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Source: *Negro History Bulletin*, JUNE, 1951, Vol. 14, No. 9 (JUNE, 1951), pp. 195-197, 206, 214

Published by: Association for the Study of African American Life and History

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44212474>

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PRESIDENT GARFIELD'S FORGOTTEN PRONOUNCEMENT

BY ELVENA S. BAGE

The history of the United States is replete with famous utterances by presidents and other statesmen. Two sentences by President James A. Garfield in his inaugural address of 1881 have, however, been almost completely overlooked. Since they voice in substance the ideal of what is today called first-class citizenship, they are deemed worthy of being rescued from oblivion. In his address Garfield declared: "Under our institutions there was no middle ground for the negro between slavery and equal citizenship. There can be no permanent disfranchised peasantry in the United States."¹

In order for the significance of these passages properly to be appreciated, a brief survey of conditions prior to 1881 will be helpful. White rule in the entire South was once more assured after President Hayes's withdrawal of federal troops from South Carolina and Louisiana in 1877, ending the period of Reconstruction. No longer was there a threat of Northern interference by force on behalf of the Negro. This fact was further evidenced during the president's good-will tour of the South in the same year. He assured the ex-Confederate states that they would be permitted to solve the "Negro problem" as they considered best. Although Southern leaders such as Wade Hampton ostensibly promised to protect the rights of Negroes, the *New York Times* was convinced as early as 1878 that this was not the case.² The reaction of some Southern Negroes

¹James D. Richardson, comp., *Messages and Papers of the Presidents* (New York, 1917), X, 4598.

²*New York Times*, November 14, 1878, p. 4, ed.

to flagrant violations of their rights resulted in the so-called Great Exodus of 1878-1879 when approximately 40,000 of them migrated to Kansas and other Northern states. By the end of the Hayes administration it was quite clear that along with economic, social and educational circumscriptions, large numbers of Negroes were being denied the right to vote by fraud and intimidation.

The next president, James A. Garfield, was fully cognizant of this situation when he took office in 1881. On many occasions previously he had expressed his concern for the protection of the political and civil rights of Negroes. Garfield left the Union Army in 1863 firmly convinced that the former slaves should enjoy full equality in American life. "No Union soldier," he publicly affirmed, "was ever betrayed by a black man or woman. And now that we have made them free, so long as we live, we will stand by these black allies."³ This attitude was repeatedly manifested during Garfield's service in Congress as representative from Ohio, from 1863 until 1880. During Reconstruction he was closely allied with Thaddeus Stevens and other "Radicals" who advocated measures to protect the rights of the Negro. In 1866, he declared: "I say here, before this House, that I will never so long as I have any voice in political affairs, rest satisfied until the way is opened by which these colored citizens, as soon as they are worthy, shall be lifted to the full rights of citizenship." Despite the opposition of many of his constituents,

³William R. Balch, *Life of President Garfield* (Philadelphia, 1881), p. 475.

Garfield urged Congress to be "brave enough" and "virtuous enough" to apply its principles to every citizen, "whatever be the color of his skin."⁴

Garfield was particularly desirous that Negroes should be protected in the free exercise of the suffrage. This led him to propose that the Southern states remain under military rule until there was a voting population that could be "trusted" with power. In addition, he advocated in 1869, 1871 and 1875 legislation to enforce the "wise and just" second section of the Fourteenth Amendment which requires a reduction in the representation of states where Negroes are disfranchised.⁵

Although Garfield was assassinated after only four months of service, it is revealing to examine his inaugural pronouncements on the Negro question and glean their meaning to his contemporaries. A considerable portion of the address was devoted to this issue which Garfield deemed the "great problem of American statesmanship" of the day. In a conciliatory tone, he called for both sections to leave behind them the "battlefields of dead issues" and extended sympathy to Southerners faced with the difficulties engendered by the emancipation of the colored race. On the other hand, the president appeared adamant in his desire for protection of the rights of Negroes, particularly the exercise of the

⁴*Congressional Globe*, 39th Cong., 1st sess., Appendix, pp. 64-69.

⁵Burke A. Hinsdale, ed., *Works of James Abram Garfield* (Boston, 1882), I, 760-762. For Garfield's role in the Compromise of 1877, see C. Vann Woodward, *Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction* (Boston, 1951).

suffrage which was being denied. The only valid excuse he saw for withholding the franchise was the uneducated condition of the masses of Negroes. But, he declared, the "saving influence of universal education" would provide the remedy for this situation; the question would thereupon cease troubling the Southern states and "each within its own jurisdiction" could make the ballot free and pure.⁶

The president's key statements rejecting a "disfranchised peasantry" in the United States have been largely ignored by later historians. Even Garfield's chief biographer, T. C. Smith, dismissed the inauguration as the "usual military and civic festival" without mentioning the address. Similarly, R. G. Caldwell, the other principal biographer, attached no importance to his statements on that occasion.⁷ Only one biography or compilation of Garfield's speeches singled out the significant passage in any way.⁸ Seven other accounts, mainly eulogistic campaign literature, included it as part of the quotation of the entire address. Nineteen did not even include the speech. Regardless of whether or not these remarkable clauses have been perpetuated for later generations, at least Garfield's contemporaries could mull over them. An analysis of the comment occasioned by these statements in periodicals and newspapers of the day proved highly rewarding.

The leading magazines—*Harper's Magazine*, *Nation*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *North American Review*, *Harper's Weekly*—did not mention the passage. While it is true that none was predominantly political in character, interest in politics and

⁶Richardson, comp., *op. cit.*, X, 4598-4600.

⁷Theodore C. Smith, *The Life and Letters of James Garfield* (New Haven, 1925), 2 vols.; Robert G. Caldwell, *James A. Garfield, Party Chieftain* (New York, 1931).

⁸Baleh, comp., *Garfield's Words* (Boston, 1881), p. 121.

reform movements was occasionally manifested. Usually, however, such outstanding men of letters as *Atlantic Monthly's* Thomas Bailey Aldrich determined editorial policies and they featured literary items. Of the two periodicals which cited Garfield's inaugural address, the Republican *Harper's Weekly* observed that, although its tone was "perfectly firm," it was "entirely unexceptionable." The editor of the independent *Nation*, Edwin L. Godkin, similarly quipped: "Everybody knows that it contains nothing in the nature of a programme, either of legislation or administration, which is likely to be carried into effect."⁹

Only a few of the leading newspapers quoted Garfield's formulation of the ultimate solution of the race problem, first-class citizenship for the Negro. Of the Southern papers examined, the *Richmond Dispatch*, while not agreeing with the "beneficent" effect of making voters of the Negroes, did concede that Garfield stated his case forcefully when he said there was no middle ground between slavery and full citizenship.¹⁰ The *New Orleans Times* characterized the entire address as political claptrap, but agreed that there could be no permanent disfranchised peasantry,

provided such class have the facilities for howling or have the ability to induce others to howl for them. This conclusion is totally independent of the right or wrong of the disfranchisement; and as all classes . . . have the means (newspapers) of howling in the Land of the Free . . . it appears to be a result inevitable that suffrage must continue to extend . . . until the bladder (the Constitution) which holds the gas bursts. That it will burst is as inevitable as the collapse of the strongest boiler under pressure of too much steam. Our idiotic country-men are almost unanimously agreed in ramming in more fuel without paying

⁹"The Inaugural Address," *Harper's Weekly*, XXV (March 19, 1881), 179; "The Inaugural Address and the Cabinet," *Nation*, XXXII (March 10, 1881), 162-163, ed.

¹⁰*Richmond Dispatch*, March 5, 1881, p. 2, ed.

the slightest attention to worn rivets and gnawing rust.¹¹

Other leading Southern newspapers, while omitting reference to the passage, seized upon Garfield's allusion to the Negro question in the South to voice their objections to his concepts. The *Louisville Courier-Journal* dismissed the inaugural address as containing no insight into the president's future policy. It declared: "The talk about the suppressed vote in the South has long since lost its significance and will soon lose its power of irritation." The indignant editors of the *Mobile Daily Register* accused Garfield of violating good taste in charging the South with denying Negroes the right to vote. Relief was expressed, however, at his recognition that there was danger from the ignorance of voters. The *Atlanta Constitution* went so far as to disclaim responsibility for educating Negroes and asserted that the right to vote would take care of itself if Northern Republicans would accord Negroes the right to hold office. Similarly striking a partisan note, Henry Watterson in the *Charleston News and Courier* retorted that Southern Negroes voted for any candidates the Republicans presented them, whether ignorant, educated, honest or corrupt. The classic response to criticism of the South, however, was proclaimed by the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* which declared that the South would deal with the situation in a just and honorable way if left alone, "free from the intermeddling, propagandistic spirit of fanatics, possessed with negrophobia."¹²

Northern and Western newspapers ran the gamut of expres-

¹¹*New Orleans Times*, March 6, 1881, p. 6, ed.

¹²*Louisville Courier-Journal*, March 7, p. 2; *Mobile Daily Register*, March 5, p. 2, March 11, p. 2; *Atlanta Constitution*, March 5, p. 2, March 6, p. 2, March 11, p. 2; *Charleston News and Courier*, March 5, p. 2; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 5, 1881, p. 1. All editorials.

sions in stating their reactions to Garfield's inaugural address. However, only three of the twelve leading journals examined, representing a cross-section of the nation's political diversities, included comments in their editorials upon the president's most striking sentences. The Democratic press was most censorious. George Hearst's San Francisco *Examiner* simply regarded the address as a "partisan stump speech." The same was true of the New Haven *Evening Register* which denounced it as a "stalwart" document which read smoothly but sounded hollow and thin. The most important Democratic daily in Ohio, the Cincinnati *Enquirer*, mocked: "It is hardly necessary to call attention of the colored people to the fact that they got a nice word in the Inaugural but no place in the Cabinet. The colored man subsists a long time on wind pudding."¹³

The response of the Republican party organs to Garfield's pronouncements on the racial picture in the South was varied. "Every reference," stated the Indianapolis *Journal*, "was of a most satisfactory character." Joseph McCullagh of the St. Louis *Globe-Democrat* singled out the protection of the rights of Negroes and their education as the most important aspects of the address. In Detroit, the Scripps family's *Post and Tribune* agreed that education was needed but affixed responsibility on local authorities. The paper pointed out: "The national government cannot open their jaws and force this educational remedy down the throats of ignorance until the Constitution is changed." The Boston *Evening Transcript* went so far as to interpret Garfield's allusion to education as a sanction for educational tests and the payment of a poll tax, as in Massachusetts. Apparently the paper overlooked the

¹³San Francisco *Examiner*, March 7, 1881, p. 2; New Haven *Evening Register*, March 5, p. 2; Cincinnati *Enquirer*, March 7, p. 4. All editorials.

fact that the racial question was not involved in the case of the poll tax in that state to the extent that it was in the South. Instead of examining these issues as did the other dailies, the Pittsburgh *Dispatch*, along with the independent Washington *Star*, registered hope that the address marked the "funeral oration" over sectional strife.¹⁴

The three newspapers of the North and West which attached special significance to Garfield's dismissal of a "middle ground" for the Negro race in America were also Republican organs. The Chicago *Tribune*, edited by Joseph Medill who was formerly mayor of that city, interpreted the clause as presaging a vigorous policy by the new administration. In like fashion, the Philadelphia *North American*, terming the propositions "forcible" and "incontrovertible," surmised: "It is high ground, but it is not higher than a free and enlightened people can occupy."¹⁵

On the other hand, John Foord, the editor of the New York *Times*, dispensed with such lavish praise and viewed the principle as having a wider application than to the Negro race. He explained: "It is a declaration of the necessity of universal suffrage as a protection of the subjects of government." That Negroes were denied the freedom of the ballot was deemed a truth which had long been "too palpable to admit of honest denial." The *Times* observed that, even though universal education might be the ultimate solution, the question remained what was to be done in the meantime about the violations. Referring to the president's promise that he would protect the rights of Negroes as far as his authority could lawfully ex-

¹⁴Indianapolis *Journal*, March 5, 1881, p. 4; St. Louis *Globe Democrat*, March 5, p. 5; Detroit *Post and Tribune*, March 9, p. 2; Boston *Evening Transcript*, March 7, p. 4; Washington *Star*, March 5, p. 4; Pittsburgh *Dispatch*, March 5, p. 4. All editorials.

¹⁵Chicago *Tribune*, March 5, 1881, p. 4; Philadelphia *North American*, March 5, p. 2. Both editorials.

tend, the paper stated: "It is easily said; but how is that authority going to operate . . . among six millions of negroes unevenly distributed among twice as many whites in a third of the States of the Union?" The editorial concluded that evidently Garfield was not ready to define his policy. Notwithstanding, it advised the administration to exercise the utmost care to free the national government from involvement in defective local conditions in order, at least, to hasten the solution.

The reaction of newspapers to Garfield's declaration of first-class citizenship for Negroes was clearly attuned to sectional and party interests. Only two Southern dailies referred specifically to the clause. Neither approved of it. The Richmond *Dispatch* did concede that Garfield had stated his case forcefully, but the New Orleans *Times* ridiculed the principles outright. The other five Southern papers used the address as an opportunity to reiterate their opposition to Negro suffrage. In the North and West, three of the twelve papers examined commented on the excerpt in question. All three, Republican organs, commended the significant statements. In fact, the Chicago *Tribune* and the Philadelphia *North American* were quite lavish in their praise. The New York *Times*, however, sought media for implementing the doctrine. The comments of the nine Northern and Western papers which directed attention to Garfield's views on the Negro question without singling out the clause in reference followed party dictates. Democratic organs bitterly denounced the address; those with Republican affiliations agreed with most of the president's policy.

The Negro press was similarly investigated to gauge its reaction to Garfield's inaugural address.

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¹⁶New York *Times*, March 7, 1881, p. 4, ed.

sary.'” The “chicken-stealing Negro” was reflected in an item from the *Kansas City Star*. According to this item:

It was a Maysville negro preacher who needing the money, said: “Brethren, we will now staht de box, an’ fo’ de glory of heaven, which ebber of you stole Mr. Jones’s turkey will please not put anything in hit.” And every man in the congregation contributed.³

The Negro who was engaged in one of the professions also came in for his share of ridicule and dialect. A Negro lawyer who was wounded in a fight was quoted as saying: “‘Don’t know who shot me, and ah wouldn’t tell if ah did.’” According to an editorial in the *Times*: “It is not alone as pulpit orators that the Negroes of the older school use an eloquence more interesting than intelligible.” Then the editorial in the *Times* offered as evidence the following statement by Randolph Miller, editor of the *Chattanooga Blade*:

“In this case, as are generally all other cases of this sort, the whites have disgraced themselves tenfold worse than the act of the Negro; for this reason, while it is said that the Negro committed a high crime by an act of way laying with an intent to take life, a crime of the same nature or worse from the fact that it was committed collectively a part of which was in the presence of 8,000 people in a nation that boasts offering the encyclopedist, of the balance of the civilized and intelligent world, perpetrating a deed that of collective arson unequalled in the ancient history of the darkest days of savagery of races, even of the cannibal kind.”

Miller’s editorial, part of which is quoted above, was concerning a lynching that took place in the South. To illustrate the parallelism, these lines by a Negro preacher leading his congregation in prayer were used:

“Gibe dis pore brudder de eye of de eagle, dat he spy out sin afar off. Glue his hands to de gospel plow. Tie his tongue to de line of truf. Nail his years to de gospel pole. Bow his head

³*Ibid.*, March 31, 1901, p. 1, news art.; July 20, p. 6, Nuggets; Aug. 10, 1902, p. 6, Nuggets.

way down between his knees, Oh Lord, and fix his knees way down in some lonely dark, and narrow valley, where prayer is much wanted to be made. Noint him with de kerosine ile of salvation and set him afire.”⁴

While quoting unintelligible utterances such as these, the *Times* failed to quote from intelligent editorials by Negro editors and intelligent sermons by Negro preachers.

Several items dwelt on Negro superstition. The *Lexington (Kentucky) Herald* reported on a mirage of a village in the sky seen by many citizens of Lexington: “‘A colored revival in progress at the time continued far into the night, as the worshippers firmly believed that the mirage portended great events.’” The *Burging (Kentucky) Record* told a story about a log that fell on a youth and killed him. The story related that the log would probably remain where it lay till it rotted for the Negroes had a superstition that whoever removed a log that had been the cause of a death would suffer a similar fate.⁵

⁴*Ibid.*, January 21, 1901, p. 2, news art.; June 1, 1902, editorial; February 14, 1913, p. 5, news art.

⁵*Ibid.*, March 2, 1910, p. 2, news art.; March 16, p. 6, news art.

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No magazines were then being published, although several of short duration had appeared since 1837. In fact, of the thirty-one Negro newspapers listed by Penn as being published in 1880,¹⁷ only two were on file for 1881 at the library of Congress or the Moorland Room of Howard University. The only issue for the month of March was that of the New Orleans *Louisianian*, a weekly paper founded by

¹⁷I. Garland Penn, *The Afro-American Press and Its Editors* (Springfield, Mass., 1891), p. 114.

P. B. S. Pinchback, former lieutenant-governor and acting governor of Louisiana, in 1870. Its form, printing, spelling and English usages were defective, but its uncompromising reinforcement of Garfield’s principles was clearly evident. This is shown by the following quotation which is given exactly as it appears in the paper:

The position of the Negro in the South since reconstruction has been a very peculiar one: debarred literally from the rights justly accorded to him in the amendments to the Constitution by the coercive powers of State rights, rendering the National Government powerless to protect him as one of its common citizens, and in accordance with its Constitution. President Garfield is the first to announce this brave and patriotic sentiment, that: “Those who resisted the change should remember that there was no middle ground between slavery and equal citizenship,” and we trust that in the future it will be so understood. . . .

It is alleged that the danger growing out of the Negro suffrage question owing to his ignorance is a standing menace to local self-government. . . . This reasoning cannot be gainsayed, and it is the shoal upon which the South is liable to be wrecked, unless the National Government come to its aid. The Negro is not the only source of ignorance in the South; but the hoards of white children growing up in utter ignorance and depravity in the South, is a grave question and should be seriously considered by those who are interested in the welfare of this section. . . . The educational facilities of the Negro in this State outside of the parish of Orleans, is a farce. In a majority of the parishes, the scholastic year does not embrace two months of actual teaching and in many parishes a school for the past two years is a luxury unknown. Such is the measures taken by a loyal states government to educate a race and to liberate the franchise of its citizens.¹⁸

This sole available comment of the Negro press on Garfield’s interest in elevating the colored race to the rank of what is today called first-class citizenship appears bitter indeed. The previous Hayes administration had gone on record as having allowed the South to

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¹⁸New Orleans *Weekly Louisianian*, March 12, 1881, p. 2, ed.

abundant evidence of the sheer hypocrisy of both political parties and of the presidents on the difficult question of the desirable place for the Negro in American society.

On the other side of the ledger, perhaps, is a striking comment by President Garfield in his inaugural address of March 4, 1881. My research assistant at Howard University, Mrs. Elvena S. Bage, has analyzed this statement and its reception by the press at that time. Other articles in this issue are portions or summaries of some of the theses. They will leave little doubt that the period since the end of Reconstruction needs largely to be rewritten.

When the history of the last seventy-five years shall have been written, one will be able to trace the rise of the Negro from the nadir at the end of the nineteenth century to the present day hope for integration and the forces that have contributed to an extraordinary improvement in the place of the Negro in American society and thought.

Garfield's Pronouncement

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relegate the Negro to an inferior status; yet some Negroes, at least, remained unswerving in their devotion to the Republican party and welcomed the new president. Garfield's policy as defined in his inaugural address, if put into effect, would no longer tolerate a middle ground for the Negro between slavery and equal citizenship, or permanent disfranchised peasantry. Garfield himself, however, could not envision success in this endeavor, for he confided to a friend in January, 1881: "Time is the only cure for the Southern difficulties. In what shape it will finally come, if it come at all, is not so clear."¹⁹

¹⁹Mary L. Hinsdale, ed., *Garfield-Hinsdale Letters* (Ann Arbor, 1949), pp. 478-479.

Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History

The Annual Meeting of the Association will be held on the campus of Florida A and M College, Tallahassee, Florida, October 26-28, on invitation of President George W. Gore, Jr. The chairman of the local committee is Professor J. W. Riley of the Department of History.

The program will be built around the topics, "The Negro in the United States," "The Negro in Africa," "The Negro in the Caribbean," "The Negro in Latin America," and "Neglected Areas of Research." As usual, there will be formal papers and discussion. One

innovation will be the designation of a *rapporteur* for each session who will have the responsibility of preparing a summary of the discussions for publication in the *Journal of Negro History*.

All delegates should report to the Guest House on the campus for room assignment. Lodging will be \$1.50 to \$2.00 per night and meals, which will be served in the Faculty Dining Room, will cost approximately \$2.00 per day. Requests for reservations should be addressed as soon as possible to Professor Riley.

One of the outstanding events will be a testimonial in honor of the more than twenty years of service rendered by Mr. Louis R. Mehlinger, Secretary-Treasurer of the Association.

THEME FOR NEGRO HISTORY WEEK 1952: "GREAT TEACHERS"



MAYOR VINCENT R. IMPELLETERI PRESENTS TO DR. JAMES EGERT ALLEN, TREASURER AND PROGRAM COORDINATOR OF THE NEW YORK BRANCH OF ASNLH, THE ANNUAL PROCLAMATION SETTING ASIDE FEBRUARY 11-18 AS A TIME FOR SPECIAL OBSERVANCES IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK. SHOWN IN THE PICTURE READING FROM LEFT TO RIGHT ARE: MR. SHERMAN HIBBITT, WHO HAS CONTRIBUTED RADIO TIME TO THE WORK OF THE ASSOCIATION; MRS. RUTH W. WHALEY, DEPARTMENT OF WELFARE; DR. ALLEN; MAYOR IMPELLETERI; MRS. GERRI MAJOR OF THE *AMSTERDAM NEWS*; AND DEPUTY COMMISSIONER OF HOUSING, FREDERICK WEAVER, GRANDSON OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS