

RUTHERFORD B. HAYES – A DECENT REPUBLICAN

By Rutherford H. Platt

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Between the Civil War and the Great Depression, Ohio yielded a veritable dynasty of seven U.S. Presidents born in the Buckeye State—all of them Republicans. No other Ohio natives have occupied the White House before or since that remarkable run. The roster of Ohio-bred presidents was not exactly a Who’s Who of Mount Rushmore candidates. Bookended by the corrupt administrations of Grant and Harding, the list included two victims of assassination (Garfield and McKinley), the forgotten Benjamin Harrison, the party doctrinaire William Howard Taft, and the beneficiary of the most tainted election prior to 2000, Rutherford B. Hayes. Guess which of these was my great great uncle.

Out of sense of duty to family and my namesake, my wife Barbara and I drove to Fremont, Ohio just off the Turnpike near Toledo for a Memorial Day Weekend celebration of the Centennial of the Hayes Presidential Library, the first of the nation’s presidential libraries which opened in 1916. The Library and adjoining Hayes Presidential Museum share the wooded 25 acres of Spiegel Grove with the splendid Victorian-style Hayes mansion of the same name. I prepped for the trip (and this column) by rereading the 1995 biography by Ari Hoogenboom: *Rutherford B. Hayes: Warrior and President*.

The festivities evoked a by-gone era of parades, bands, flags, balloons, ice cream, and good-natured pride in family, state, and nation. The Ohio State University Band commemorated Hayes’s role as co-founder of OSU’s predecessor institution. The “President’s Own” Marine Corps brass quintet played Sousa marches, George M. Cohan’s “Yankee Doodle Dandy,” and Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America” to a great lawn filled with Hayes’s and local residents. (In a quintessential 21st-Century touch, Cokie Roberts delivered her keynote address via “Gotomeeting” on a large screen due to a travel delay.) Spiegel Grove that weekend was a welcome refuge from the overwrought politics of today.

Of course, the politics of the Gilded Age were scarcely idyllic. The 1876 election infamously triggered a four-month brawl over contested vote counts between supporters of Hayes, the Republican candidate and Governor of Ohio, and the Democratic candidate, New York Governor Samuel J. Tilden. In the more genteel custom of the time, both candidates remained outside the fray and continued their gubernatorial duties as their surrogates waged electoral warfare.

The central issue was the hostility of the southern states to civil and voting rights for African-Americans, as established in the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution. After the Civil War, the positions of the major political parties were the reverse of today: Democrats were sympathetic to white supremacy in the South while many Republicans like Hayes (a decorated Union general officer and graduate of Kenyon College and Harvard Law School) sought to perpetuate Lincoln’s vision of equality before the law for all Americans.

The outcome of the 1876 election centered on disputed vote counts in three southern states: South Carolina, Louisiana, and Florida (the scene of the 2000 “hanging chads” debacle). Black votes were allegedly suppressed by Democrat-controlled county organizations while overall vote counts were altered by boards selected by state Republican administrations, which in turn were backed up by federal troops. Withdrawal of those troops, thus ending “Reconstruction,” was finally offered as an inducement for southern acceptance of a Hayes victory by one electoral vote. Fatuous commitments by southern politicians to enforce the civil rights of black Americans would be a chronic source of frustration to Hayes during and after his presidency, and to most of his successors.

Once settled with his family into the White House, Hayes proved to be an adept politician with a remarkably progressive agenda embracing civil service reform, economic stability, prison reform, railroad regulation, public education, fair taxation, and social justice. Like Jane Addams a few years later, he admired Henry George’s *Progress and Poverty*, a critique of industrial capitalism and proposal for a “single tax” on land value. Hayes wrote that the influence of money is “growing greater and greater. Excessive wealth in the hands of the few means extreme poverty, ignorance, vice, and wretchedness as the lot of the many.” (Bernie could not have said it better!).

As an experienced lawyer and three-term governor, Hayes provided a foretaste of an activist presidency not fully realized until the New Deal. He inventively used the veto power to beat back efforts by Democrats in Congress to attach anti-civil rights riders to federal appropriations bills. Another arena was civil service reform where he succeeded in reducing the ability of political bosses like Senator Roscoe Conkling to use political appointments to enhance their power and wealth. However, his support for the gold standard placed him at odds with the growing populist “free silver” movement in the West.

Like Calvin Coolidge in 1928, Hayes chose not to run for a second term. This probably diminished his potential legacies, especially when his chosen successor and friend, James Garfield, was tragically assassinated a few months after assuming office. But once back at Spiegel Grove, Hayes’s post-presidency was as productive for his era as that of a later one-term president, Jimmy Carter. Among many causes, he continued to promote civil service reform, a goal pursued after Hayes died in 1893 by the hyperactive Civil Service Commissioner, Theodore Roosevelt. And as a trustee of the Slater Fund in New York City, Hayes supported the expansion of education opportunities for African-Americans, helping to provide a grant for the young W.E.B. DuBois to study in Europe.

After Hayes died on January 17, 1893, his friend, the prominent liberal theologian Rev. Washington Gladden, remembered him as “a clean-handed, clear-minded, simple-mannered, great-hearted man” who was Ohio’s “greatest citizen—the finest product of her century of history.”

Rutherford B. Hayes will not be added to Mount Rushmore but he certainly deserves admiration as a decent and dedicated public servant, who should be more closely studied and emulated by those who claim to be Republicans today.