JAMES S. CLARKSON VERSUS BENJAMIN HARRISON, 1891-1893: A POLITICAL SAGA

*By Stanley P. Hirshson**

When Benjamin Harrison defeated Grover Cleveland for the presidency in 1888, some prominent Republicans believed that the triumph would usher in a golden age for their party. They were convinced that under Harrison's dynamic leadership Republicanism would reign supreme at least for the remainder of the nineteenth century. By 1900 the Democracy's once powerful voice in national affairs would be but a meaningless whisper.[1]

It did not take long for Republican disillusionment to set in. Almost immediately after Harrison's inaugural, men like James S. Clarkson, the Republican national committeeman from Iowa and owner of the Des Moines *Iowa State Register*, saw that the new chief executive was incapable of fulfilling their expectations. As time went by he and others became increasingly dissatisfied with the President.

By 1891 the Harrison administration had done many things which irked Clarkson. Despite the valuable work he had performed during the campaign of 1888, the Iowan had not been given a post in the new President's Cabinet. Instead, he had been appointed First Assistant Postmaster General. Although the chief executive was not entirely to blame for this situation, Clarkson became obsessed with the notion that Harrison had cheated him.[2] Moreover, Clarkson, a strong and relentless advocate of the Force Bill to regulate Congressional elections in the South, was piqued by the President's failure in 1891 fully to support that measure. An outspoken defender of the Southern Negro, Clarkson thereafter periodically urged the administra-

*Stanley P. Hirshson is assistant professor of history at Paterson State College, New Jersey.

[1] For this idea, see the remarks of James S. Clarkson in the Chicago *Tribune*, Feb. 5, 1893; of Chauncey Depew in the New York *Tribune*, Nov. 9, 1888; and of Benjamin Harrison in the New York *Herald*, Dec. 23, 1888.

[2] New York *Sun*, Apr. 27, 1891. On Clarkson's activities as vice-chairman of the Republican national committee in 1888, see Harry J. Sievers, *Benjamin Harrison, Hoosier Statesman* (New York, 1959), 366-7, 415. For the details of Clarkson's appointment as First Assistant Postmaster General, consult Leland L. Sage, *William Boyd Allison, A Study in Practical Politics* (Iowa City, 1956), 236-9.

tion to take a strong public stand in favor of equal rights for the freedmen, but his pleas were futile. The President did nothing.[3] So incensed was Clarkson by 1891 that he frequently denounced the administration, often using the strongest possible language.[4]

Nor was Clarkson the only Republican enemy Harrison made. Early in his term the President completely alienated such party leaders as Matthew S. Quay, the political dictator of Pennsylvania, and Thomas C. Platt, the Republican czar of New York. To Platt, disappointed because he had not been appointed Secretary of the Treasury, Harrison was the "White House iceberg" who had disregarded the wishes of the men who had elected him. Similarly, Quay, deprived of the patronage by the administration, found little to like in the President.[5]

By the third year of the Harrison administration the bosses' hatred of Harrison was an open secret. When, in July, 1891, Clarkson was elected chairman of the Republican national committee, the New York *World* considered the selection a bad omen for the chief executive. "It is a distinct anti-Harrison victory," the paper observed. "Exercising great influence," Clarkson would undoubtedly "forward any move calculated to defeat the President's ambition for a second term."[6]

By early 1892, Clarkson, Platt, and Quay were convinced that something drastic must be done if their party was to capture the presidency that year. At a secret meeting in New York these men, along with former Governor Russell A. Alger of Michigan and Samuel Fessenden, the party leader in Connecticut, agreed that Harrison must go and vowed to work for the nomination of Secretary of State James G. Blaine of Maine.[7]

In line with the scheme decided upon, Clarkson implored Blaine to seek

[3] Des Moines *Iowa State Register*, Apr. 29, 1890; Portland *Oregonian*, Aug. 1, 1890; James S. Clarkson to Elijah W. Halford, May 13, 1892, *Benjamin Harrison Papers* (Library of Congress), Vol. 140; Clarkson to W. B. Allison, Apr. 21, 1890, *William Boyd Allison Papers* (Iowa State Dept. of History and Archives, Des Moines), Box 273. For the President's attitude on the race problem, see Harrison to H. H. Mitchell, May 21, 1892, *Harrison Papers*, Vol. 142.

[4] New York *Sun*, Apr. 27, 1891.

[5] Louis J. Lang (ed.), *The Autobiography of Thomas C. Platt* (New York, 1910), 206-215; Philadelphia *Press*, July 31, 1891.

[6] New York *World*, July 30, 1891; George Harmon Knoles, *The Presidential Campaign and Election of 1892* (Stanford University, Calif., 1942), 36.

[7] Lang (ed.), *Autobiography of Thomas C. Platt*, 246, 488-9. Clarkson's long devotion to Blaine is described in Leland L. Sage, "The Clarksons of Indiana and Iowa," *Indiana Magazine of History*, 50:440 (December, 1954).

the nomination. Blaine's policies as head of the State Department had made the country prosperous, the Iowan argued. Of great personal magnetism, the man from Maine was the only Republican who could carry the country in November.[8]

Unmoved, Blaine in a public letter released early in February took himself out of the presidential race. Insisting that he was sick and tired of public service, he said that he desired to spend his remaining days in the comfort and ease of private life.[9]

A short while later Clarkson, in an interview, admitted that, with Blaine out of the running, the Republican presidential nomination would probably go to Harrison. "Blaine could be nominated and could be elected beyond all doubt, if he would take it, and he is our only certain winner," the national committee chairman asserted. Still, Harrison had "added to the glory of the country and the party both." He had "grown steadily in public estimation and in the last year rapidly in party estimation. It is not unlikely, and indeed is probable, that he may be chosen again."[10]

Until a few weeks before the Republican National Convention of June, 1892, Clarkson, living up to the letter if not the spirit of the chairmanship of the national committee, observed a policy of strict neutrality in the presidential race. In the middle of May when asked by the New York *World* to designate his own favorite candidate, Clarkson declined to comment.[11]

But Clarkson's deep-seated preference for Blaine proved too strong to stifle. At his instigation a Detroit conference of anti-Harrison men was held late in May. Attending the gathering were such important Republicans as Alger; J. Sloat Fassett of New York, one of Platt's most trusted advisers and former secretary of the national committee; Senator John M. Thurston of Nebraska; and John Mercer Langston, the Negro leader of Virginia. Along with Quay, Platt, and Senator J. Donald Cameron of Pennsylvania, these men, all of whom had been ignored by the adminis-

[8] Clarkson to James G. Blaine, Jan. 15, 1892, in Mary Abigail Dodge, *Biography of James G. Blaine* (Norwick, 1895), 698-9.

[9] Blaine to Clarkson, Feb. 6, 1892, in New York *World*, Feb. 8, 1892; Donald M. Dozer, "Benjamin Harrison and the Presidential Campaign of 1892," *American Historical Review*, 54:56 (October, 1948).

[10] New York *Times*, Mar. 16, 1892.

[11] New York *World*, May 18, 1892.

tration in patronage matters, decided to disregard Blaine's February letter and to push forward the Plumed Knight's candidacy.[12]

Spurred on by the strong pro-Blaine stand the members of the Detroit conference had taken, Clarkson after the meeting did what no self-respecting national committee chairman was supposed to do: he publicly named names and played favorites. Abandoning the unwritten principle of neutrality, he announced to the world that he was a Blaine man. "Blaine is in the American rather than in the Republican heart today. . . ," he insisted. Every schoolboy revered the Secretary of State. "Every American at home or abroad is proud of him." According to Clarkson, the buttons on millions of American vests were ripped off by the pressure of chests swelled with pride at the mere mention of Blaine's name. Should the man from Maine die tomorrow, "every newspaper in the land, irrespective of party, would say it was a pity he had never been President." Unbeatable, Blaine was "far stronger than his party."[13]

Hammering away at the Blaine-for-President theme, Clarkson predicted a few days later that his favorite would be nominated. Six-sevenths of the Republicans of the country, he conservatively estimated, favored Blaine. The young people of the party were for him almost to a man. Blaine's name was

> . . . the watchword — the synonym of Republicanism. The popular demand for his nomination is something the like of which I have never witnessed, nor do I think has its parallel been seen since the foundation of American institutions. Wherever I travel I am asked, yes, commanded by Republicans, young and old, even by their wives and their sweethearts, to cast my vote in the convention for the statesman from Maine, and to use what influence I have to make him our candidate.

Vowing to obey this public clamor, Clarkson predicted that Blaine would be selected by acclamation on the first ballot.[14]

After much pressure by the spoilsmen, Blaine finally yielded. Flattered beyond belief by Platt, Clarkson, and Quay, "the three most skillful wire-pullers in the Republican party," he finally broke with Harrison three days before the Republican convention met. He resigned his post as Secretary

[12] *Ibid.*, May 20, 23, 1892; New York *Times*, May 24, 1892.
[13] New York *World*, May 26, 1892.
[14] *Ibid.*, June 4, 1892.

of State and openly avowed that he was a candidate for the nation's highest office.[15]

Blaine's move proved to be far too little and far too late. In firm control of the party machinery, the President easily won renomination at the Minneapolis convention of June, 1892. Stampeding the gathering, he was chosen on the first ballot.[16]

To Clarkson the defeat of Blaine was a stunning blow. While still on the floor of the convention hall, he told a close friend that the Blaine forces had nothing to work with "but a rope of sand; we did not have a candidate until two days before the convention met." Well did Clarkson realize that this latest debacle signified the end not only of Blaine's political fortunes but also of his own career as a political manager. "For five successive conventions I have fought for Blaine," he recollected. "Do you realize what it means to me to see the end — and without success?"[17] Thus was Clarkson's twenty-year exercise in political futility concluded.

Failing completely as a president maker, Clarkson in 1892 had not even been able to hold his own delegation in line. Such important Iowans as Senators William B. Allison and James F. Wilson rallied to Harrison at the Minneapolis gathering. Only five Iowa votes were cast for Blaine, while the President received twenty.[18]

Predicting defeat in November for Harrison, the frigid Presbyterian deacon whose "low temperature of action towards the party workers" had alienated hundreds of thousands of loyal Republicans, Clarkson, Platt, Quay, and their cohorts bundled themselves "in overcoats and earmuffs" and left Minneapolis for home. Just the thought of Harrison, Platt later recalled, "caused a chattering of the teeth among the warm-blooded Republicans of the East."[19]

Not all party members agreed. To Senator William E. Chandler of New Hampshire, Clarkson had acted like a fool. Instead of trying to run a

[15] Matthew Josephson, *The Politicos, 1865-1896* (New York, 1938), 498-9; Allan Nevins, *Grover Cleveland, A Study in Courage* (New York, 1933), 488; June D. Holmquist, "Convention City: The Republicans in Minneapolis," *Minnesota History*, 35:73 (June, 1956).

[16] Josephson, *Politicos*, 500.

[17] Arthur W. Dunn, *From Harrison to Harding* (2 vols., New York, 1922), 1:93-4.

[18] Sage, *Allison*, 253; Thomas R. Ross, *Jonathan Prentiss Dolliver, A Study in Political Integrity and Independence* (Iowa City, 1958), 101.

[19] Lang (ed.), *Autobiography of Thomas C. Platt*, 215, 246-7.

campaign, the Iowan had attempted to make a President. As a result, Clarkson had split and greatly weakened his own party.[20] Joining in, former Senator John J. Ingalls of Kansas, ex-President Rutherford B. Hayes, and Whitelaw Reid of the New York *Tribune*, the 1892 vice-presidential nominee, all insisted that Clarkson, Platt, and Quay — the most "unscrupulous elements" in the party — had used Blaine's name "not because they loved it or cared to protect it, but merely because it was the handiest club for wreaking their revenge on Harrison."[21]

Looking back at the work of the convention ten days after its close, Clarkson defended his course. "Blaine really had the hearts of over three-fourths of the delegates," he opined. If the Plumed Knight had not waited so long to resign, he would easily have beaten Harrison. Blaine had not even bothered to consult his supporters before he had acted. Clarkson had learned of Blaine's intention to leave the Cabinet only the night before the public had.

Clarkson could find nothing good to say about Harrison. It was the President, not the bosses, who had resorted to unfair tactics at Minneapolis. As in 1888, Harrison had bartered important government posts for convention delegates. "I do not see where all the Cabinet offices that were promised at this Convention are to be found without a very substantial enlargment of the Cabinet," Clarkson stated. At least four posts in the chief executive's inner circle had been pledged by the President, and the "Mission to St. Petersburg, to my certain knowledge, was promised to three different men."[22]

Having rebelled against his master, Clarkson was now forced to pay the penalty. Despite his protests that he had served his party well in the past and would continue to do so in the future, he was, upon orders from the President, removed from the chairmanship of the Republican national committee late in June, 1892. Thus did Harrison make it clear that his political enemies would not guide his campaign for re-election.[23]

Publicly reviewing the situation, Clarkson once more denounced Harri-

[20] New York *World*, July 1, 1892.

[21] Philadelphia *Press*, Apr. 16, 1893; Charles R. Williams (ed.), *Diary and Letters of Rutherford Birchard Hayes* (5 vols., Columbus, Ohio, 1922-1926), 5:90; Joseph B. Foraker, *Notes of a Busy Life* (2 vols., Cincinnati, 1916), 1:423.

[22] Philadelphia *Press*, June 13, 1892.

[23] New York *Times*, June 28, 1892.

son. The President had replaced him solely for spite. Still, Clarkson revealed, he would do all in his power to re-elect Harrison. "Party duty" required that he support the ticket. "Loyalty is due to party and not to men."[24]

Privately, Clarkson just as emphatically emphasized his devotion to Republicanism and to the ticket. "Nobody's personal disappointments should weigh against party interests," he told John E. Bruce of the New York *Age*. "I bear no scars and wounds and have suffered no disappointments; and even if I had they should not weigh against anything of party concern or welfare. All that is left now for any good Republican to do is to turn in and help the ticket to win, and there can be no further rivalry during this campaign than to vie in the endeavor to do the most toward success."[25]

But Harrison wanted little aid from men like Clarkson, Quay, and Platt. Unwilling to forgive those who had attempted to kill him politically, the President refused to assign to them tasks of importance during the campaign of 1892. He was certain that he could successfully direct his own canvass.[26]

The balloting in November shattered Harrison's dream. He went down to a stunning defeat, winning only 145 electoral votes to 277 for Grover Cleveland, his Democratic opponent.[27] Clearly, the organizational skill of the three most prominent Republican wirepullers had been sorely missed.

To Clarkson the Republican debacle was but the latest and most notable tragedy in a long line of political disasters which had commenced with Harrison's inauguration. "The defeat was inevitable," he stressed to Bruce. Mismanagement had "gradually weakened" the Republican organization. "No party," he insisted, "can make itself ready for successful battle if its self-respect is constantly wounded and its spirit is constantly broken." Harrison did not "deserve to win." Still, Republicanism was "not dead, it cannot die because the Republicans cannot afford to have it die."[28]

Early in 1893 Clarkson viciously denounced Harrison and his methods once more. In a long interview entitled "Why Harrison Lost," published

[24] Philadelphia *Press*, July 2, 1892.

[25] Clarkson to John E. Bruce, July 13, 1892, *Bruce Papers* (Schomburg Collection of the New York Public Library).

[26] Philadelphia *Press*, Aug. 7, 1892; New York *World*, Nov. 2, 1892.

[27] Josephson, *Politicos*, 515-16.

[28] Clarkson to Bruce, Dec. 2, 1892, *Bruce Papers*.

on the same day in such leading newspapers as the Chicago *Tribune*, the New York *Press*, and the Philadelphia *Inquirer*, he argued that the chief executive had tried to run the campaign without help from anyone and that his reward had been the resounding Democratic victory. The President, Clarkson continued, should not have been nominated in the first place. Since 1872, Blaine had been the most popular Republican by far, and yet he had received the presidential nomination only in 1884. A "remnant" which dominated the Republican organization during the past twenty years had continually frustrated the majority desire for the former Secretary of State. With the exception of Blaine, no Republican since the 1870's "has possessed a genius for party leadership."

The humiliation of 1892 was a Harrison, not a party, defeat, Clarkson once more insisted. Over a million loyal Republicans had refused to vote for the mediocrity from Indiana. As proof of this assertion, Clarkson pointed out that the President had run far behind other Republican candidates in such key states as New York and Indiana. Four years ago, Harrison had achieved victory with "the help of every drop of Republican blood in this Republic. His election was purely a party and not at all a personal triumph." In 1888 there had been "a union of Republicans for the party's sake, a perfect union and concord in its ranks everywhere." But Harrison from the first had weakened his own organization. He made his administration "the culmination of the idea that party work, regularity and organization is a vulgar, immoral evil." He had chosen his Cabinet "without regard to Republican merit." Two of its members were Mugwumps and had endorsed Cleveland, the Democratic candidate for President, in 1884. Although Harrison had rewarded his enemies, he had rebuked those who had elected him. Thus, "instead of the new Republican administration at Washington proving a new source of encouragement and inspiration to the party at the center it proved a refrigerator to frappe nearly every Republican who journeyed there for suggestion, advice, or consultation."

In intelligence, Clarkson believed, Harrison was the equal of Blaine. "But in the elements of political or party leadership and in constructive and progressive statesmanship Blaine is infinitely superior." The gentleman from Maine was "a leader of men. He was born to it. He can apparently put his soul into other men." Cold and indifferent, Harrison lacked Blaine's charm, vision, and warmth. With careful planning and dynamic leadership,

Harrison in 1888 could have ushered in a twelve to sixteen-year era of Republican domination of the government. Unequal to the task, the President had bungled this glorious opportunity.[29]

It took only two months of Democratic rule for Clarkson to change his mind completely. After nine weeks of Grover Cleveland, Clarkson, for years the leader of the Republican opposition to Harrison, realized the error of his way and began lauding the former chief executive to the skies. No longer the "White House iceberg," the ex-President was now "gallant Ben Harrison," an indomitable leader who always acted "in the name of liberty." Well had gallant Ben served both the people and his party during his four years in the White House. Unfortunately, Cleveland in but a few weeks had ruined the grand work of the previous Republican administration.[30] Truly, election defeats make strange political bedfellows.

[29] Chicago *Tribune*, Feb. 5, 1893; New York *Press*, Feb. 5, 1893; Philadelphia *Inquirer*, Feb. 5, 1893.

[30] *Annual Address of James S. Clarkson, President of the National Republican League of the United States . . . May 10, 1893*, 4, in *James S. Clarkson Papers* (Library of Congress), Box 1.