

“Not Any Steps Backward: Frederick Douglass on the 23rd President”

Frederick Douglass was thrilled by Benjamin Harrison’s election as president in 1888. The one-time Maryland slave who had run away and won world-renown as a writer and had loyally supported every Republican presidential candidate since Abraham Lincoln. Always placing the protection of newly won African American political and civil rights as his top political priority, he had moved to Washington, D.C. after the Civil War to lobby Republicans during Reconstruction. He applauded the passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendment during the administration of Ulysses S. Grant as evidence that the Republican Party had honored its commitment to the former slaves. Douglass had been deeply disappointed, however, with the performance of Republican presidents Rutherford B. Hayes, James A. Garfield, and Chester Arthur who allowed Southern Reconstruction to collapse and African American rights to ebb. He blamed the defeat of Republican candidate James G. Blaine by Democrat Grover Cleveland in 1884 primarily on his party’s turn away from concern for African Americans toward promoting the growth of the nation’s industries. During Cleveland’s term, Douglass witnessed increases in assaults on Black people as voters and as workers and federal inaction toward the atrocities associated with lynching. Despite after reached seventy years of age, Douglass campaigned vigorously for Cleveland’s defeat in 1888 and hoped that the Republican Party would again champion equal rights for all citizens.

Douglass went to the Republican convention in Chicago in June 1888 supporting Senator John Sherman of Ohio for president but warmly accepted the nomination of

Hoosier Harrison with whom he was long acquainted. Douglass had observed Harrison's political career first-hand during campaign tours of Indiana on behalf of Republican candidates in 1876, 1880, and 1884. He had seen Harrison while a candidate for Indiana governor in 1876 defend Reconstruction as "a covenant with our God to save these people from the dastardly outrages that their rebel masters are committing upon them in the South." In his term in the U.S. Senate (1881-1887), Harrison also distinguished himself as a supporter of the unsuccessful effort to provide federal aid for African American education. These words and action convinced Douglass that Harrison would reverse the Republican Party's decreasing interest in African American rights.

A powerful stump orator, Douglass campaigned for the Republican Party ticket in Indiana and Michigan in September and then in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut in October. Douglass stressed Harrison's clear superiority to Cleveland: "The president of a country should be more than a successful politician. He should be a man of spotless character that has the admiration of all men; who can be pointed to as an example of good and power; who can be respected by the lowest and the highest. Such a man was Lincoln. Such a man we shall have in the person of Benjamin Harrison." Douglass rejoiced in Harrison's triumph at the polls that November as a victory for equality for the law, telling a Washington reporter: "The election of Gen. Benjamin Harrison is an advertisement to the American people that we are to have one country, one law, one liberty, and a common destiny for all citizens of the United States."

In the White House, Harrison worked to satisfy the desires of the broad constituency that had elected him. He sought to stimulate growth of north industries through raising the nation's tariff and protecting the gold standard. As Douglass had hoped, Harrison also supported a new effort pass the federal education bill and even more importantly endorsed Massachusetts Senator Henry Cabot Lodge's bill to provide federal protection for African Americans attempting to register and vote in Southern states where local Democratic authorities sometimes backed by mobs blocked them. Furious Democratic opposition in Congress to Harrison's full slate of legislation began to cause concern over how much could be passed before the midterm congressional elections. To Harrison's consternation, powerful Pennsylvania Senator Mathew Quay convinced Congress to delay deliberation of the elections bill until after the election in order to concentrate Republican efforts on getting the tariff measure passed. Douglass frantically lobbied Republican congressmen to not to postpone action on the federal elections bill, asking one Senator: "What if we gain the tariff and many other good things if in doing it the soul of the party and nation is lost?" The tariff measure passed, but the Republican Party lost control of both houses of Congress in the fall 1890 election and the chance to pass the education and election bills. Douglass nevertheless appreciated Harrison's firm support for both measures and told an African American audience in Washington: "No man since Gen. Grant has stood by us more firmly than has Gen. Harrison. He has let it be known openly and emphatically that he is for stepping to the very verge of constitutional limitations to secure honest elections, a free vote, and a fair count in every State in the Union, and he is not the man to take any steps backward."

The Harrison-Douglass relationship was not without some elements of strain, however. In recognition of Douglass's help in winning the White House, Harrison appointed him the U.S. minister plenipotentiary to the Caribbean republic of Haiti. One of the Harrison administration's major diplomatic goals was to project American influence throughout the Western Hemisphere through a major expansion of the U.S. Navy. Harrison and his Secretary of State Blaine wanted Douglass to obtain Haitian agreement to the lease of the Mole Ste. Nicholas as a site for a major base for American ships patrolling the Atlantic. Douglass worked to win Haitian approval for the proposed lease. The unwise dispatch of almost the entire U.S. Navy to the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince to cow that Haitians, without warning Douglass, had the opposite effect and the negotiations collapsed. Unfairly blamed by the press, but not by Harrison, for the diplomatic failure, Douglass soon retired as minister and returned to his Washington home in summer 1891.

Despite the Haitian fiasco, Douglass warmly endorsed Harrison's reelection. In a newspaper interview shortly before leaving to attend the 1892 Republican convention in Minneapolis, Douglass declared: "I am going for the purpose of doing what I can to bring the renomination of President Harrison. He has done more for the colored men in the way of offices than any President we ever had. He has done more than any President to give to the colored men fair recognition in private life and protect his home and family. To my mind we never had a greater President." Once again Douglass praised Harrison with his unswerving support for passage of the federal elections bill because that measure if passed "meant protection to the lives of every colored voter in

the South; it meant as fair political and personal treatment as is given the colored or white men at the North; it meant uniformity of the electoral franchise.”

Once again, Douglass undertook strenuous speaking tours in the 1892 campaign when Harrison in a rematch of 1888 contest with Democrat Grover Cleveland for the nation’s highest political office. Douglass noted the increasing anti-Black violence in the South and complained that Congress had failed to give Harrison the tools he had sought to protect African Americans. In numerous audiences, Douglass praised Harrison as “humane, wise, and strong” and declared that he had “the wisdom of Abraham Lincoln and General Grant that made them successful Presidents.”

Harrison’s narrow loss to Cleveland, caused in part by the Democrats’ disenfranchisement of tens of thousands of African American voters, greatly disappointed Douglass. He wrote that he hoped that Democrats would not view their victory as “a national approval of the outrages committed by them on the negro. They will learn that lynch law and murder were not endorsed by that election.” Alas Douglass’s guarded optimism proved wrong as African American civil and political rights would be reduced still further in the era of segregation of the early Twentieth century. Whether Harrison’s reelection might have halted that trend cannot be known, but he and Douglass’s shared a vision of a nation built upon equal justice for all citizens that should remain inspiring to all Americans until this day.