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Speech of Judge Burnett of
Ohio, giving a brief History
of the Life of William Henry
Harrison. 1839.





Class F332

Book 338

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SPEECH

OF

JUDGE BURNETT,

OF

OHIO,

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IN THE

WHIG NATIONAL CONVENTION,

GIVING

A BRIEF HISTORY

OF

THE LIFE

OF

GEN. WILLIAM HENRY HARRISON.

Burnet, Jacob.
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WASHINGTON:

PRINTED AT THE MADISONIAN OFFICE.

1839.

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SPEECH.

MR. PRESIDENT:

Labouring under the influences of a severe cold, which affects both my voice and head, it will not be apprehended that I shall detain the Convention by a long address. But, sir, indisposed as I am, I must add my approving voice to the just and merited plaudits which have been pronounced from every part of this assembly, on the distinguished son of the patriotic State of Kentucky. In admiration of his talents, virtues, and public services, no man on this floor goes further than I do; nor does any one repeat them with more pleasure and pride. They are the property of the nation, and we all claim them as tenants in common. Long and ardently have I desired to see him in the Presidential Chair, and many a battle have I fought for the accomplishment of that desire. But few men on this floor bear more of the scars of political warfare, received in his defence, than I do—nor is there one more willing to have them increased in future conflicts, should it again become necessary to vindicate his character or his cause. General HARRISON entertains towards him the same feelings, and has long ardently desired to see him at the head of the nation; nor would he have been a candidate in 1836 had it not been distinctly announced that Mr. CLAY had withdrawn from the canvass.

The State of Ohio has witnessed the honors which have been paid to that distinguished citizen, in every part of the Union, with great delight, and has been among the first to acknowledge, or, more properly speaking, to assert and vindicate their justice; and here, in the presence of this august assembly, *we endorse them.*

It is, no doubt, expected, sir, that the delegation of Ohio will say something on this occasion in commendation of their favorite son, on whom this Convention has just bestowed one among the highest honors to which the ambition of man can aspire, a unanimous nomination for the first office in the gift of a free and powerful nation. I hope, sir, I shall not be charged with vanity when I say that I have been his intimate companion and friend for more than forty years. The free and continued intercourse that has existed between us for so long a period, must necessarily enable me to speak with some confidence as to his character, acquirements, and course of life.

He is a native of the "Old Dominion," and is an honor to the State which gave him birth. He is a son of Governor Harrison, of Virginia, who was a patriot of the Revolution, and a signer of the Declaration of Independence, proclaimed by the Continental Congress in 1776—by which solemn act he pledged "his life, his fortune, and his sacred honor," to maintain that declaration, and he nobly redeemed his pledge. His son, of whom I now speak, inherited from his Maker an ardent, active, penetrating mind—far, very far, above mediocrity. That mind has been improved by a classical education, under the best instructors of that day: it has been stored with valuable and useful knowledge, literary, scientific, and historical. You can scarcely name an important subject on which he has not read and reflected, and on which he cannot write and converse with facility and clearness. He is a good belles lettres scholar, a ready, correct, and strong writer, and must be ranked, wherever he is known, in the class of men who are most distinguished for improved and cultivated intellect. In the finer qualities of the heart, no man can justly claim a preference. To borrow the strong, expressive language of my friend, Governor Metcalf, "Harrison has an *an expanded heart, and it is always in the right place.*" Though brave as Napoleon, he has much of the milk of human kindness. Benevolence, and a desire to better the condition of

the whole human family, predominate in his soul, and are constantly forcing themselves into action. In dress, he is plain and unostentatious—in manners, affable and unassuming. When seen engaged on his farm, which is his daily employment, and necessarily followed to obtain his daily bread, you cannot distinguish him, by the appearance of his dress, from any of his brother farmers who are laboring in the vicinity. His house is open to all, and its hospitalities free for all, whether high or low, rich or poor. It is not exaggeration when I say, believe me, sir, it is not poetry or fiction, when I say, if he had but one dollar, he would not, because he could not, refuse to divide it with a friend in distress.

In politics, he has always been a Democratic Republican of the school of Washington, Jefferson, and Madison; he detests the agrarian, infidel principles which are gaining power and influence at the present day, and resists the doctrine that *the spoils belong to the victors*, and that an executive or ministerial officer of government may assume the responsibility of construing the Constitution and laws of the country for selfish or party purposes.

These statements, sir, are not surmises, nor are they taken on trust—they are gathered from his long life of civil and military service, and have been seen by all who have observed him, either at the head of the army—in the gubernatorial chair—in the halls of legislation, or in a diplomatic station.

In 1791, this distinguished son of the venerable signer of the Declaration of Independence was engaged in the study of medicine, under the care of Dr. Rush, of Philadelphia. Hearing of the murders committed by the Indians, on the defenceless inhabitants of the Northwestern frontier, he resolved to go to their relief. At his request, his guardian and friend, Robert Morris, of revolutionary memory, obtained for him from President Washington, an ensigncy in the army of the U. S. With this parchment in his pocket he hastened to Cincinnati, but did not reach it till St. Clair had marched into the Indian country; by which Providential event he was not on the bloody field where so many of his fellow officers and soldiers found a premature grave. The first tour of military duty he performed, was in the succeeding winter, when he marched through the snow on foot at the head of his detachment, with his knapsack upon his back, to the fatal battle field to inter the bones of the slain. This was his first military service. We find him afterwards in 1774 an Aid-de-camp of the gallant Wayne, distinguishing himself in the battle of the Rapids of the Maumee, where, for his bravery and good conduct, he received the thanks of the Commander-in-Chief, communicated to the army in general orders. In 1795 he was engaged in making the treaty of Greenville, under the superintendance of Gen. Wayne, which terminated the Indian war. He was soon after appointed Commandant of Fort Washington and had the management of the public property, chiefly collected at that post.

Early in 1798, the object being accomplished, which prompted him to join the army he resigned his commission and removed to his farm. The next military enterprise in which we find him engaged, was the expedition to Tippecanoe. The treaty which he had then recently made with the Indian tribes had been violated. Tecumseh, admitted by all, to be the most intrepid warrior, and the most talented chief of the age, had prevailed on the tribes who were parties to that treaty, to refuse its execution, and for the purpose of insuring the success of his project, was attempting to form a union among all the tribes from the lakes to the gulf of Mexico. He had visited the Northern tribes and had secured their co-operation, and was negotiating with those of the South for the same purpose. Harrison, who was aware of his plan, and that he was actually engaged in the successful execution of it, was not idle. He communicated the facts to Mr. Madison, stating what would be the consequence of permitting it to be completed. The President promptly placed the 4th regiment under the command of Harrison, then Governor of Indiana; ordered him to raise four hundred volunteers, and proceed to the Indian country. The order was so promptly obeyed, that our gallant little army of 809 men arrived at Tippecanoe before Tecumseh had returned from the South. When Harrison reached the settlement, twelve hundred warriors had already as-

sembled. He sent for the Chiefs; they came to his camp; he told them their Great Father had not sent him to fight, but to settle their complaints amicably; and he invited them to meet him in council; they promised to do so the next day, and then returned to their village. As soon as they were gone, he told his officers he knew from their language and behaviour that they intended to attack him before morning. Confident that this was the council they meditated, he encamped his army in the order of battle, and directed his men to lie down with their clothes on, and their arms at their sides. His predictions soon became history: an hour or two before day, in a dark foggy night, the attack was made with great fury. The conflict lasted nearly two hours, and until day-light enabled him to see the position of the Indians, when a vigorous charge was ordered which terminated in their defeat and dispersion. The army then marched to the village and destroyed it. We may safely affirm that this was the first instance in which American troops have sustained themselves against a superior force of Indians in a night attack of two hours continuance. As a fruit of this victory, the treaty was preserved and the peace and safety of the frontier secured. It was from this battle, so important to the Government and people of Indiana, and so brilliant in the mode of its achievement, against a desperate foe, that General Harrison derived the appellation of the "Hero of Tippecanoe."

The savages on the frontier of Indiana, having been thus defeated and scattered, and Governor Harrison hearing that they were taking scalps and breaking up the settlements on the frontier of Ohio, resigned his commission as Governor, and superintendant of Indian affairs, together with their emoluments, repaired to Cincinnati, and volunteered in our defence. In a few months he succeeded in scattering the savages on our borders; a part of them he drove to the lakes, and the residue he compelled to remove to a place of safety within our settlements. By this operation, the settlers on our frontier were relieved from danger and hundreds who had fled to the denser settlements of the State for protection, returned to their improvements and occupied them in safety. A person who has not an accurate knowledge of the condition of the Northwestern portion of Ohio, at the time of the late war, when it was an unbroken wilderness, without inhabitants, other than aborigines—without roads, bridges, ferries, or improvements of any kind, cannot form an idea of the difficulties General Harrison encountered in feeding, sustaining and keeping together his army. The difficulties and perplexities which beset him during all his campaigns are known to but few, and cannot be justly appreciated by any; yet by unceasing activity and by the efforts of his powerful mind, he overcame them all. But it is impossible to dwell on minutiae—a volume would not contain the half of such a detail. Pressed down by all these difficulties he kept the field; he never despaired for a moment; and such was the confidence reposed in his bravery and skill, by both officers and soldiers, that their spirits never flagged—their hopes never sunk. It is not generally known that the fleet built at Erie, by which the command of the Lakes was obtained was a project recommended by General Harrison, and that it was adopted by Mr. Madison, in consequence of his unbounded confidence in the prudence and sound judgment of him who proposed it. Before the period of which I am now speaking, General Harrison had been appointed a Major General in the militia of Kentucky, by a law of that State, and had been appointed a Major General in the army of the United States, by Mr. Madison.

Passing over a multitude of affairs of smaller moment, let me point your attention to the memorable siege of Fort Meigs: that work of defence consisting of a mud embankment and an enclosure of piquets, was defended triumphantly and successfully by about a *thousand men* for many days, (if I mistake not, seven or eight,) against the attack of Proctor, who commanded an army of British and Indians, at least *four times the number* of the besieged, which was furnished with all the material necessary for the occasion. Such was the skill, the bravery, and the indefatigable efforts of General Harrison—such was the success of the repeated sallies he made, that he compelled the enemy to abandon the siege in despair. It

is worthy of remark, that on the second day of the attack, Proctor sent an officer with a flag, to demand the surrender of the post. The grounds of this demand were, that the American force was too weak to defend the works, against the overwhelming force of the besiegers, and that General Proctor was anxious to save the effusion of blood. The intrepid Harrison promptly replied: "If General Proctor knows the usages of war, as I am bound to believe he does, he must either have considered me ignorant of them, or he must have intended an insult. It was his duty to make the demand before he commenced firing on the works. But, sir, said he, go back and tell your General that I know my own force, and his, and that I shall defend the works to the last extremity. *Tell him further, that if he ever possesses the Fort, he shall obtain it in a way that will give him more honor in the estimation of his Government than he could derive from a thousand surrenders.*"—Another incident is also worthy of notice: After the enemy had retired, a number of the Indians who had left them came into the fort and stated, that a contract had been entered into between Proctor and Tecumseh, that as soon as the fort surrendered, which they considered inevitable, Harrison should be given up to the Indians, to be disposed of as they might see proper. Harrison replied: "Then General Proctor can be neither a soldier nor a man. But if it shall ever be his fate to surrender to me, his life shall be protected, but I will dress him in a petticoat, and deliver him over to the squaws, as being unworthy to associate with men."—On this story, sir, was founded an infamous slander on General Harrison, and a base insult to the ladies of Chillicothe, fabricated by a person whose name I will not stoop to mention, and published by the administration press.

It was not long after the successful defence of this Fort, that our honored nominee led his victorious army into Fort Malden, recaptured Detroit and the Territory surrendered by the unfortunate Hull, and pursuing the enemy to the Thames, subdued the united forces of Proctor and Tecumseh, and captured the entire British army!

The war having been thus gloriously terminated in his own district, Harrison repaired to Erie and tendered his services to the army operating in that quarter. Unfortunately, the Secretary of War was there, who felt some private griefs unredressed, and was moreover envious of the laurels which Gen. Harrison had so dearly, but justly won, being unwilling to see another added to the wreath, he ordered him to repair to Ohio, where he had no further duty to perform, having already brought the war to a close in that quarter. The order was obeyed. He returned to his family and immediately resigned his commission, declaring that he could not honestly eat the bread of the Government when he was denied the privilege of rendering services in return. Here, sir, terminated forever the brilliant military career of a hero who had won many victories, *but who never lost a battle.*

Now, sir, let us look at this distinguished man in a political and private life.—Time forbids to do more than name the stations he has filled. When he resigned his first commission, which was given him by the "Father of his Country," he was appointed Secretary of the North-western Territory. The Governor being then absent, he was *ex-officio* acting Governor, and vested with all the Executive power of the Territory, which he executed with great prudence, and to the approbation of the Government and people. In 1799, the Territorial Legislature, (myself being one of them,) appointed him the delegate to represent the Territory in the Congress of the United States. His election had been opposed by a numerous class of men who had purchased land from his father-in-law, and had settled on and improved it. They had failed to obtain a title from the vendor, and were at the mercy of Congress, liable to be dispossessed at any moment. They wished to obtain pre-emption rights and other indulgencies. It was the interest and the anxious desire of the vendor to defeat their object. On this account they entreated the Legislature not to appoint Mr. Harrison, believing that he would be governed by the views of his father-in-law, and oppose their claims. He was,

notwithstanding, chosen, and to the surprise of those men, he volunteered in their cause, and, though against his own ultimate interest, he procured for them the boon they were so anxious to obtain.

At the same session he procured the passing of an act requiring the public lands to be surveyed and sold in small tracts. Under the former law, it was impossible for a poor man to become a purchaser from Government—he was compelled to purchase from the speculator at an advanced price. But by the amendment every poor man in the nation, if industrious, might become an independent freeholder; and, sir, it is public history, that thousands of thousands *have* become so, and every emigrant who now removes to the west from any part of the Union, has the same privilege. The benefit which has been derived by the industrious poor, from that successful effort of General Harrison, is beyond the power of numbers to compute. Having accomplished these important objects in Congress, he resigned his seat and was appointed Governor of Indiana. He administered that government twelve years, with such ability, benignity, and success, that all that portion of its present population, who resided there, under his administration, look up to him as the political father of their State. We next find him representing the people in the Legislature of Ohio—then in the House of Representatives of the United States—afterwards in the Senate of the United States—and lastly we see him the Ambassador of his Government at the Court of the haughty Bolivar. In all these stations he has received from the government and the people, the plaudit of ‘well done good and faithful servant’—and it may be added, this has been his *only* reward.

Suffer me to say here, that it is the settled and publicly expressed opinion of General Harrison, that no man, however great, wise and good, should be re-elected President of these United States. To the prevalence of the opposite opinion he ascribes most of the corruption and strife which have agitated and disgraced the nation—and I add, that if elected, he will enter on the duties of the office, having no griefs to avenge, and no obligations to fulfil, in relation to individuals.

And now, sir, what more can I add—I have attempted to throw a ray of light on the almost forgotten life of one of the most useful, virtuous and patriotic citizens our country has ever produced. From an intimate and confidential acquaintance with him, of more than forty years standing, I can speak *ex cathedra*. The single fact, that after he has held all these offices with abundant opportunities of accumulating wealth, at the expense of his country, he has retired to private life, comparatively poor, is enough to place him on a level with Aristides.

Had he nothing more to complain of but the blighting negligence of his own government, which has compelled him, Cincinnatus-like, to labor at the plough for the bread which feeds his family, it might be endured. But, sir, it is not so: malice has assailed his character, and thousands who know him not, have innocently yielded to it their assent. An attempt to refute charges against his bravery, would be as insulting to him as it would be ridiculous in the eyes of the world. Insinuations have been made injurious to his moral character; those who know him personally, smile at the folly of such efforts; and let me say to all others, that a man of purer moral character does not inhabit our land. When every thing else fails, they proclaim at the top of their voices that he is an *imbecile old man*. Sir, I had the pleasure of taking him by the hand the morning I left home; scarcely a week passes in which I do not see and converse with him, and let me assure you and this assembly, and the American people, *that his mind is as vigorous, as active, and as discriminating as it was in the meridian of his days; that he enjoys fine health, and all the bodily vigor and activity which belong to a man of sixty-five or sixty-six.*

Now, sir, let me attempt to give utterance to the ecstasy of joy and delight which the transactions of this day have produced on my own mind. In common with

all my associates in this imposing assembly, I feel that our country is redeemed and saved—the sounds of unity and concord which strike the ear from every seat in this sacred temple—the united declaration of entire acquiescence in the result of our deliberations—the enthusiastic pledges, tendered by every member of this august body, to devote himself, heart and hand, to sustain the distinguished individuals we are about to present to the people as the men of our unanimous choice—the expression of joy on the faces of so many aged and venerable patriots, who have finished their course in public life—who have long since crossed the meridian—are on their downward course, and will soon pass the horizon, to be seen here no more; I say, sir, to hear such men testify their feelings of approbation, pledge their zealous efforts to advance the cause and proclaim their confidence in its triumphant success, produces sensations which cannot be described. To hear the shouts of approbation—the enthusiastic promises of exertion, and the confident predictions of victory, from the young and vigorous portion of this body, is enough to inspire the most confirmed stoic. In short the entire manifestations of this day, so exciting, so cheering, have produced a general ecstasy of delight, of which those who have not witnessed the scene, and felt the threatened danger of disagreement in this body, as we have done, can form no conception. For one, I must say, that although I am near the termination of the prophetic number of days allotted for the life of man, I have never, in that long period, witnessed such an imposing spectacle. I am almost ready to repeat and apply to myself the pious exclamation of the good old Simeon.

Mr. President—Is not this enough for one day? The great object which brought us here from every part of the Union, is accomplished. That object was to produce unity and harmony of action in the great struggle we are on the eve of commencing; a struggle to save the liberty, the morals and the happiness of the people, and to rescue the constitution from the hands of the profligate men, under whose management it is sinking to decay. This object, I repeat, has been gained. It is the opinion of every American, whose principles have not been debased by the corrupt and corrupting influence of the national administration, that an effort should be made to save the nation; that effort has now been made, and successfully made. The unity and zeal it has produced, have accomplished half the victory already, and will consummate it hereafter. It is now manifest that we came here, deeply impressed with the importance of the object at stake, which is nothing less than the perpetuity of the glorious constitution bequeathed by our fathers. We all know, sir, that in such a struggle, in a contest for such a prize, we cannot afford to dispute and wrangle about minor matters; and we have therefore offered up our preferences on the altar of patriotism. This Convention has carried out its professions, that it seeks the prosperity and happiness of the whole Union, and that it contends for *principles* instead of men. Our choice has not been restricted for want of material; among the Whigs and Conservatives of the country there are a thousand enlightened patriots, honest, capable and faithful, into whose hands we may safely commit the Executive Government of the country. From such men we have made our selection, and now give to the nation, a united, unbroken pledge to support it. We cannot therefore despair or permit our hopes to sink. There is talent and virtue enough in the nation to save it. After what we have accomplished, nothing is wanted but unity, energy and confidence; let these be put in requisition, and victory will perch upon our standard, the constitution will be saved, the purity of its administration restored, and we will transmit it to our children as we received it from our fathers. I say we *will*, because every gentleman on this floor, old and young, stands pledged to redeem the promise. Depend on it, sir, there is a conservative principle in the great mass of the American people, which may be called into successful action by united effort; and I am now fully persuaded that victory will crown our efforts, since we have this day unfurled before the nation, the Union flag, inscribed with the motto of the Hon Mr. Wise, of Virginia, "union for the sake of the Union."

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