harrison,' *The Evening Courier* (Madison), 23rd August 1876.

was called – he responded by appealing directly to his former comrades, explaining that he would “rather march by your side on the dusty road under the dear old flag of our Union, and wear the old army shirt stained with drops of blood, than to do service under the black banner of treason.”¹⁹ Despite his defeat, Harrison’s campaign revealed the potential political power of his identification with his former comrades, a power that would soon help to propel him to national prominence. In 1880, the Republican Party retook the Indiana legislature, and, by selecting Harrison as U.S. Senator, it enabled him to take the soldier’s cause to Washington.

“One of the Truest and Best Friends the Soldier Has.”

During his six years in the Senate, Harrison established himself as a firm ally of the soldier’s cause. The Republican Party had already begun to move away from the issues of the Civil War and Reconstruction and to focus upon the issues of an industrializing economy, but it still relied upon its relationship with, and the votes of, the nation’s veterans. Like many Republicans, Harrison believed that the so-called soldier vote would be an important prop of the party’s success. Yet Harrison was not simply interested in the political clout of the nation’s soldiers; rather, he demonstrated a genuine and often time-consuming interest in their personal wellbeing. Throughout his senatorial career, Harrison worked hard on behalf of the nation’s veterans and the survivors of the war dead. Indeed, the steady stream of letters he received from veterans from across the country, asking him to take an interest in their pension claim or to press for more liberal pension legislation, attests to his reputation as a receptive and responsive advocate on their behalf.

Most prominent among the veterans’ concerns was the system of military pensions established to provide compensation to men wounded or otherwise disabled as a result of their military services, as well as for the widows, orphans, and other relatives of the war dead. Created in July 1862, this system of military benefits had expanded considerably since the war; by the 1880s, there were more than a quarter of a million names upon the federal pension rolls, incurring an annual expenditure, most years, of at least fifty million dollars. During his time in the Senate, Harrison received countless letters from impoverished veterans and widows asking for his help in securing their pensions. “There has not been a day since I have been in the Senate,” Harrison informed one correspondent, “that I have not received from two to twenty letters from soldiers in Indiana calling my attention to their pension claims.”²⁰ It was evidently a point of pride to Harrison that he was able to intervene on the behalf of the nation’s veterans and widows. In August 1882, Harrison assured one regular correspondent that he had “never failed in any instance in which a soldier or his friend has written to me about his pension, to send the inquiry to the Pension Office, and to forward him the reply the moment it was received.” Indeed, he went on, “I believe my books will show that a larger number of such cases have come to me than to any other Republican member of Congress from this state.”²¹ His efforts on behalf of the soldiers earned him a reputation as a reliable ally in their campaign for respect and recognition. “Some men who

¹⁹ ‘Gen. Ben. Harrison at Lawrenceburgh,’ *The Lawrenceburg Press*, 24th August 1876.

²⁰ Benjamin Harrison to James Vandolan, 24th June 1886, Papers of Benjamin Harrison Papers, LC. For Harrison’s presentation of veterans’ petitions, see, for example, ‘Petitions from Indiana Soldiers,’ *Indianapolis Journal*, 21st March 1884; ‘Notes and Personalities,’ *Indianapolis Journal*, 6th March 1884; ‘G.A.R. Demands,’ *Indianapolis Journal*, 21st February 1884.

²¹ Benjamin Harrison to Eugene Gano Hay, 22nd August 1882, Volume 3, The Eugene Gano Hay Papers, Library of Congress.

play the demagogue for friendship to the soldier may make louder professions than Senator Harrison,” one newspaper asserted, “but when the truth is known it will be found that Ben Harrison is one of the truest and best friends the soldier has in the United States Congress.”²²

Indeed, Harrison demonstrated his concern for the veterans not simply by chasing up individual claims but also by pursuing more substantial changes to the nation’s veterans’ policy. Throughout his time in the Senate, Harrison became a focal point for efforts to liberalize the federal government’s military pension laws. “I am always likely to be in the advance rather than in the rear upon the question of pension legislation,” he assured one correspondent.²³ A variety of proposals for more liberal pension legislation came before the nation’s lawmakers during these years, but the most significant was a proposal to provide a pension to all disabled veterans, whether their disability could be attributed to the war or not. Since 1862, prospective pensioners had been required to prove that their disability (or the death of the soldier, in the case of their widows, orphans, and other relatives who had been dependent upon them for support) was a direct result of their military service. This requirement had always presented an obstacle to prospective pension claimants due, in large part, to the deficiencies of wartime record-keeping, but it grew even harder during the postwar period as time passed and memories faded, documents scattered, and comrades lost touch. During the 1880s, therefore, many veterans, especially within the Grand Army of the Republic, began to demand legislation that would eliminate this requirement. Not only did Harrison agree with the goals of this campaign, but he also encouraged its advance. Twice, the Senate passed his proposals only for the bill to fail in the lower house.²⁴ When he explained his support for such a measure, Harrison demonstrated his awareness of the nature of the war and its long-term physical implications for the men who had fought it, which, as he well knew, consisted not only of lost limbs or visible wounds but also of the invisible consequence of hard marching, rough sleeping, exposure to the elements, and a poor diet. “The bill I introduced looks to the benefit of soldiers who are now disabled without reference to proving that the disability was incurred in the service,” he explained to one correspondent in 1884. “I’d pass [it] upon the idea that these disabilities from which soldiers now suffer were probably the result of the exposure and hardships they endured in the service.”²⁵ Despite the taunts of some of his Democratic opponents that he was merely attempting to secure the soldier vote, he was insistent that his efforts reflected his sincere dedication to his former comrades and a desire to see the nation’s debt to its defenders repaid. “I advocated and defended my measure and pledged myself to it though, when I introduced it, I was laughed at by many conservative people, who said that I was playing the demagogue,” he explained to one correspondent, though he maintained that he had merely wanted to do “the wisest, most liberal and gracious thing by our comrades.”²⁶

The election of Grover Cleveland in 1884 gave Harrison a new role as a defender, rather than simply a promoter, of the veterans’ interests. During Harrison’s final years in the Senate, he received almost constant complaints from veterans about the new administration’s incursions upon their rights and privileges. One issue that caused complaint was veterans’ preferment. Veterans of the Union Army were supposed to receive preferential treatment in government

²² ‘Senator Harrison and the Soldiers,’ *Indianapolis Journal*, 5th March 1884.

²³ Benjamin Harrison to C.A. Power, 8th March 1886, Papers of Benjamin Harrison, LC.

²⁴ Harry Sievers, *Benjamin Harrison, Hoosier Statesman: From the Civil War to the White House, 1865-1888* (New York: University Publishers, 1959), 210.

²⁵ Benjamin Harrison to Jacob Schmidt, 1st March 1884, Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site [copy and transcription; original in possession of E. Michael Whetsell].

²⁶ Benjamin Harrison to C.A. Power, 8th March 1886, Papers of Benjamin Harrison, LC.

hiring. When Cleveland took office, however, large numbers of officials were dismissed, a number of veterans among them, drawing considerable criticism from the veterans' community. "The injustice that has been practiced on the poor crippled and maimed soldiers," one correspondent informed Harrison, "can't, nor won't, be borne any longer by us soldiers."²⁷

The veterans' opposition to Cleveland was most pronounced, however, in response to his approach to veterans' pensions. From the start of his administration, Cleveland promoted the idea that the pension rolls were filled with claims of doubtful legality and dubious merit, a situation which, he believed, contributed to an excessive governmental expenditure and undermined veterans' independence. He encouraged the United States Pension Bureau, the agency which administered the pension system, to investigate the pension rolls and to purge fraudulent claims; its officials, it was rumored, were also encouraged to take an increasingly strict and legalistic approach in the assessment of new applications. Most notoriously, Cleveland also challenged the passage of *private* pension claims through the nation's legislature. By the middle of the 1880s, Congress was considering increasing numbers of petitions for private pension bills which would add individual men and women to the pension rolls by legislation, usually because they were not covered by the existing laws or because their claims had already been rejected by the Pension Bureau. To Cleveland, this kind of legislation represented a particular source of abuse, and he vetoed more than two hundred such bills, frequently accompanying his decisions with sarcastic commentaries that impugned the claims made by the veteran or widow who had petitioned lawmakers for relief. To many of the nation's veterans, these vetoes demonstrated a want of sympathy for the old soldiers, many of whom, due to their inability to prove that their disabilities stemmed from their military service, were forced to rely on private charity or localized forms of poor relief. Many turned to Harrison for help. "You are the man that we look to in this most trying crisis since the war," one veteran informed Harrison as he reported the case of a pensioner whose claim was under investigation.²⁸ Nor did Harrison respond simply by aiding those who found themselves challenged by this new pension policy. Speaking to a large crowd of veterans in Wabash in 1886, Harrison declared his opposition to the president's approach, and assured them of his own support for generous legislation. "No veteran who went with Sherman to the sea," a newspaper reported him saying, "or with Grant trod the weary ways and marshes to Appomattox, should ever be allowed to cross the portals of a poor-house."²⁹

The hostility to Cleveland's pension policy reached a crescendo when the president vetoed a major new pension bill in 1887. The Dependent Pension Bill, as it was known, represented the culmination of the campaign for more liberal pension legislation described above. That January, Congress had finally agreed on the provisions of this new measure, which would provide pensions to any man who had served in the Union Army who was now disabled, whether his disability stemmed from the war or not, and who was now dependent upon his own labor for support. When Cleveland received the bill, however, he vetoed it, declaring that the language was too imprecise, that it would invite fraudulent or exaggerated claims, and that it would thus cost too much, provoking a storm of criticism from the nation's veterans.

With the 1888 election on the horizon, Cleveland's assault on the pension system virtually guaranteed that the veterans' community virtually guaranteed that they would play an active role

²⁷ E. Carver to Benjamin Harrison, 12th March 1886, Papers of Benjamin Harrison, LC.

²⁸ J.W. Davis to Benjamin Harrison, 18th February 1886, Papers of Benjamin Harrison, LC.

²⁹ "The Art Loan at Wabash," *Indianapolis Journal*, 19th August 1886.



In September 1888, Harrison (center, on right of table) attended the annual reunion of the Seventieth Indiana Regiment, held that year in Clayton.

in the next election. Many Republicans, indeed, believed it was vital that they nominate a candidate who would prove acceptable to the nation's veterans, and Harrison's support for the soldiers' cause made him a strong candidate. Following his nomination in June, Harrison exploited his image as a supporter of veterans' interests and especially as a proponent of more liberal pension legislation. Now was not the time, he assured a crowd of around two thousand men and women in August, "to use an apothecary's scale to weigh the rewards of the men who saved the country."³⁰ His

popularity among the veterans ensured that they would play a part in his campaign. When former Union General Lew Wallace composed Harrison's

campaign biography, he emphasized his popularity among his men and his support for generous pension legislation. Building on the recollections of a number of Harrison's former comrades, Wallace reinforced popular stories of Harrison taking coffee to men serving picket duty on cold nights, administering to the wounded, giving up his horse to a weary or injured soldier, and giving them money to enable them to travel to hospital.³¹ "No man was dearer to the boys in the line than General Harrison," one of his men remembered.³² "In every possible way he showed the deepest interest in the welfare of my soldiers," another recalled.³³

The Grand Army of the Republic and the wider veterans' movement played a prominent part in the campaign. Despite the Grand Army's protestations of non-partisanship, its National Encampment, held that year in Columbus, Ohio, became the scene of an explicit show of support: during the grand review of the organization's members, as Julia Foraker later remembered, an enterprising local tradesman capitalized upon the warm weather by handing out fans to the marching veterans, each of which was adorned with a picture of the Republican nominee. "As column after column marched past the reviewing stand," she recalled, "the effect was of just one fluttering picture of Benjamin Harrison." (This impromptu Harrison rally was not to everyone's taste. According to Foraker, the spectacle prompted Senator Allen Thurman, the Democratic Party's vice-presidential nominee to leave the event, complaining that what he had believed would be a "non-political gathering" had turned into "nothing but a damned Republican mass meeting."³⁴)

³⁰ Quoted is Harrison's speech in Indianapolis, August 1, 1888, in Charles Hedges, ed., *Speeches of Benjamin Harrison* (New York: United States Book Company, 1892), 71.

³¹ Lew Wallace, *Life of Gen. Ben Harrison* (New York: W.A. Houghton, 1888), 227, 241-242, 244-246.

³² Wallace, *Life of Gen. Ben Harrison*, 232.

³³ Wallace, *Life of Gen. Ben Harrison*, 236.

³⁴ Julia B. Foraker, *I Would Live It Again: Memories of a Vivid Life* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1932), 117-118.

Among Harrison's greatest advocates were the surviving members of his old regiment. In September, Harrison attended the Seventieth Indiana Regiment's reunion at Clayton (pictured above), an event which attracted national interest and brought large crowds to the village. Despite the interest in Harrison's political hopes, however, he was keen to emphasize his enduring interest in his former comrades. "It is my wish to-day that every relation I occupy to the public or to a political party might be absolutely forgotten and that I might for this day, among these comrades, be thought of only as a comrade – your old Colonel."³⁵ As the election grew closer, more than three hundred members of the Seventieth published an endorsement of their old commander's candidacy:

They recollect the manly characteristics manifested by him in the camp, and the high soldierly qualities that adorned his character in the field. They recall his untiring efforts in perfecting his men in military tactics, his vigilance in the midst of danger, his courage in battle ... They recollect his care for the health, the food and clothing of those who composed his command ... They remember his kindness to the sick and his habits of sharing the discomforts of army life with those in the ranks. They can never forget his carrying the rifle and knapsack of the exhausted soldier, and his tramping through the mud while a foot-sore comrade occupied his place in the saddle. ... The fires of battle united us, and memories more precious than life hold us as one, so that the contest of our old commander is ours.³⁶

The enthusiasm of the Grand Army and the nation's veterans' movement may well have had a decisive impact upon the result. By the time the votes were counted, Harrison had defeated Cleveland in one of the tightest races in the country's history, trailing his opponent in the popular vote by fewer than one-hundred thousand votes but securing his triumph in the electoral college by sweeping almost all of the Northern and Midwestern states, including his own Indiana. His election secured, Harrison now had the opportunity to take the soldier's cause to the White House.

The Soldier President

In March 1889, Harrison left Indianapolis for the White House. Then, as during the Civil War, he was followed by the members of the Seventieth Indiana Regiment – more than two hundred of them – who travelled to the nation's capital to act as his escort throughout the inauguration, and they were among the first of his callers at the White House.³⁷ Critics might have attributed Harrison's election to the Grand Army of the Republic and its desire to influence the nation's pension policy, but the president demonstrated a sincere interest in veterans' affairs and a commitment to honoring their sacrifices. In August, Harrison travelled back to Indianapolis to speak at the laying of the cornerstone of the city's new Soldiers and Sailors' Monument, an event which attracted an enormous crowd and drew the attention of newspapers across the country. Harrison had first proposed the erection of such a monument to Indiana's soldiers five years earlier, but he could have little believed that, by the time the ground was being broken, he would

³⁵ 'The Regiment at Clayton,' *Indianapolis Journal*, 14th September 1888.

³⁶ 'A Tribute from Comrades,' *Indianapolis Journal*, 30th October 1888.

³⁷ 'Moving on the Capital,' *Indianapolis Journal*, 2nd March 1889; 'President Harrison,' *Indianapolis Journal*, 5th March 1889; 'The Hoosiers are Welcome,' *Indianapolis Journal*, 6th March 1889.

be speaking as president.³⁸ Travelling to the city's Tomlinson Hall for a further veterans' gathering, Harrison was again pressed to speak, and he emphasised his continued loyalty to his old comrades. "That comradeship and good feeling which your cordial salutation has expressed to me," he asserted, "I beg every comrade of the Grand Army here to-night to believe I feel for him."³⁹

The Harrison administration would, indeed, represent the culmination of the veterans' movement for a more generous pension policy. Upon Harrison's election, many veterans expressed their belief that his administration would answer their demands for more liberal legislation. When some of the Grand Army of the Republic's leaders called upon Harrison at his home in Indianapolis prior to his departure for Washington, they later reported to their comrades, they received from him "the most cordial assurances of his warm interest in the great question of pensions and his earnest desire for generous legislation in behalf of the defenders of the Union."⁴⁰ In his first address to Congress later that year, he made explicit his desire to pass legislation to provide pensions to those who were "dependent upon their own labor for a maintenance and by disease or casualty are incapacitated from earning it."⁴¹

Yet Harrison's dedication to a generous pension policy also invited controversy. His appointment of James Tanner as his Commissioner of Pensions overshadowed much of his first year in office. The New Yorker was a popular choice among the nation's veterans. Himself a Union veteran who had suffered the amputation of both of his legs below the knee, Tanner was well-known across the country as a passionate advocate of veterans' issues. Yet although Harrison received countless letters recommending Tanner for the position, and despite the excitement with which many veterans greeted his appointment, he became a lightning rod for broader criticisms of the pension system. Taking Harrison's supposed injunction to "treat the boys liberally" to heart, Tanner committed himself to a generous pension policy, adopting an expansive interpretation of the pension laws and re-rating thousands of pension claims to ensure that they provided the recipients with a higher rate of pension.⁴² At a speech in Columbia, Tennessee, in May, Tanner declared his intention to award more generous rates of pension "though I may wring from the hearts of some the prayer, 'God help the surplus!'"⁴³ During the summer, the Commissioner's extravagance brought considerable criticism of the new administration which was portrayed as beholden to the nation's veterans. By September, Tanner's management of the pension system had not only made him a political liability but had also brought him into conflict with many of his colleagues, and he was quietly encouraged to resign.⁴⁴

While Harrison's decision to dispense with Tanner caused some grumbling among the nation's veterans, he was soon able to demonstrate his continued dedication to a generous system

³⁸ 'The Soldiers' Monument,' *Indianapolis Journal*, 28th January 1884; 'The Proposed Soldiers' Monument,' *Indianapolis Journal*, 25th January 1884; Home E. Socolofsky and Allan B. Spetter, *The Presidency of Benjamin Harrison* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1987), 164-165.

³⁹ 'Day for the Soldiers,' *Indianapolis Journal*, 23rd August 1889; 'Among His Old Friends,' *Indianapolis Journal*, 23rd August 1889. While in Indianapolis, Harrison also attended the annual reunion of his old regiment, the Seventieth Indiana. 'Gen. Harrison's Regiments,' *Indianapolis Journal*, 24th August 1889.

⁴⁰ *Journal of the 23rd National Encampment* (1889), 121.

⁴¹ Benjamin Harrison, 'First Annual Message,' 3rd December 1889 [Found at millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/december-3-1889-first-annual-message; accessed 1st July 2026].

⁴² Glasson, *Federal Military Pensions*, 226-227. McMurry, 'The Bureau of Pensions During the Administration of President Harrison' *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 13 (December 1926), 347.

⁴³ 'Commissioner Tanner in Tennessee,' *New York Tribune*, 11th May 1889.

⁴⁴ John Noble to Benjamin Harrison, 24th July 1889, Papers of Benjamin Harrison, LC; John W. Noble to Benjamin Harrison, 18th September 1889, LC.

of veterans' pensions. By 1890, and despite avowed Harrison's support for the passage of new legislation, the nation's lawmakers had yet to take firm action, and the veterans were getting restless. "The soldiers are impatient and excited under what they supposed they were to expect as a result of the presidential election of 1888," one writer warned Harrison.⁴⁵ The meeting of the Grand Army's Department of Indiana in Harrison's native Indianapolis in March provided an opportunity to gauge the temperature of the nation's veterans. Reporting to Harrison's personal secretary, Elijah Halford, numerous men noted the impatience with the administration's progress. "Unless this Congress takes a very radical step forward on the pension question," one observer reported, "the Democrats will whip the life out of us in this State this year."⁴⁶ Yet even as Indiana's veterans fulminated, Congress was considering a major change to the pension laws. The previous December, the Senate had begun considering a bill that promised to provide a pension of twelve dollars a month to all soldiers who had served for ninety-days in the war and were now incapacitated for manual labor, or were otherwise dependent upon another person for support, regardless of the origins of their disability. By the end of March, after considerable congressional debate, the bill had passed through both houses by large majorities, and Harrison swiftly signed it into law.

The Dependent Pension Act might have fallen short of the hopes of some veterans, but it represented a significant liberalization of the nation's pension laws and a major boon to veterans and the families of the war dead. Writing to President Harrison's personal secretary Elijah Halford, Louis Michener, chairman of the Indiana Republican State Committee and one of Harrison's closest confidants, assured him that the law was "giving well-nigh universal satisfaction to the soldiers in this state." Pensions were now extended to any man who had served for at least ninety days in the Union army and who was now disabled, whether his disability had originated in the war or not. The Dependent Pension Act, as one correspondent informed Harrison's private secretary, had "relieved a great deal of the pressure which we had experienced before this in favor of a soldiers' pension bill," and "there is much more happiness in soldier circles than I have seen in many a year."⁴⁷ The measure reinforced Harrison's popularity among the nation's veterans, and contributed to an enormous expansion of the pension system. During the following three years, the number of names upon the federal pension rolls almost doubled, rising nearly to one million, and the annual cost soared, exceeding one hundred and fifty million dollars.⁴⁸

The Last March of his Last Campaign

By the time that Harrison left the White House in 1893, he had demonstrated his abiding support for the nation's veterans. When Harrison returned to Indianapolis in March, some of the city's Grand Army posts and representatives of other local veterans' organizations were prominent among the dignitaries and groups who received him at the city's Union Station. As Harrison and his family were driven through the city to their old home, they were escorted by some of the

⁴⁵ M.L. Bundy to Benjamin Harrison, 11th March 1890, Papers of Benjamin Harrison, LC.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Charles Griffin to E.W. Halford, 15th March 1890, Papers of Benjamin Harrison, LC. See also Stanton J. Peelle to E.W. Halford, 15th March 1890; Moses McClain to Elijah W. Halford, 15th March 1890; Louis T. Michener to E.W. Halford, 14th March 1890; John K. Gowdy to E.W. Halford, 12th March 1890. All Papers of Benjamin Harrison, LC.

⁴⁷ Louis T. Michener to Elijah W. Halford, 10th July 1890, Papers of Benjamin Harrison, LC.

⁴⁸ Glasson, *History of Military Pension Legislation*, 351.

surviving members of the Seventieth Indiana, three Grand Army posts, and the city's German Veteran Association.⁴⁹ When the Grand Army arrived in Indianapolis for its annual reunion later that year, Harrison was among the local veterans who welcomed them to the city. "If there is any man anywhere who does not honor the Union veteran," he assured the crowd at the beginning of the reunion, "he does not live in Indianapolis. If there is any man anywhere who suspects him or would detract in the smallest degree from his service, he is not here to-day. You will not meet him on our streets."⁵⁰ Despite the discomforts attendant upon the hot weather, the event drew an enormous crowd, and Harrison did his best to play an active role in the festivities, circulating among his former comrades, making speeches, and hosting a number of visitors at his home. "I tried to make several speeches," he informed a friend, and to "preside at several camp fires, shake hands with every body [sic]." It had been a "hard week," he concluded, "but a glorious one."⁵¹ Nevertheless, Harrison worried that the country was slowly forgetting the cause of the soldiers. Speaking once again at the city's Tomlinson Hall, Harrison lamented the plight of those veterans who were struggling with the enduring consequences of their service. "Can it be possible that, while the survivors of this great struggle are still with us, while they walk our streets, a generation has come on forgetful of their great achievements?" Harrison asked. That some veterans still depended upon private charity or localized relief, he went on, represented a stain on a country whose material growth owed much to their efforts to preserve the Union. "This country is rich in the great resources of these accumulated years. Our people can find no excuse for ingratitude toward the soldiers of the land in their inability to meet their just demands."⁵²

During the decade that followed, Harrison largely withdrew from the nation's political life, although he earned acclaim as an international lawyer and remained in demand as a speaker and even, briefly, as a potential presidential candidate in 1896. When Harrison did appear in public, however, his often demonstrated his continued respect for the nation's veterans. During a stay at Dodd's Camp in the Adirondacks in July 1895, for example, Harrison addressed a crowd assembled to mark the erection of a new flagstaff flying the national flag, and he spent much of his short address describing it as a symbol of the nation's veterans and their achievements on the battlefield: "It speaks to us of Lexington and Concord, of Valley Forge, of Saratoga, of Yorktown, and of all these great achievements. We look upon it and think of Washington. We look again and see the benign face of Abraham Lincoln. We look again, and Grant and Sherman and Sheridan are revealed to us. We see upon its folds the story of Vicksburg and Chickamauga and Chattanooga, of Gettysburg and Appomattox. It is this story that is woven into it that makes it precious to us."⁵³ No less than Washington and Lincoln, Harrison implied, or the generals who had commanded their armies, the private soldier had played his part in the nation's history.

The affection that Harrison felt for the nation's veterans, past and present, was repaid in kind. Though Harrison was often unable to attend the Seventieth Indiana Regiment's annual reunions due to the press of business or the needs of his family, he remained a highly popular figure and was re-elected every year as president, despite the suggestion of some disgruntled

⁴⁹ 'Mr. Harrison Home,' *Indianapolis News*, 6th March 1893.

⁵⁰ 'Are Going Into Camp,' *Indianapolis Journal*, 5th September 1893.

⁵¹ Benjamin Harrison to Lizzie Parker, 8th September 1893, Box HC 2 (Folder 14), Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site.

⁵² Reprinted in Benjamin Harrison, *Views of an Ex-President* (Indianapolis: The Bowen-Merrill Company, 1901), 362-363.

⁵³ 'Story of the Flag,' *Indianapolis Journal*, 28th July 1895.

members that his non-attendance justified his replacement.⁵⁴ The regiment's history, *The Seventieth Indiana Volunteer Infantry in the War of the Rebellion*, which appeared in 1900, reflected his regiment's continued affection for their old commander. Not only was Harrison's portrait selected as the volume's frontispiece, but the final chapter recounted his election to the presidency, emphasising the joy that his comrades had felt at his nomination and, in effect, claiming his election as a victory for the regiment.⁵⁵

Perhaps the clearest demonstration of Harrison's place within the hearts of his former comrades, however, came in the wake of his death in March 1901. When Harrison's body was transferred from his home to the statehouse, the surviving members of the Seventieth Indiana provided an escort, accompanying their former commander, as one of them would later remember, on "the last march of his last campaign."⁵⁶ Numerous commentators noted Harrison's continued identification with his comrades. To most Americans, one member of the Indiana Bar suggested, Harrison was simply a statesman, but to "the diminishing band of veterans of the war for the Union he was, besides that, the gallant soldier, the comrade in arms."⁵⁷ The Seventieth Indiana Regimental Association demonstrated the truth of that sentiment when they



Funeral Procession of Benjamin Harrison, Indianapolis.

convened for their annual reunion later that year. Perhaps as many as eight hundred people crammed into Greenwood Park that October, including more than one hundred of the regiment's surviving members, making it one of the larger reunions of recent years. Despite the number of attendees, however, the event was accompanied by an undercurrent of melancholy.⁵⁸ "We look in vain for the sturdy form, the kindly face, the beaming eye and the good white head of 'Colonel Ben.'" noted the speaker, who recalled the pride that Harrison had always taken in his military career. "It may be truthfully said," the speaker explained, "that the work of his life to which Benjamin Harrison recurred with the most marked delight and satisfaction was the conscientious service he gave to his country in the war for the Union."⁵⁹ Yet this service, as the speaker and his listeners well knew, had come not simply on the battlefield, but also in the long years of peace that had followed. As the United States began a new century, Harrison represented a reminder of the battles won during the previous one, including not only those on the internecine battlefield, but also in the political arena by the men who had fought to preserve the Union.

⁵⁴ 'The Old Seventieth,' *Indianapolis Journal*, 22nd August 1894; 'The Veterans at Acton,' *Indianapolis Journal*, 15th July 1897; 'Their Annual Reunion,' *Indianapolis Journal*, 21st July 1899. Discussions about replacing Harrison came to a head in 1900. See 'Gen. Harrison Elected,' *Indianapolis Journal*, 21st July 1900.

⁵⁵ Samuel Merrill, *The Seventieth Indiana Volunteer Infantry in the War of the Rebellion* (Indianapolis: Bowen-Merrill, 1900), 282-290.

⁵⁶ Quoted in 70th Indiana Regimental Association, *27th Annual Reunion and Camp-Fire: 70th Indiana Regimental Association* (1901), Folder: 70th Indiana Volunteers, Box 16 (70th Volunteer Regiment), Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site. See also 'To Lie in State,' *The Indianapolis Journal*, 16th March 1901.

⁵⁷ *Memorial Meeting of the Bar of Indiana upon the Occasion of the Death of Benjamin Harrison* (Indianapolis: Indiana State Bar Association, 1901), 10.

⁵⁸ 'Close of Reunion,' *Indianapolis Journal*, 10th October 1901.

⁵⁹ 70th Indiana Regimental Association, *27th Annual Reunion and Camp-Fire: 70th Indiana Regimental Association* (1901), Folder: 70th Indiana Volunteers, Box 16 (70th Volunteer Regiment), Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site.