



INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS

William Henry Harrison: Virginia Gentleman in the Old Northwest

Author(s): Reginald Horsman

Source: *Indiana Magazine of History*, June 2000, Vol. 96, No. 2 (June 2000), pp. 125-149

Published by: Indiana University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27792242>

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

https://www.jstor.org/stable/27792242?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

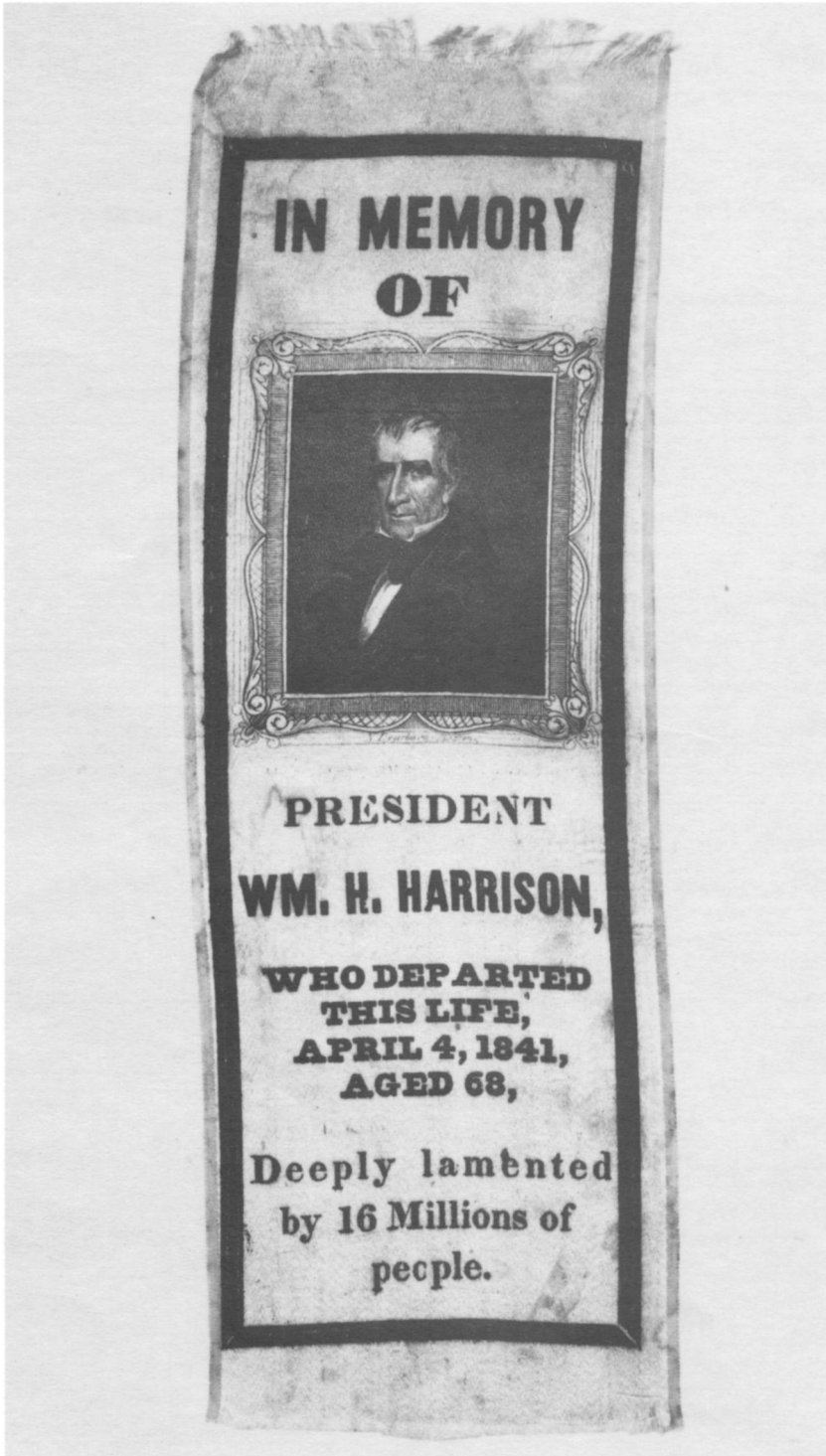
JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Indiana University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Indiana Magazine of History*



Courtesy Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis

William Henry Harrison: Virginia Gentleman in the Old Northwest

*Reginald Horsman**

The recent publication of a comprehensive collection of the papers of William Henry Harrison for the years 1800 to 1815 will make possible a new evaluation of his career in the period of his longest tenure of political office and most important military service. The papers should also pave the way for a much-needed biography.¹ Although Harrison served very briefly as president of the United States, he has always held more interest for historians of Indiana and the Old Northwest than for those interested in the national scene. Even his election to the presidency has usually been examined more in regard to the methods the Whigs used to secure this success than in terms of Harrison's fitness for office. While his successes and failures as territorial governor of Indiana, as superintendent of Indian affairs, and as the general at Tippecanoe and in the War of 1812 have been discussed at some length, Harrison as a national politician remains a shadowy figure.

There is no modern comprehensive biography of this man who was important enough to be elected president.² The best biography, by Dorothy Burne Goebel, is over seventy years old. The work has kept its usefulness because Goebel was a sound historian who presents a balanced view of Harrison's public career. She indicates some of the problems in writing a full-scale biography of Harrison with the sub-

*Reginald Horsman is Distinguished Professor Emeritus at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

¹Douglas E. Clanin *et al.*, eds., *The Papers of William Henry Harrison, 1800-1815*, microfilm (10 reels and guide; Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, 1999). With over 3,800 annotated transcripts from a variety of public and private sources, this is a very rich collection, and the materials have been transcribed with meticulous care. The accompanying guide explains the origins and methodology of the project and contains a comprehensive listing of all the transcribed items.

²One reason for the absence of a modern biography of Harrison has been the lack of any comprehensive collection of his papers. Many of them were lost when his home in North Bend, Ohio, near Cincinnati, was destroyed by fire in July 1858. The collection of Harrison papers in the Library of Congress consists of less than a thousand items. Most of them are from the period of the War of 1812, although there are some earlier items and some material relating to the presidential campaign of 1840. See *Index to the William Henry Harrison Papers* (Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., 1960). An excellent source for the location of papers relating to Harrison's career and the extensive historical writing about him is Kenneth R. Stevens, *William Henry Harrison: A Bibliography* (Westport, Conn., 1998).

title “A Political Biography.” Ironically for a work with this subtitle, Goebel reaches the conclusion that Harrison was at his best in his private life—affectionate with his family, genial, with a capacity for friendship. In public life, Goebel argues, Harrison was a politician, not a statesman, but she tempers this assessment with the comment that this was also true of almost all his public associates. He eagerly sought public office and “did his best, but he lacked the powers of a Calhoun, a Clay, or a Webster.” Goebel finds that Harrison seldom initiated ideas or programs, although he advanced an idealistic image of the republic. As a general, she concludes that he was brave and alert to danger but unwilling to press on after a victory.³

The two main biographies of Harrison written since Goebel, by Freeman Cleaves and James A. Green, were both published some sixty years ago.⁴ Both of these lack the balance and critical acumen of Goebel, although Cleaves’s account is less sycophantic than Green’s. Cleaves uses a lively narrative style, avoids extensive analysis, and generally interprets Harrison’s actions favorably. Green, a collector of Harrison materials, was quite open about his admiration for his subject and acknowledged help from Harrison’s grandchildren. Writing of Harrison in his foreword, he states, “I greatly admire him as a man who did things worth while.” This was a laudatory history, written in the tone of some of the nineteenth-century biographies of Washington. It succeeds reasonably well in conjuring up Harrison’s era, provides useful details on Harrison’s family, his farm, and private life, but makes no attempt to provide a balanced account of Harrison’s career. Greene says of Harrison’s biographers that all of them had been “generous and appreciative” except Goebel. Her book, he writes, “in many ways. . . falls far short.” She had done “a marvelous job of research” but had written her book “without sympathy.”⁵

As the major biographies of Harrison were written so long ago, they are all traditional in their approach. Discussions that place Harrison in the context of modern historical writing have to be sought in studies other than biographies. Some of the shift in historical trends is revealed in Andrew R. L. Cayton’s excellent book on frontier Indiana. Cayton approaches the history of early Indiana through chapters devoted to figures prominent in the early history of the state. For his chapter on the early nineteenth century, Cayton focuses on Harrison’s wife rather than Harrison in a chapter entitled “The World of Anna Tuthill Symmes Harrison, 1795–1810.” He considers Harrison both in the setting of his family and in the context of other immi-

³Dorothy Burne Goebel, *William Henry Harrison: A Political Biography* (*Indiana Historical Collections*, Vol. XIV; Indianapolis, 1926), 378-80.

⁴Freeman Cleaves, *Old Tippecanoe: William Henry Harrison and His Time* (New York, 1939); James A. Green, *William Henry Harrison: His Life and Times* (Richmond, Va., 1941).

⁵Green, *Harrison*, xi-xii, 455.

grants to the Ohio Valley in these formative years. In his desire to acquire the land that would provide him with prosperity, Cayton argues, Harrison was typical of the white males moving into the Ohio Valley. He is depicted as a man prepared to use the existing system, eagerly seeking patrons who would help him secure positions in government. He married the daughter of an important man in frontier Ohio and grasped at every opportunity. As a member of a prominent but declining Virginia family, Harrison knew that he had to shape his own personal and political future and sought to do this in every way. "It is hardly surprising," Cayton writes, "that he made it to the very top, serving as president of his country for one month in the winter of 1841, without anybody being exactly sure of what his principles were."⁶

In *The Emerging Midwest*, Nicole Etcheson places Harrison in the context of concerns about republicanism in the early republic. Etcheson argues that in the years from 1790 to 1818 upland southern midwesterners feared that an oligarchy was using its wealth and political power to threaten republican principles. In Indiana Territory, Harrison's opponents argued that he thwarted the popular will, influenced elections, speculated in land, and encouraged slavery. Etcheson points out that many of these complaints originated with Harrison's political opponents and that he used similar republican rhetoric in his own defense. He attacked his critics as self-interested men and claimed that he had used his wide powers to defend the liberties of the people.⁷

The lack of modern biographies of Harrison and the failure of earlier biographers to catch the essence of the man have meant that it is difficult to obtain any overall sense of his strengths and weaknesses or of what moved him as an individual. Historians of Indiana have depicted him as an influential but controversial territorial governor, yet on the national level it is difficult to see beyond the cardboard image erected by the Whigs to win their "Log-Cabin and Hard Cider Campaign" in 1840. In the piece on Harrison in the recent *American National Biography*, K. R. Constantine Gutzman states that his "significance is not great" and that "his career in federal political office was a relatively undistinguished one." Even Harrison's record as governor of Indiana Territory is minimized. "His record as a territorial governor was solid," writes Gutzman, "but its social basis—the dominance of the 'Virginians' in the Old Northwest—did not survive him." As a general he is characterized as "less incompetent" than most of the civil and military leaders responsible for American actions in the War of 1812.⁸ This is not the stuff of heroes. Even

⁶Andrew R. L. Cayton, *Frontier Indiana* (Bloomington, Ind., 1996), 172, 194-95.

⁷Nicole Etcheson, *The Emerging Midwest: Upland Southerners and the Political Culture of the Old Northwest, 1787-1861* (Bloomington, Ind., 1996), 15-16, 22-26.

⁸*American National Biography*, see under "William Henry Harrison."

though Harrison fought the Indians at Tippecanoe, commanded the northwestern armies against the British in the War of 1812, and won the Battle of the Thames, he has never even appeared as a dominating figure in accounts of the War of 1812.

Without a modern biography Harrison's life and career have never been viewed in the light of more recent historical understanding of the period through which he lived, nor has his career been placed in the context of the new understanding of the changes in America's political culture in the postrevolutionary years. Harrison was born into Virginia's ruling gentry, yet he managed to be elected president in an age when the politics of deference had been succeeded by a new, tumultuous republicanism. By 1840 the Virginia gentleman had been transposed, at least in the eyes of Whig campaign managers, into a sturdy western farmer and a true representative of the common man. Harrison was presented as a man of the people in contrast to his opponent, who was portrayed as a representative of an eastern elite. Clearly, Harrison's career is revealing of the changing nature of political life in early republican America as well as of changes in individual motivations and expectations.

The man who ended his life as the log-cabin president of the Whig party began it at Berkeley plantation in Virginia. There had been Harrisons in Virginia since the 1630s. William Henry's father, Benjamin, served for many years in the Virginia House of Burgesses, was governor of the state, and as a member of the Continental Congress had signed the Declaration of Independence. As part of the ruling gentry of Virginia, Harrison was bred to the politics of deference. In the normal course of events, the Harrisons expected their sons to be among the ruling elite of Virginia, and the sons could expect to receive the electoral support of the freeholders of the state.⁹ Although historians have differed widely in their discussion of the timing of the replacement of the politics of deference by a new republican political culture, there is general agreement that the Revolution did not eliminate this political form in Virginia.¹⁰

William Henry's heritage was more impressive than his material prospects. Many of the long-established Virginia plantations were in decline in the revolutionary era. Benjamin Harrison did not

⁹The classic statement of the role of the Virginia gentry is given in Charles S. Sydnor, *Gentlemen Freeholders: Political Practices in Washington's Virginia* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1952). See also Michal J. Rozbicki, *The Complete Colonial Gentlemen: Cultural Legitimacy in Plantation America* (Charlottesville, Va., 1998).

¹⁰The persistence of the politics of deference in post-revolutionary Virginia is discussed in Richard R. Beeman, *The Old Dominion and the New Nation, 1788-1801* (Lexington, Ky., 1972), and in J. R. Pole, "Representation and Authority in Virginia from the Revolution to Reform," *Journal of Southern History*, XXIV (February 1958), 16-50. There is a discussion of the transitional nature of political culture in the early republic in Ronald P. Formisano, "Deferential-Participant Politics: The Early Republic's Political Culture," *American Political Science Review*, LXVIII (June 1974), 473-87.

maintain the fortune he had inherited from his father, and William Henry was his third son. In seeking his fortune, William Henry first decided to pursue a career in medicine, a course followed by many younger sons of well-established Virginia families. For a time he attended Hampden-Sydney College and then studied medicine briefly in Richmond and in Philadelphia, the center of American medical education. This early interest soon waned, for in August 1791, after the death of his father, Harrison obtained a commission as an ensign in the 1st Regiment of United States Infantry. With his impeccable Virginia connections and Virginian George Washington as president, Harrison could expect to find preferment in a military career. Entry into the army also brought him the chance to seek his fortune in the newly settled areas beyond the Alleghenies.

In 1791 the tiny American regular army was absorbed in the struggle for the acquisition of Indian lands south of the Great Lakes in what is now the state of Ohio. Harrison joined the force that General Anthony Wayne was forming to reestablish the military position that had been shattered by the defeats of Josiah Harmar in 1790 and Arthur St. Clair in 1791. Harrison served in the campaign that culminated in the American victory at the Battle of Fallen Timbers. He became aide-de-camp to Wayne and, by the time he left the army in 1798, had risen to the rank of captain. In obtaining his military appointment and in gaining the position as Wayne's aide-de-camp, Harrison had followed a pattern that was familiar to members of prominent Virginia families. Ties of status and kinship had always been vital elements in Virginia's political leadership, and Harrison benefited from his family name as well as his own merits.

In 1795 Harrison moved smoothly from the Virginia gentry into the emerging political and economic elite of the Old Northwest. In that year he made an advantageous marriage to the daughter of Judge John Cleves Symmes. After Judge Symmes had received the huge land grant that initiated official settlement in the region around Cincinnati, he had been appointed as one of the three judges who, with the governor, ran the new Northwest Territory. At first Symmes was displeased by his daughter's marriage to a young army lieutenant, but he later brought his influence to bear on Harrison's behalf. In 1798 Harrison resigned from the army to accept an appointment as territorial secretary.¹¹ Harrison was a capable soldier, but it was more than military ability that allowed him to move in less than a decade from being an ensign of limited means to membership in the inner circle of northwestern political leaders.

¹¹The most reliable source for the details of Harrison's career is Goebel, *Harrison*. Goebel also wrote the entry on Harrison in the *Dictionary of American Biography*. See also Robert G. Gunderson, "William Henry Harrison: Apprentice in Arms," *Northwest Ohio Quarterly*, LXV (Winter 1993), 3-29, and Cayton, *Frontier Indiana*, 172-75.

With this move into territorial government, Harrison began a rapid regional political rise. In 1799 the Northwest Territory advanced to the second territorial stage. It received a local assembly and the privilege of sending a delegate to Congress. Harrison was the candidate of those territorial leaders who were in opposition to Governor Arthur St. Clair. As St. Clair was a Federalist, Harrison was later to use this in defending himself against attacks that he had elitist, Federalist leanings, but he was involved at least as much in a power struggle amongst the leaders of the Northwest Territory as he was in any popular resistance to St. Clair's Federalist rule. The legislative election of the territorial delegate was narrowly fought and bitter. St. Clair's candidate was his son, Arthur St. Clair, Jr. The vote resulted in an eleven to ten victory for Harrison. It was an important victory. It sent him to Washington, D. C., put him in direct contact with others who could help him, and gave him the opportunity to revise the procedure for land sales that became the most popular act of his political career.¹²

The system for the survey and sale of the public lands that had been created by the Ordinance of 1785 had initially proved of far more advantage to land speculators than to actual settlers. Although one dollar an acre seemed a reasonable price, the stipulation that the smallest area that could be purchased was 640 acres meant that government land was well beyond the reach of the average settler. The situation had been made worse in 1796, when the price of land was raised to two dollars an acre. In his brief stay in Washington, Harrison took the lead in pressing for a revision of the land law to make it possible for many pioneers to buy land from the federal government. As chairman of the Committee on Public Lands, he reported and urged passage of the bill that became the Land Law of 1800. The new act provided for land west of the Muskingum River to be sold in lots of 320 acres, for additional land offices to be established in the Old Northwest, and, most important of all, for settlers to be given the chance to buy land over a period of time. The price remained at two dollars an acre, but the settler only had to pay a quarter of the price within forty days of the sale. The rest was due in equal payments at the end of the second, third, and fourth years. This measure led to a great increase in land sales to actual settlers. The credit system was ultimately to be abandoned, but for the rest of his career Harrison reaped benefits from his sponsorship of a bill that was designed to help the small farmers of the West.¹³

¹²The vagaries of territorial politics are effectively treated in Andrew R. L. Cayton, *The Frontier Republic: Ideology and Politics in the Ohio Country, 1780-1825* (Kent, Ohio, 1986). For Harrison as territorial delegate see *ibid.*, 70-71; Goebel, *Harrison*, 42-46; and John D. Barnhart and Dorothy L. Riker, *Indiana to 1816: The Colonial Period* (Indianapolis, 1971), 309-10.

¹³Malcolm R. Rohrbough, *The Land Office Business: The Settlement and Administration of the Public Lands, 1789-1837* (New York, 1968), 8-50; Reginald Horsman, *The Frontier in the Formative Years, 1783-1815* (New York, 1970), 32-33, 72-73.

As territorial delegate, Harrison was also the promoter of a measure that was of more immediate importance to his political career. A major fight had erupted in the Northwest Territory over the question of how and when the eastern portion of this vast governmental region would proceed to statehood. Governor St. Clair was maneuvering to have the territory divided in a way that would delay statehood and thus help the Federalist party. His opponents—the ‘Virginia group’ to which Harrison belonged—were pressing for a division into two units in such a way that Federalist influence would be lessened in the eastern portion that would become a new state. Harrison used his position as territorial delegate to promote the cause of the anti-St. Clair group, and in 1800 the Northwest Territory was divided into two units: the eastern section later became the state of Ohio, the rest of the territory, encompassing the whole area that was to be the states of Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin, became Indiana Territory.¹⁴

In his later career when the Federalists lost power and ultimately collapsed as a party, Harrison consistently used his election as territorial delegate over St. Clair’s son and his major contribution to the passage of the 1800 land law as evidence of his unremitting opposition to elitism and the Federalist party, but his actual record is less clear. During his stay in Washington, Harrison was well received by a Congress that was still controlled by the Federalists. If he had been known as an active Democratic-Republican supporter of Thomas Jefferson, he could hardly have received the appointment as governor of Indiana Territory that was given to him by President John Adams in the spring of 1800. Goebel’s opinion is that Harrison was selected through the influence of Federalist leaders, particularly the Virginia-born South Carolina politician Robert Goodloe Harper.¹⁵ He was undoubtedly helped considerably by his status as a member of the Harrison family of Virginia.

Although Harrison had a general faith in the republican society brought into being by the Revolution, he subordinated ardent political commitment to opportunity. He always tried to avoid committing himself to positions that would become irreversible. He was a cautious man, a characteristic that was also to influence his career as a general. That Adams was willing to appoint him as the first governor of Indiana Territory demonstrated that Harrison was quite acceptable to the Federalist party, but before accepting the appointment Harrison made sure that, should Adams lose the 1800 presidential

¹⁴Barnhart and Riker, *Indiana to 1816*, 310-12; Clarence E. Carter, ed., *The Territorial Papers of the United States: Vol. VII, The Territory of Indiana, 1800-1810* (Washington, D.C., 1939), 7-10.

¹⁵See Goebel, *Harrison*, 51-52; also Jacob P. Dunn, *Indiana: A Redemption from Slavery* (Boston, 1896), 280.

race, Jefferson would allow him to retain his position.¹⁶ Because of his Virginia connections, the young Harrison successfully survived the transition to a Jeffersonian Democratic-Republican administration and was able to obtain reappointment until the War of 1812.

Harrison arrived in Vincennes early in 1801. He was to serve as governor of the territory for twelve years. The position of territorial governor was an anomalous one in an age when republicanism was the American political creed. When the Northwest Ordinance was enacted in 1787, many in the East were fearful that the distant, disorganized settlements beyond the Alleghenies were in danger of breaking away from eastern control. Jefferson's earlier ordinance of 1784, which had granted considerable local powers, was sharply modified to insure that in the early stages of settlement western regions could be tightly controlled by appointees of the central government. In the first stage of settlement all power was given to the governor, three judges, and a secretary. Even in the second stage, the newly created local legislature was to be under the control of the governor. He could dissolve it or prorogue it at will and had a power of absolute veto.¹⁷ In the years before the War of 1812 disgruntled settlers in the trans-Allegheny West objected to their lack of powers in the territorial government. Conservative easterners defended the system with the argument that the ordinance provided for full equality as a state of the union when the population of a territory reached 60,000.

Yet, settlers who had been raised on revolutionary rhetoric and republican ideals objected bitterly to a system that left them with no local rights in the first stage of government and extremely limited local rights in the second stage. In the Northwest Territory the governorship of St. Clair was a source of constant bickering. His authoritarian tendencies were seen by many settlers as a betrayal of what had been fought for in 1776. In the early stages of government, the disputes were heightened by the narrow, parochial nature of territorial politics. There was a village or small-town atmosphere in which cliques formed to support the governor and gain his patronage or to oppose him, his policies, and his friends. This was the pattern with St. Clair in Marietta; the problem beset Harrison at Vincennes; and it was to arise again in Detroit after 1805 when Michigan Territory was created with William Hull as governor.

In legislating for Indiana Territory some slight attempt had been made to ease the problems experienced in the Northwest Territory by stating that the second stage of government would not have to wait until there were 5,000 free male inhabitants but could occur

¹⁶Cayton, *Frontier Indiana*, 176.

¹⁷Clarence E. Carter, ed., *The Territorial Papers of the United States: Vol. II, The Territory Northwest of the River Ohio, 1787-1803* (Washington, D.C., 1934), 39-50.

when a majority of the freeholders wanted it.¹⁸ In reality, this introduced another provision of government to bicker over as leaders sought to influence the freeholders to support or oppose an advance to the second stage and the creation of a local assembly.

Harrison's record as governor of Indiana Territory has generally been viewed favorably by historians. Freeman Cleaves ignores a good deal of evidence in arguing that "Harrison had governed Indiana for nearly eight years with but few evidences of internal turmoil except on the part of the Federalist faction, which naturally had been passed over, in large part, in the matter of appointments." Even Goebel, who depicts far more internal dissension than Cleaves, decides that while Harrison used the spoils system to manipulate territorial politics, much of the dissension probably arose from the outs objecting to the ins. Writing more recently, James Madison concludes that Harrison avoided much of the arbitrary conduct that caused St. Clair so much trouble in the Northwest Territory but that "he never enjoyed the full and unqualified support of all the people."¹⁹

The fundamental problem for Harrison in Indiana Territory was that the territorial system gave so much power to territorial governors that they could not avoid extensive resentment. Although the system had abandoned traditional imperial expansion by providing for the admission of new states into the Union as equals, the territorial governor had been given imperial powers in the first two stages of government. The republican rhetoric of the Revolution and the new republican practice in eastern states made this situation unacceptable to many western settlers. They protested against a system that gave them less real power than they had possessed as colonial subjects of the British Crown.

To the problems inherent in the system, Harrison added the additional difficulty that he had been raised as a member of the Virginia gentry, which was accustomed to the deference and support of the governed. The territorial system denied political power to local citizens at the very moment when the political culture of deference was coming under increased attack. Richard Beeman and Albert Tillson have shown that in newer areas of Virginia, with new conditions and the new credo of republicanism, traditional patterns of deference began to break down.²⁰ In Indiana, Harrison had the additional problem that the usual difficulties of unrepresentative territorial government were compounded by the degree to which the growing num-

¹⁸Carter, *Territory of Indiana*, 8.

¹⁹Cleaves, *Old Tippecanoe*, 61; Goebel, *Harrison*, 56-70; James H. Madison, *The Indiana Way: A State History* (Bloomington, Ind., 1986), 46-47.

²⁰Richard R. Beeman, *The Evolution of the Southern Backcountry: Case Study of Lunenburg County, Virginia, 1746-1832* (Philadelphia, 1984); Albert H. Tillson, *Gentry and Common Folk: Political Culture on a Virginia Frontier, 1740-1789* (Lexington, Ky., 1991). See also Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1982).

ber of northern settlers disagreed with the early southern settlers of the state. Also, Harrison's lack of wealth meant that he was eager to better himself through land speculation while serving as governor. This eagerness led to unproved accusations of corruption. While even the well-entrenched gentry of old Virginia had difficulty coming to terms with the new republican political culture, Harrison had to contend with the problems of political transition while serving in the autocratic position of territorial governor of Indiana Territory.

Northern settlers who attacked Harrison as an elitist included in their charges his support of slavery, an issue that caused bitter controversy in Indiana Territory. Although the Northwest Ordinance had banned slavery in the Old Northwest, Harrison supported its introduction, arguing that this would encourage the more rapid development of the region. As a youth Harrison had joined an abolition society, but throughout his political career he opposed interference with the rights of slaveowners. During his early years in Indiana he had considerable support for his position. As early as 1796, inhabitants in the Kaskaskia district had petitioned Congress in favor of slavery, and, in spite of the Northwest Ordinance, the French in the region continued to hold slaves. Harrison took up the cause of those who wanted to bring slaves into the region and called for a convention at Vincennes in 1802. This resulted in a petition asking Congress to suspend the prohibition of slavery for ten years and to provide that slaves brought in during that ten-year period should remain as slaves. The petitioners, including Harrison, placed their request in the context of attracting settlers to Indiana and furthering its development. They also asked for the acquisition of Indian territory, cheaper lands, the encouragement of roads and educational institutions, and voting rights for all free adult males at the time Indiana obtained an assembly.²¹

Congress did not approve this change, but slavery was allowed into Indiana in spite of the Northwest Ordinance. This evasion was encouraged by Harrison and the judges who ruled the territory. In 1803 they adopted a Virginia law that provided for African Americans to work under contract; in practice this meant working as slaves. When Indiana moved to the second stage of territorial government, the assembly cooperated with Harrison in evading the Northwest Ordinance. At first Harrison had resisted the move to the second stage, giving more ammunition to those who were accusing him of autocracy and elitism, but in 1804 he changed his position and called for a vote on the subject. It passed, and the first Indiana territorial assembly met in Vincennes in 1805. The assembly, with the encouragement

²¹Peter S. Onuf, *Statehood and Union: A History of the Northwest Ordinance* (Bloomington, Ind., 1987), 116-17; Goebel, *Harrison*, 18; Barnhart and Riker, *Indiana to 1816*, 334-36; Cayton, *Frontier Indiana*, 187-89.

of Harrison, quickly took steps to allow slavery in the territory. Owners were permitted to bring slaves into the territory for sixty days and during that time either to sign indentures or to sell the slaves back into a state where slavery was allowed. In effect, the indentures provided for slavery under the guise of "servants." In 1810 there were over six hundred African Americans in Indiana Territory. Whatever their technical status, many of them were in reality slaves. Harrison himself owned slaves while governor of the territory.²²

After 1805 the position of Harrison and the proslavery group weakened as more settlers opposed to slavery moved into the territory. Newcomers argued that Harrison's support of slavery was part of his general desire to retain power in the hands of a small "Virginia elite" and to resist popular participation in government. Harrison was also plagued by charges of corruption. In 1805 the *Letters of Decius* accused him of misusing his office for personal gain and of maintaining power by extensive use of the patronage system. For the rest of his time as governor of Indiana, Harrison faced virulent attacks on his conduct. In general, however, historians have acquitted Harrison of the charges of malfeasance in office and have emphasized that none of the accusations of illicit speculation in lands have been proved. Even Jacob P. Dunn, who filled his book with a discussion of the attempts to establish slavery in Indiana, clears Harrison of personal and political misconduct. He comments that "no man in public life ever had so many serious charges preferred against his honesty, and came forth from his trials so fully vindicated by his judges and by the people, as did William Henry Harrison. His private life had its blots, but his public record was remarkably clean."²³

In the years directly preceding the War of 1812 the opponents of slavery gained strength from the increasing tide of settlers from northern states. In 1810 the assembly repealed the 1805 indenture law, although it did not change the status of those already serving indentures. For Harrison this represented a stage in the decline of his personal power in Indiana. Increasingly the attack on the proslavery position was combined with an advocacy of "popular" republican government against what was perceived as a narrow clique led by Harrison. Anti-Harrison forces persuaded Congress to expand voting rights and permit the election of the legislative council. When the second stage of territorial government came into effect, Harrison had been able to arrange for a friend, Benjamin Parke, to be sent as Indiana's delegate to Congress, but in 1809 Harrison's candidate, Virginian Thomas Randolph, was defeated by the anti-Harrison lawyer Jonathan Jennings. The same result occurred in 1811. Jennings

²²Cayton, *Frontier Indiana*, 190-93; Madison, *Indiana Way*, 49-50; Barnhart and Riker, *Indiana to 1816*, 345.

²³Green, *Harrison*, 100; Dunn, *Indiana*, 414; Goebel, *Harrison*, 56-70.

became the leader of those opposed to Harrison, and Harrison's power weakened in his last years as territorial governor.²⁴

As governor of Indiana Territory, Harrison also served as superintendent of Indian affairs, and in this capacity he pursued American aims with relentless vigor. In his two terms as president, Jefferson had very clear objectives in his Indian policy. He maintained that the cession of large areas of their lands was in the best interest of both the United States and the Indians. In this way the U.S. could obtain the lands necessary for a growing population to create an "Empire for Liberty" while the Indians would be persuaded to give up their way of life and become farmers in the American mold. Neither Jefferson nor Secretary of War Henry Dearborn had qualms about urging Harrison to obtain Indian lands rapidly and by all possible means.²⁵ Harrison could have no doubt about the policies he was expected to pursue. It was in his interest to seek Indian lands with all possible speed.

Beginning in 1802 Harrison set about achieving Jefferson's objectives through a series of negotiations with the Indians of the Old Northwest. By 1809 he had obtained most of southern Indiana, much of Illinois, and lands in Michigan and Wisconsin. Negotiations culminated at Fort Wayne in September 1809 when, ignoring Indian dissatisfaction about the lands they had been pressured to yield in the previous seven years, Harrison forced the Indians into additional cessions. There are few signs in Harrison's correspondence or speeches that he was deeply moved by the ardent Jeffersonian belief that denying Indians access to hunting lands and "civilizing" them would be means of saving the Indians from destruction in the path of the white advance. Harrison was carrying out policies that Jefferson had ordered; he was obtaining lands that he thought were essential for the development of Indiana Territory; and he was pursuing Indian policies that undoubtedly had the support of most of the new settlers in Indiana Territory.

In his relentless drive for Indian lands, Harrison became the primary instigator of the Tecumseh confederacy. In response both to land loss and to American efforts to persuade the Indians to abandon their way of life, the Shawnee Tecumseh and his brother Tenskawatawa, the Shawnee Prophet, shaped an alliance of Indians, first at Greenville, Ohio, and from 1808 at Tippecanoe on the Wabash in northern Indiana. Harrison refused to acknowledge that the Jeffersonian Indian policies he was vigorously pursuing were the basic cause of Indian resistance, and in the years preceding the War of 1812 he repeatedly told Dearborn that British agents were to blame. This was true only to the extent that the British Indian Department

²⁴Madison, *Indiana Way*, 49-50; Barnhart and Riker, *Indiana to 1816*, 347, 352, 357-60.

²⁵See Reginald Horsman, *Expansion and American Indian Policy, 1783-1812* (East Lansing, Mich., 1967), 104-14.

at Amherstburg in Upper Canada was taking advantage of already existing Indian resentment at the land acquisition policies of the American government.²⁶

Harrison was ready to pursue all possible means to secure an expanding and prosperous Indiana territory, and he believed that removing the Indians and bringing in slaves would help. In obtaining Indian lands Harrison could please both the new settlers and the president he depended on for his position. It is not surprising that he proved willing to ride roughshod over Indian objections to the cessions of their lands.

The land acquisition policies that culminated in the treaty of Fort Wayne also returned Harrison to the military career that he had left in 1798. After Fort Wayne, Indian discontent at American policies began to peak, incidents multiplied, and Harrison warned Dearborn that there was a danger of more general hostilities. Harrison had begun his career in the West in the military campaign culminating in General Anthony Wayne's decisive victory over the Indians at the Battle of Fallen Timbers, and he was attracted to the idea of another display of military power to quell Indian resistance and pave the way for further cessions. He was to be less successful than Wayne, and his actions raised questions regarding his military abilities that were to beset him for the rest of his career.

In October 1811 Harrison led a force north from Vincennes to the vicinity of Prophetstown. Tecumseh was away visiting southern tribes, but his brother, the Prophet, decided to forestall any American move against the village with a surprise dawn attack on the American encampment. The Battle of Tippecanoe, which took place on November 7, resulted in the dispersal of the Indians and the destruction of Prophetstown, but it was hardly the great victory later claimed by Harrison and his supporters. In the 1840 election there was an attempt to equate Harrison's clash at Tippecanoe with Andrew Jackson's victory at New Orleans in 1814, but the two engagements were very different. At New Orleans Jackson decisively defeated the British force that attacked him; the total British casualties were about two thousand and American casualties less than one hundred. At Tippecanoe, Harrison scattered the Indians and destroyed Prophetstown, but Indian hostilities increased rather than lessened in the months after the battle. In the following year they were to merge into the War of 1812. Moreover, Harrison's losses were heavy; about one-fifth of his men were killed or wounded. Indian losses were uncertain but probably did not exceed those of the Americans.²⁷

²⁶See John Sugden, *Tecumseh: A Life* (New York, 1998); R. David Edmunds, *Tecumseh and the Quest for Indian Leadership* (Boston, Mass., 1984); R. David Edmunds, *The Shawnee Prophet* (Lincoln, Neb., 1983); Reginald Horsman, *Matthew Elliott: British Indian Agent* (Detroit, 1964), 157-91.

²⁷Sugden, *Tecumseh*, 225-36, 259-62; Edmunds, *Shawnee Prophet*, 104-16.

When Harrison and his men returned to Vincennes a major controversy ensued. Dismayed at the American casualties, critics said that Harrison had been surprised by the Indians, his preparations had been inadequate, and he had been saved only by the presence of regulars. Harrison's opponents in the Indiana legislature and John Jennings, the Indiana congressional delegate, were happy to use the criticisms to lambaste the governor. In late November and early December discussions in the Indiana assembly were acrimonious. The first resolutions adopted by the assembly singled out the regulars for praise while neglecting Harrison and the militia. Ultimately, after a protest from Harrison, the assembly and the legislative council agreed on a wording that included the governor in the thanks. For Harrison this was hardly a triumphal return to Vincennes.²⁸ At Tippecanoe, Harrison had made preparations for a possible Indian attack and had acted bravely and calmly in the battle, but he had not managed to fight on ground of his own choosing and had achieved little from his costly campaign. Harrison's efforts do not quite amount to the "great victory" that Green describes or the "memorable campaign" that Cleaves judges it.²⁹

When the United States declared war against Great Britain in June 1812, Harrison sought a major appointment, making use of friends in Kentucky to lobby in his behalf. His chances increased when William Hull surrendered at Detroit and had to be replaced, but his hopes were frustrated when Secretary of War William Eustis appointed Brigadier General James Winchester to the command of the Northwestern forces. Harrison persevered. At first, he had to be content with a position as major general in the Kentucky militia, but finally in mid-September the political pressure from the West, particularly Kentucky, resulted in Harrison's appointment to command the American forces in the Northwest.³⁰

Harrison's War of 1812 career lasted from the fall of 1812 to the early months of 1814. As at Tippecanoe, he achieved military victory, but the victory came with controversy instead of general acclaim. Like all other commanding officers in the War of 1812, Harrison worked under severe limitations. The command structure was flawed, the supply system was inefficient, and the relations between federal regular troops and state militia were a frequent cause of disagreement and delay. American military preparations for the conflict had been totally inadequate. For Harrison there were other problems. In the fall of 1812 he inherited a disastrous situation in the Northwest. Hull had surrendered Detroit into British hands, and

²⁸Barnhart and Riker, *Indiana to 1816*, 390-94; Goebel, *Harrison*, 118-24; John B. Dillon, *A History of Indiana* (1859; reprint, New York, 1971), 473-79.

²⁹Green, *Harrison*, 130; Cleaves, *Old Tippecanoe*, 105.

³⁰Reginald Horsman, *The War of 1812* (New York, 1969), 81; Barnhart and Riker, *Indiana to 1816*, 402-403.

both Fort Mackinac and Fort Dearborn had also fallen. Many of the Indians in the Great Lakes region were joining the British in the hope of regaining some of the lands they had lost to the Americans in the prewar years. Harrison's only advantage was that the West was generally enthusiastic in support of the war and willing to supply militia and volunteers.

In a war in which numerous commanding officers were dismissed and ruined, Harrison managed to survive and achieve reasonable success. This in itself was a major achievement for which neither his contemporaries nor many later historians were willing to give him sufficient credit. Harrison was able to gain the confidence of the ordinary soldiers under his command but frequently received criticism from officers who found him too cautious. He was reluctant to move without extensive preparations, and when he won a victory he did not vigorously press his advantage. The forces under his direct command were unlikely to find themselves in hopeless positions, but he was unwilling to take the risks necessary to achieve striking success.

Harrison's efforts in the Northwest began with a bad defeat caused primarily by an ill-advised move by the disgruntled General Winchester, who had lost command of the Northwestern army to Harrison. Winchester, forming the left wing of Harrison's army, was situated along the Maumee River in northwestern Ohio. In January 1813 he rashly advanced with a large part of his force to occupy Frenchtown on the River Raisin within twenty miles of what was now the British post of Detroit. There he was surprised and defeated by a British force from Fort Malden. The fault was Winchester's rather than Harrison's, but some argued that Harrison had exposed part of his main army before adequate preparations had been made to regain control of the Detroit frontier.³¹

The key to American success on the Detroit front was naval control of Lake Erie, and after months of indecisive action on land, Commander Oliver Hazard Perry's victory at the Battle of Put-in-Bay in September 1813 gave Harrison the chance for his most successful battle. With Lake Erie in American hands, the British could not supply their western army and their Indian allies. The British commander, Colonel Henry Procter, decided to retreat to the head of Lake Ontario. When Harrison received news of Perry's victory, he moved his forces to the Detroit River. His eventual victory on land depended as much on the incompetence of Procter as on his own actions. As the British retreated eastward, Procter's troops and his Indian allies, led by Tecumseh, lost confidence in him. Harrison's own opinion when he arrived near Detroit was that he had no chance of overtaking the retreating British, and he took several days to move eastwards.

³¹Horsman, *War of 1812*, 83-85.

Fortunately for Harrison, the British retreat was ill-conducted. Procter often failed to give the necessary orders, bridges were left intact, and confusion reigned. On October 5 Harrison's force overtook the British at Moraviantown on the Thames River. Procter had failed to fortify his position and had put himself in the position of facing Harrison's advancing army of over 3,000 men with a total force (including some 500 Indians) of about 1,000. He hoped the wooded area would prevent the American use of their Kentucky mounted infantry, but the British line was so open that Harrison decided to send the Kentucky horsemen against the British position. There was little resistance. Demoralized by Procter's lack of leadership on the retreat, the British broke and fled. Some of the main American fighting was against the Indians who held the right of the British line. In hand-to-hand fighting Tecumseh was killed, the Indians finally fled, and Harrison had won a far clearer victory at the Battle of the Thames than he had at Tippecanoe.³²

Even this victory did not succeed in giving Harrison a great military reputation. Some criticized the caution with which he had begun the pursuit of Procter, and while the victory had ensured the safety of the Detroit frontier it had done little or nothing to further the conquest of Canada. As it was late in the campaigning season, Harrison decided to take no further action. He faced the fundamental problem that he was far from the areas in which a successful invasion of Canada could be launched. To advance farther east toward Lake Ontario would bring risks without the chance of any great accomplishment. He was accused, however, of being too ready to rest on the laurels of a single victory. Ultimately, the commander of the Kentucky Mounted Infantry, Richard M. Johnson, made more political mileage out of the Battle of the Thames than Harrison. When Johnson was elected as Martin Van Buren's vice president in 1836 his supporters made much of his decisive role in the battle and the claim that he had killed the great chief Tecumseh. In both the elections of 1836 and 1840 Harrison appealed to army veterans, but the indecisive Battle of Tippecanoe rather than the clear victory at the Thames was invoked as a rallying cry.

Harrison ended his military career in anticlimax. Serving in the Niagara theater, he soon found himself in conflict with John Armstrong, the secretary of war who had succeeded Eustis. Armstrong had an extremely difficult job, and he made it worse by his habit of interfering in details that should have been left to subordinates. In the winter of 1813–1814 relations between Harrison and Armstrong worsened, and in May Harrison resigned.³³ After helping to negotiate peace with

³²*Ibid.*, 103-15. Procter's retreat is covered in detail in John Sugden, *Tecumseh's Last Stand* (Norman, Okla., 1985). See also Sandy Antal, *A Wampum Denied: Procter's War of 1812* (Ottawa, Ontario, 1998).

³³See C. Edward Skeen, *John Armstrong, Jr., 1758–1843: A Biography* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1981), 149-53, 162, 177.

the northwestern Indians, he returned to private life at his farm at North Bend, near Cincinnati.

In the following years Harrison found himself at the center of considerable controversy concerning his military record. This controversy and the writings it generated have had a permanent effect on depictions of Harrison. The major argument began in 1816 with the publication of Robert B. McAfee's *History of the Late War in the Western Country*. McAfee, who had served in the Kentucky Mounted Infantry under Harrison, submitted his manuscript to Harrison before it was published. Unsurprisingly, the book praised Harrison, but it criticized Winchester. In the following year, Winchester defended himself in several articles in the *National Intelligencer*. His articles cast doubt on Harrison's competence and raised charges that he would never have pursued Procter and won the Battle of the Thames without considerable pressure from others. Also, Harrison's integrity was questioned in regard to the purchase and distribution of supplies for the Northwestern army. The Senate caused Harrison considerable offense by striking his name from a resolution that was to award him a medal along with Governor Isaac Shelby of Kentucky. A full investigation cleared Harrison, and in 1818 the Senate reversed itself in granting him a medal. However, some of the mud stuck.³⁴

From the time of *The Letters of Decius* in 1805 there had been few years when Harrison had been free from attack. He had managed to clear himself of the charges of corruption, but he remained extremely sensitive to criticism of his record as a soldier. He continually found it necessary to justify his actions. After the controversy produced by McAfee's *History of the Late War in the Western Country*, Harrison's war record was badly in need of refurbishing. In 1824 this was attempted in Moses Dawson's *A Historical Narrative of the Civil and Military Services of Major-General William Henry Harrison, and a Vindication of His Character and Conduct as a Statesman, a Citizen, and a Soldier* (Cincinnati, 1824). Although Dawson was later to break with Harrison, at that time he was a good friend. As editor of the Cincinnati *Advertiser* he was in regular contact with the old general. As with McAfee's book, Harrison vetted it before publication, and Harrison's friendly biographer Green says that it is very likely that Harrison wrote parts of the book. In spite of its provenance as a defense of Harrison's record against attack, it has been much used by later biographers. Green comments that though it was the earliest of the Harrison biographies, it remains the best. Certainly it provides much detail that is difficult to find elsewhere, but equally it has to be used with caution as it reflects Harrison's record as viewed by the Harrison circle and by Harrison himself.³⁵

³⁴Stevens, *Harrison: A Bibliography*, 123-24; Green, *Harrison*, 225-26; William O. Stoddard, *The Lives of the Presidents: William Henry Harrison, John Tyler, and James K. Polk* (New York, 1888), 104-106; Goebel, *Harrison*, 200, 202-203.

³⁵Stevens, *Harrison: A Bibliography*, 86; Green, *Harrison*, 447-50, 455.

In the years from 1816 to 1828 Harrison continued his public career by serving in both the U.S. and Ohio legislatures. At the national level he was in the House of Representatives from 1816 to 1819 and in the Senate from 1825 to 1828. He was never a major figure in Congress. Much of his attention was devoted to military matters and to defending his military career. Politically, he showed sympathy for the internal improvement policies of Henry Clay and became one of Clay's supporters and friends. However, he also added to his considerable list of enemies. When the House discussed Andrew Jackson's incursion into Spanish Florida and his execution of two British subjects, Harrison tried to strike a middle ground by arguing that one of the executions was justified but not the other. This earned him the permanent enmity of Jackson.³⁶

Harrison also managed to stir considerable criticism within his own state of Ohio when he opposed efforts to restrict slavery in Missouri. This showed continuity with his Virginia background and with his stand in territorial Indiana, but it did not suit many of his constituents. As in Indiana, he was attacked as being unresponsive to the popular will, and he was defeated when he ran for reelection.³⁷ After his election as a state senator in 1819, he became prominent in support of internal improvements and was a local director of the Bank of the United States. By 1824 Harrison was clearly in Clay's camp. As a presidential elector, he voted for Clay and he backed his American system. As a senator from 1825 to 1828 he was aligned with the anti-Jackson forces.³⁸

Since the death of his father in the early 1790s, Harrison's actions had frequently been dictated by his desire to recoup his fortunes. From the very beginning of his career he had eagerly sought patrons. His speculations in land and his various commercial ventures did not give him the comfortable financial security that he so desired. Even his marriage to the daughter of major land speculator John Cleves Symmes was not the source of support that he might have expected, for Symmes encountered severe financial problems in his later years.³⁹

In the 1820s, Harrison's continued quest for financial security led him to seek positions that paid better than service in the House or Senate. His persistence annoyed President John Quincy Adams, who in 1828 commented in his diary that Harrison's "thirst for lucrative office is absolutely rabid." Harrison, he wrote, was a man with "a lively and active, but shallow mind, a political adventurer, not

³⁶Goebel, *Harrison*, 212-22.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 223; Cayton, *Frontier Republic*, 134-35; Stoddard, *Lives*, 106; Green, *Harrison*, 245.

³⁸Goebel, *Harrison*, 233-34, 242-43; Green, *Harrison*, 245, 250-56.

³⁹See Beverley W. Bond, ed., *Correspondence of John Cleves Symmes: Founder of the Miami Purchase* (New York, 1926), 15-21.

without talents, but self-sufficient, vain, and indiscreet." He had "a faculty for making friends, and is incessantly importuning them for their influence in his favor." Harrison's efforts to find a position finally succeeded late in the year when, at the urging of Secretary of State Clay, Adams reluctantly appointed Harrison as minister to Colombia. His diary comments that "Harrison wants the mission to Colombia much more than it wants him, or than it is wanted by the public interest."⁴⁰

When Harrison arrived in Colombia early in 1829 the country was in a state of crisis. Simón Bolívar's dreams of unity had collapsed, and he was facing both internal dissension and a war with Peru. Exasperated at the divisions, Bolívar was taking more power into his own hands. Harrison, who had no diplomatic experience except in dictating treaties to a variety of Indian tribes, was ill-suited for the position of representative to a volatile and sensitive Latin American nation. Soon after his arrival he became convinced that Bolívar was using the army to run Colombia and that he intended to abandon republican principles, expand his nation, and assume the position of emperor. Although Harrison had proved capable of adapting his political convictions to suit the time or situation, he took pride in the republicanism of the United States. He became indiscreet in his sympathy for those in Colombia who were plotting against Bolívar.

Bolívar abandoned any plan to create a monarchy, but in his brief stay as minister Harrison completely alienated the Colombian government. His stay was brief, because by the time he reached his post Adams had lost the 1828 election to Jackson. The new president quickly recalled Harrison, a man he viewed as an old enemy. Harrison, however, stayed in his position until the new American minister arrived in Colombia in September 1829. Within a week of being replaced Harrison took a last and most undiplomatic step. He wrote a long letter to Bolívar criticizing the militarism of his rule, holding out to him the example of the restraint of George Washington, and urging him to adhere to principles of republicanism. The letter was a ardent avowal of republican principles that Harrison's opponents had frequently accused him of lacking, but it was totally inappropriate as a gesture by a recent American minister. In his last days in Colombia, Harrison came close to arrest. One biographer of Bolívar commented of Harrison's letter that "Diplomatic history does not record a more flagrant case of the violation of the duties of neutrality and diplomatic convention."⁴¹

⁴⁰Goebel, *Harrison*, 242-45; John Quincy Adams, *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams*, ed. Charles Francis Adams (10 vols., Philadelphia, 1874-1877), VII, 530, VIII, 4-5. There is a more favorable view of Harrison's character in Robert G. Gunderson, "A Search for Tip Himself," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, LXXXVI (Autumn 1988), 330-51.

⁴¹Victor A. Belaunde, *Bolívar and the Political Thought of the Spanish American Revolution* (Baltimore, 1938), 386; Green, *Harrison*, 260-80; Goebel, *Harrison*, 259-87

With Harrison's recall from Colombia, and the success of Jacksonianism, it might well have seemed that Harrison's career was at an end. He was so strapped financially that in 1834 he was happy to obtain the job of clerk of courts of Hamilton County in southwestern Ohio. He was pleased with the position because the fees connected with it brought in a substantial income.⁴²

What finally gave Harrison the chance for his greatest victory was the emergence in the late 1830s of the Whig party. He was further helped by the party's internal divisions. Southern and northern opponents of Jackson held very different views of how the country should be run, and in the latter half of the 1830s the Whigs had neither a tightly-knit organization nor a coherent set of principles. Although Harrison lacked the unchallenged military credentials of Jackson, he had won victories over both the Indians and the British and could be put forward as a military hero. Another advantage was his reluctance to take strong positions on the most divisive political issues of the day. He had straddled many fences. His most striking defense of any particular position had been his statement of the principles of republicanism to Bolívar. While this had gravely offended the Colombian government, it helped him with the American people.

In the mid-1830s the Whig party had not yet fully crystallized, and various names were floated as possible presidential candidates. Harrison's name began to appear in Pennsylvania and Ohio in the winter of 1834–1835 as several Cincinnati newspapers came out strongly for him. Although Harrison did not have the stature of Whig leaders such as Henry Clay or Daniel Webster, he was helped by the feeling that this would be a very difficult year for a Whig to win. Clay was waiting for a better opportunity. The Whigs were happy to place several candidates in the field, both to satisfy different wings of the emerging party and in the hope of throwing the election into the House of Representatives. Out of the various state conventions, legislative nominations, and local meetings Harrison emerged as one of three candidates, together with Webster of Massachusetts and Hugh Lawson White of Tennessee. Adams characterized Harrison and White as “men of moderate capacity” but of long and varied public service. His additional comment that they were at least as competent for the presidency as Andrew Jackson was probably more a criticism of Jackson than it was praise for Harrison and White.⁴³

The Whigs wanted to cut into Jackson's base of popular support and were anxious to counter charges that they were elitists who were out of touch with ordinary voters. While Harrison had been born into the Virginia gentry and had been attacked as autocratic

⁴²Green, *Harrison*, 292-93.

⁴³Norma L. Peterson, *The Presidencies of William Henry Harrison & John Tyler* (Lawrence, Kans., 1989), 17-19; Goebel, *Harrison*, 297-317; Green, *Harrison*, 294-98; Cleaves, *Harrison*, 297-309; Adams, *Memoirs*, IX, 312.

while territorial governor of Indiana, he was also a western farmer, had shaped an extremely popular land law, and had won victories over the Indians and the British. His friends and Whig strategists began presenting him as the old military hero and honest farmer of North Bend. This was the image presented in the most important of the Harrison campaign biographies of 1836, James Hall's *A Memoir of the Public Services of William Henry Harrison of Ohio*.⁴⁴

Martin Van Buren, the Democrats' choice to succeed Jackson, won a convincing victory. He rode into office on Jackson's popularity and a booming economy. Van Buren obtained nearly 58 percent of the popular vote. Of the Whig candidates Harrison was by far the most successful. He obtained almost 25 percent of the vote, while no one of the other Whigs could muster 10 percent.⁴⁵ Harrison had proved attractive as an old general, and, like Andrew Jackson in 1824, he had no unpopular political stands at the national level.

The panic of 1837 and the subsequent decline in the fortunes of the Democratic party meant that candidates sought the 1840 Whig nomination with far more eagerness. With his 1836 showing, Harrison immediately emerged as the leading challenger to Clay and Webster. Historians have traditionally placed great emphasis on the Whigs' "Log-Cabin and Hard-Cider" campaign, which sold Harrison as a man of the people who would better represent them than the "aristocratic" Van Buren. However, recent political historians have emphasized the degree to which the Whig victory was not only dependent on image-making. Michael Holt points out that the key element in the 1840 election was voter belief that the Democrats had brought on a depression that they were then unwilling to tackle. The Whigs had shown at the state level that they were willing to take vigorous action to change the prevailing economic conditions, and this proved extremely attractive to the voters. A remarkable 80.2 percent of the electorate voted in 1840, and 37.5 percent of the ballots in the 1840 election were cast by new voters.⁴⁶

Holt argues that Harrison's image was of greatest assistance not for his election victory but for his nomination. This was not simply a matter of his characterization as the honest farmer-patriarch of North Bend and the hero of Tippecanoe; it was also that Harrison's political caution had made him less vulnerable to attack than other candidates. It was far easier to defend his controversial record as a general than it would have been to explain away any strongly-argued

⁴⁴Stevens, *Harrison: A Biography*, 80.

⁴⁵Green, *Harrison*, 308; John Sibley, "Election of 1836," in *History of American Presidential Elections, 1789-1968*, eds. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and Fred L. Israel (New York, 1971), 577-600, 640.

⁴⁶Michael F. Holt, "The Election of 1840, Voter Mobilization, and the Emergence of the Second Party System: A Reappraisal of Jacksonian Voting Behavior," in *A Master's Due: Essays in Honor of David Herbert Donald*, ed. William J. Cooper (Baton Rouge, La., 1985), 16-33.



“THE NORTH BEND FARMER AND HIS VISITORS,” HARRISON POLITICAL CARTOON

Courtesy Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis

political positions. His skill as a general was a matter of opinion and could be vigorously defended. The two main Whig leaders, Webster and Clay, were both politically controversial. Webster, who was viewed as too much the New England candidate, withdrew. Clay, however, desperately wanted the nomination but carried far more political liabilities than Harrison. He had been at the heart of national political battles for over a quarter of a century.

The Whig nominating convention met in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in December 1839. Clay's hopes were dashed by resistance from the influential New York politicians. Holt argues that, with some improvement in economic conditions, Whig leaders believed that they needed a military hero to defeat Van Buren. He contends that Clay might have been nominated if the convention had been held a little later, for by then the economic situation had again declined and the Democrats were again vulnerable.⁴⁷

Although it seems quite possible that any Whig nominee could have won in 1840, the "Log-Cabin and Hard-Cider Campaign" under which Harrison ran began a new era in election image-making. At the age of sixty-seven Harrison showed great enthusiasm in playing his role. The Whig strategy was remarkably successful in creating the kind of candidate they wished to place before the people. Although southern Whig supporters were wooed by reference to Harrison's long record of noninterference with the rights of slaveowners, the primary image was of a simple, noble character. Nearly fifty years after the election, one of Harrison's old supporters wrote in his preface to a collection of 1840 election materials that "It was remarkable as the first campaign in which the candidate was emphatically one of the people—a poor and honorable farmer." He remembered it as the first campaign in which women were generally engaged and the first in which the lines were clearly drawn between the people and the officeholders. The old Harrison supporter wrote that "honest men felt a just pride in the plain old farmer of North Bend." That a younger son of a Virginia governor born at Berkeley plantation, who had been a proslavery territorial governor of Indiana could be remembered in such terms is an indication of how successful the Whigs and Harrison had been in creating the image they desired.⁴⁸ A question that needs answering is the degree to which Harrison himself had been transformed in his four decades in politics. By 1840, Harrison proved willing to present himself to the people by actively campaigning. Ironically, his campaign was helped by the reasonably simple life style that had resulted from his lack of success in acquiring the wealth he had sought.

⁴⁷Holt, "Election of 1840," 54-55; Peterson, *Presidencies of Harrison & Tyler*, 24-27; Goebel, *Harrison*, 323-46; Green, *Harrison*, 312-75.

⁴⁸A. B. Norton, comp., *The Great Revolution of 1840: Reminiscences of the Log Cabin and Hard Cider Campaign* (Mount Vernon, Ohio, 1888), 7, 10; Dunn, *Indiana*, 309.

Harrison was a tireless campaigner, and for the first time a presidential candidate actually took to the hustings. He talked in generalities and avoided issues, except for opposing the excessive use of presidential power. He argued for serving a single term and the limited use of the presidential veto. Harrison stressed his military service to the country and his life as a practical farmer. He was vague on issues such as the bank, the tariff, and slavery. His opponents attacked his military career, stressed that he was no simple farmer, and accused him of being a Federalist because he had served under John Adams. The campaign literature that supported Harrison reiterated the themes of Tippecanoe and the honest farmer of North Bend. Songs heralded "The hero plowman of North Bend" and the "hero of Tippecanoe" with "no ruffled shirt, no silken hose." Harrison was made to represent an earlier, a more heroic America of yeoman farmers instead of eastern monied elites.⁴⁹ The popular vote was very close, but Harrison won by a decisive 234 to 60 electoral votes. He carried nineteen states to Van Buren's seven.

Once in office, Harrison had very little time to enjoy his triumph. He lived for only a month after his inaugural in March 1841. He showed signs in his brief tenure that he would have shaped his own course. His inaugural was extremely long. It emphasized a limited role for the presidency, with little use of the veto and service for a single term. Webster read it in advance and removed an excessive number of classical references. From the time of his arrival in Washington in February, Harrison had distanced himself from Clay and showed a willingness to turn to Webster. How he would have fared in dealing with Congress is unknown, because by April 4 Harrison was dead from a cold that turned to pneumonia and pleurisy.⁵⁰

There is an obvious need for a modern, balanced biography of Harrison, and the new microfilm collection from the Indiana Historical Society will greatly ease this task. Over seventy years ago, Goebel did a good job of researching Harrison's public life and assessing his contribution, but much more needs to be done. Harrison's role as a politician needs to be placed in the context of the abundant research carried out in the past half century on the Virginia gentry, the transition from the political culture of deference to that of republicanism, and the origins of the second party system. His military contribution also needs a general reassessment. Perhaps most of all, an attempt needs to be made to understand Harrison the man. Goebel largely avoided this task. He is not an easy figure to depict or under-

⁴⁹Robert G. Gunderson, *The Log-Cabin Campaign* (Lexington, Ky., 1957), 75-76, 108-22, 148-50, 156, 163-67, 219-22; Norton, *Great Revolution*, 8, 54, 89; Green, *Harrison*, 69; William N. Chambers, "Election of 1840," in *Presidential Elections*, eds. Schlesinger and Israel, 643-90.

⁵⁰Gunderson, *Log-Cabin Campaign*, 253-55; Peterson, *Presidencies of Harrison & Tyler*, 31-42; Goebel, *Harrison*, 371-78.

stand. A major problem is that the conflicts that swirled around him produced a barrage of charges and counter-charges that have obscured the real Harrison. Later biographers, with the exception of Goebel, have had difficulty separating Harrison from his image. Harrison demonstrated a remarkable ability to rise above his opponents and to modify his positions to suit changing times and conditions. The campaigner of 1840 in many ways had removed himself physically and emotionally from plantation Virginia. The life of a Virginia aristocrat who ended his career as “the hero plowman of North Bend” can tell us much about the transition from eighteenth-century to nineteenth-century America.