

Tears for Old Tippecanoe

Religious Interpretations of President Harrison's Death

BY HOWARD H. PECKHAM

“WHY has labor suspended her toil, and commerce her traffick? Why the lengthened procession, and this thronged temple? This is not the anniversary of Freedom’s jubilee. No gorgeous pageant glitters in the sun-light; no glad anthem swells on the breeze; no triumphant acclaim fills the welkin. Today we hang out the ensigns of mourning; we march to the slow and solemn music of muffled drum; we attune our voices to the melancholy notes of funereal dirge. The King of Terrors, who respecteth not the high places of power, hath entered our National Mansion House—hath stricken down the Chief Magistrate of our glorious Republic. President Harrison, the annointed of liberty, is no more.”¹

After this preface it is probably anticlimactic simply to say that William Henry Harrison succumbed to pneumonia on April 4, 1841, exactly one month after his inauguration. However, it presages the fact that he was the first President of the United States to die in office. Eight men had preceded him in the Chief Executive’s chair and a period of fifty-two years had elapsed without such an interruption. The death of the President was a shock to the nation simply because it had never happened before. But it was a further shock because by many people this event, while it might be attributed directly to pneumonia bacteria, was actually an

¹ Charles J. Jenkins, *Eulogy on the Life and Character of William Henry Harrison* (Augusta 1841), p. 5.

instance of Divine intervention. To astonishment, therefore, was added foreboding and dread. The Almighty had deliberately struck down the Chief Executive. Therefore He must have a purpose. What did it mean?

For an answer they looked to their clergymen. For generations the clergy had insisted that America was favored by God. History to them was an account of God's dealing with people. They could recall that Luther's posting of his theses followed upon discovery of America, and that settlement of what was called the New World proceeded during the persecutions incident to the Protestant Reformation. America was the New Zion, the new Promised Land; it was settled by a Chosen People. It had grown and prospered, overcome Wilderness and savage, French and Spanish Catholic, and British tyranny, because God had led and rewarded a reverent and virtuous people. God-fearing men had written a new Constitution of self-government and religious freedom, and the republic was launched under a pious George Washington. Now something had happened that indicated a mighty dissatisfaction on the part of Jehovah.

Clergymen were not unmindful that a solemn and puzzled nation turned to them for an explanation of this mysterious calamity. They can hardly be blamed if they took some secret pride in their role as interpreter and prophet. While they did not rejoice in the event, they hardly felt an aversion to the spotlight now fixed upon them. As they meditated on the situation, most of them saw clearly what was meant by the baring of God's arm in the White House. Unfortunately, they did not agree, and it is the pattern of those answers, or interpretations, that I want to examine.

First, let me remind you of the background against which the ministers spoke. Harrison had been elected on the Whig ticket in November 1840, after the rowdiest, zanyest, most

hilarious, colorful, and extravagant campaign the nation had yet experienced.² It has been called the beginning of the modern political campaign, but I'm not sure its carnival aspect has been equalled since that time. The Democrats had renominated Martin Van Buren, who had served one term as the heir and successor of the formidable Andrew Jackson. Circumstances had not been kind to President Van Buren. Jackson's refusal to recharter the United States Bank had left his successor to advocate a sub-treasury system that provided a good political issue and split his own party. A financial panic in 1837, brought on by the over-expansion of credit, had stagnated business, closed banks, wiped out paper fortunes of speculators, and caused some unemployment. Van Buren himself was a well-to-do New York politician of patrician tastes who lacked Jackson's appeal to the common people, especially in the West.

Both parties were national in scope; that is, they had adherents in every part of the country and they had radical and conservative wings. The Whigs included plantation owners in the South, manufacturers in New England who abhorred slavery, and Western farmers concerned with internal improvements. Sectional differences were growing, but both parties tried to avoid issues that would split them geographically. New England Whigs wanted to nominate Daniel Webster, but he went off to England before the conventions to try to sell some of his land speculations and get out of debt. The Southern Whigs hoped to nominate Henry Clay, and he expected it, but Clay had demonstrated a remarkable talent for misinterpreting public sentiment and winding up on the unpopular side of an issue. In such a predicament the Whig party adopted no platform and the Whig bosses of New York and Pennsylvania threw the nomination to a man whose views on the controversial

² The campaign is detailed in Robert G. Gunderson, *The Log-Cabin Campaign* (Lexington 1957).

issues of the day were unformed or unknown, a military hero who was virtually impregnable to attack: William Henry Harrison, of Ohio.

He was then in unwilling retirement on his farm, and so he was pictured as a modern Cincinnatus called from his plow to lead the country. The simile was hardly accurate because Harrison had been the Whig nominee in 1836 and lost to Van Buren, and he had been angling for the nomination a second time to the best of his ability. Harrison was a Virginian who entered the army in the West under General Anthony Wayne in 1792. Later he served as governor of Indiana Territory, as a major general in the War of 1812, in the Ohio legislature, then as a United States Senator, and finally as minister to Colombia. From this last service he had returned in 1829 and since then had been in political eclipse trying to support an extraordinarily large household.

The Democrats found almost nothing about Harrison they could attack. He straddled the issues of slavery and banking with vague platitudes. He came from an aristocratic old family, but he had made his career in the West on his own merit. His patriotism was undeniable, and the fact that he was poor indicated all too clearly that he had never made money from his offices or from speculation in western lands. When the Democrats tried to ridicule his military record by impugning his competence as a commander or questioning his courage, the effort backfired. Not only did the many men who had served under him rise to his defense, but even Van Buren's running mate, Richard M. Johnson, who had fought with Harrison in the war, was so embarrassed by his party's tactic that he praised his opponent's military record.

The Whig strategy was carefully to avoid discussion of issues. The party stuck to emphasizing the contrast between the two candidates, convinced that Harrison merited the popular trust. The campaign resembled that of 1828,

when Jackson won over John Quincy Adams, but now the parties were reversed. The Whigs had the plain man of the people, and they painted Van Buren as the indifferent, aristocratic man of money. In disgust the *Baltimore American*, a Democratic newspaper, declared that if someone would give Harrison a jug of cider and a modest pension he would be content to sit in his log cabin for the rest of his days, albeit he lived in a large clapboard house. The Whigs seized on to this sneer and made the log cabin and barrel of cider the symbols of the campaign. A log cabin was used in a float in every parade and as a party headquarters in almost every town. Free cider, usually hard, was liberally dispensed. The popular woodcut of the day pictured Harrison with a tumbler in his upraised hand; probably no other presidential candidate has been swept into office with this posture accepted by the public. A campaign newspaper called the *Log Cabin* was started by an energetic Whig named Horace Greeley, who changed it the following year to *The New York Tribune*, a Whig daily. Songs by the dozen were written, published, and what is worse, sung. Here are a couple of samples:

The fame of the Chieftain's gone forth, and it flies
 Like the day-beams that shine on both cottage and palace;
 From their log-cabin homes, see the People arise
 And present to Van Buren the hard cider chalice.

"From Virginia, alas!
 I have had a full glass;
 Away from my rose lips," he cried, "let it pass!"
 "Hard cider makes drunkards," the sad Tories cry—
 But, ah! it will never make Martin 'get high.'³

Let Van from his coolers of silver drink wine,
 And lounge on his cushioned settee.
 Our man on his old buckeye bench can recline,
 Content with hard cider is he.⁴

³ *The Log Cabin* (New York and Albany), May 16, 1840, p. 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Oct. 3, 1840, p. 4, reprinted from the *Louisville Journal*.

Harrison's age, 68 years, might have given pause to some voters, but the mere fact that he traveled and made 23 speeches in a personal canvass—the first in any Presidential campaign—made his age seem inconsequential. When the Democrats questioned his competence, they simply couldn't make themselves heard. His forty-year record of public service under every President from Washington to John Quincy Adams was too impressive. Whatever his lack of talents, Harrison was an immensely likeable man of unblemished character. Need I add that he won the electoral vote by a four-to-one margin and carried 19 of the 26 states?

When Harrison arrived in Washington early in 1841, it was expected that he would place himself in the hands of the Whig leaders. Webster had the arrogance to offer him an inaugural address that he had prepared. But Harrison had already written his own. Webster insisted on revising it. Harrison was well read in ancient history, and his speech abounded in classical allusions. Allegedly exhausted from his editorial efforts, Webster appeared haggard at dinner that night. His hostess asked if anything had happened to him.

"Madam," Webster replied, "you would think something had happened, if you knew what I have done. I have killed seventeen Roman proconsuls as dead as smelts!"⁵

Even so, in delivery the speech lasted an hour and forty minutes. Rarely was it criticized by the clergy and even then its style was excused. The Reverend B. B. Edwards of Andover, Massachusetts, admitted: "There are too many words in it; and the classical allusions are too frequent. But Gen. Harrison was not educated as a scholar. . . . His academic halls were the ancient woods of Vincennes; the

⁵ Peter Harvey, *Reminiscences and Anecdotes of Daniel Webster* (Boston 1877), pp. 162-163.

lamps by which he read Caesar and Tacitus were the watchfires of Tippecanoe."⁶ One paragraph of the inaugural pleased the ministers immensely, in part because it was so clearly introduced out of context. Several of them quoted it to their audiences:

I deem the present occasion sufficiently important and solemn to justify me in expressing to my fellow citizens a profound reverence for the Christian Religion, and a thorough conviction that sound morals, religious liberty, and a just sense of religious responsibility are essentially connected with all true and lasting happiness; and to that good Being who has blessed us by the gifts of civil and religious freedom, who watched over and prospered the labors of our Fathers, and has hitherto preserved to us institutions far exceeding in excellence those of any other people, let us unite in fervently commending every interest of our beloved country in all future time.⁷

Despite this declaration, Harrison was not a member of any church. In Ohio he had often attended his wife's church—Presbyterian—and had even taught a Bible class for a time. In Washington he began attending the Episcopal Church (in which he had been reared) and told the rector that as soon as enough time had passed so that his motive would not be construed politically, he would join. This statement of intention on top of his inaugural testimony and past performance satisfied almost all the ministers who delivered funeral sermons and to whom formal church affiliation was a serious matter. One lone dissent was heard from the Reverend Nathaniel Hewit of Bridgeport, Connecticut: Harrison, he pointed out, "was not in form a member of a Church of Christ. Supposing him to have been a 'believer in Him with all his heart,' this neglect on his part

⁶ B. B. Edwards, *Address Delivered on the Day of the National Fast* (Andover 1841), p. 10.

⁷ In his biography of Daniel Webster, Claude Fuess attributes this paragraph to Webster's editorial pen. Apparently some question of authorship arose immediately after Harrison's death, for the Reverend Mr. Hawley, rector of the Episcopal Church in Washington, was "authorized from unquestionable authority" to say "that this paragraph was written by Harrison himself."

was an act of disobedience to his Lord and Saviour of no trivial magnitude.”⁸

Emphasis on the letter of religion, or more accurately of Protestantism, and on church membership and ritual, were the inheritance of the Second Great Awakening, which began in 1800 and blazed in the West for two decades.

Three weeks after the inauguration, President Harrison was suffering from a cold. Congestion in the lungs was found on March 28, and his physicians grew concerned. As one biographer put it, Harrison endured their treatment for eight days before dying on April 4. This small coincidence of date—March 4 and April 4—did not escape notice. The dramatic contrast of the two days proved irresistible to almost every speaker. I confine myself to one quotation, without gestures, from the Reverend Horatio Potter:

“The inhabitants of that city, who but a few days ago crowded to the Capitol to witness the august ceremony of Inauguration . . . have scarcely retired to their firesides, and had time to recover from the excitement of that occasion, before they are summoned to come forth to look upon another pageant, upon another procession! The elements that compose it are in many respects the same as before; but the air, the spirit of the whole, how mournfully changed! Ministers of state, and foreign ambassadors, and distinguished citizens, are again to be seen, but every trace of joy and gratulation is fled. The same martial, well disciplined ranks are there; but their arms are reversed, their countenances are bent in gloom upon the ground, their step is measured and solemn; the drum is still heard, but in muffled tones; their music is low and funereal; the horse, too, which made a principal figure on the previous occasion, is there; but the seat of the rider is vacant, and the hearse that

⁸ Nathaniel Hewit, *Discourse at the Funeral Solemnities* (Bridgeport 1841), p. 6.

follows tells but too plainly that DEATH is now the conqueror."⁹

Vice-president John Tyler was the instigator of most of the funeral sermons. Without precedent to guide him, he issued on April 13 a "Recommendation" declaring Friday, May 14, to be a day of "national fasting and prayer." He also went on to call Harrison's death "a bereavement peculiarly calculated to be regarded as a heavy affliction, and to impress all minds with a sense of the uncertainty of human things, and of the dependence of Nations, as well as individuals, upon our Heavenly Parent."

As the result of this cue, almost every minister in the country, with some notable exceptions, prepared a sermon related to Harrison's death. Some, of course, had already preached a memorial sermon before the proclamation appeared, and as a penalty for their precipitateness a few found themselves preaching a second funeral sermon on May 14. In many towns and cities, a Committee of Arrangements was appointed to prepare a municipal observance or a union church service. Where the Committee selected the speaker, his reward was customarily the publication of his sermon or address. Yet an astonishing number of churches apparently published their own minister's sermon on this occasion. I have found 138 sermons and eulogies, by 132 authors, in pamphlet form.¹⁰ If any Catholic priests responded to the event, their sermons apparently did not see print.

Let me put your minds at ease. Although I have read an even hundred of these pamphlets, I have no intention of offering a resumé of each one. I shall simply classify them

⁹ Horatio Potter, *A Discourse on the Death of William Henry Harrison* (Albany 1841), pp. 12-13.

¹⁰ The Philosophical and Historical Society of Ohio (Cincinnati) owns 93 sermons; the Indiana Historical Society (Indianapolis) has 81; the Library of Congress (Washington) owns 68. I am indebted to all three libraries and particularly to Miss Caroline Dunn of the Indiana Historical Society Library.

into a few groups according to the point of view expressed. A very few were completely biographical with little religious coloring. A similar few were completely sermons barren of biographical reference. The vast majority were a mixture.

Actually the estimates of Harrison presented by these speakers ran a narrow gamut. Those persons who despised the man or were derogatory of his abilities naturally were not asked to speak and for the most part they kept quiet. No one openly declared that Harrison was a knave or a fool and that his death should be welcomed. The worst judgment was uttered by William Cullen Bryant in an editorial in the Democratic *New York Evening Post*. He said he regretted the President's death only because Harrison did not live long enough to prove his incapacity for great office.¹¹

The sermonizers and eulogizers confined themselves to an emotional range of mild to enthusiastic approval of Harrison. At the lower end of the scale were those who frankly asserted that he was not a talented or great man, but were quick to add that he was honest and good. Many others believed that he was more competent than the politicians and circumstances had permitted him to demonstrate; that he had been ably prepared for the Presidency by his military, political, and diplomatic services and would have been a strong Chief Executive. A few, usually ardent Whig politicians, eulogized him as a genius, a talented administrator, a wise and discerning leader from the mould of George Washington. These judgments were painted with purple rhetoric.

None of the laymen who delivered eulogies used a Biblical text, nor did all the clergy. Of the 62 ministers who did preach from a text, 52 took a verse from the Old Testament, and only 10 from the New Testament. This preference has its significance. The circumstances suggested a similarity to

¹¹ *New York Evening Post*, Apr. 6, 1841, p. 2, in Yale University Library, courtesy of Miss F. Bernice Field.

early Israelite history. The American people were considered a Chosen People with whom God had a covenant. Further, Harrison was sometimes seen as a second Moses because as leader of these people he had not been allowed to live to enjoy the Promised Land toward which he was taking the nation. Since so many of the clergy also saw in the President's death the judgment of a stern God, they found in the Old Testament characteristics and examples of such a Jehovah. Theirs was the God of Job and Jeremiah, before the new interpretation of fatherhood preached by Jesus. There are few references in their sermons to Christ the mediator, and no thought of God as seeking man through the love exemplified in Jesus. The Book of Psalms was drawn on by 11 ministers, Isaiah by 7, Jeremiah and Samuel by 6 each.

To survey religious points of view in the hundred sermons we must eliminate those that expressed no opinion on the cause of Harrison's death. These were strictly memorial addresses, such as that by Lewis Cass speaking of his old comrade in arms to the American citizens in Paris, or Congressman Caleb Cushing addressing his constituents at Newburyport, Massachusetts. There were 8 of these eulogies, and only one was delivered by a clergyman.

The next category encompasses those speakers who assumed that Harrison's death was due to the orderly working of natural law, for which God was ultimately responsible but with which He did not interfere. The fact that Harrison happened to be President of the United States did not alter the situation. Among these speakers were Deists, of course, and Transcendentalists. They agreed that the public had a right to mourn for the loss of a trusted leader, and they sought to find traits in Harrison that could be glorified and recommended for emulation. The Reverend Alvan Lamson of Dedham, Massachusetts, said that in His government of His creatures and of His

universe, God proceeds by fixed laws founded on an immutable morality. The Reverend George Whitney of Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, put it plainly that a common lot awaits us all. There were only six speakers of this persuasion.

All the remaining 86 speakers out of 100 believed that Harrison's death resulted from special Divine dispensation. They differed among themselves only as to God's motive. One group confessed that they could offer no explanation. The "how" of this death was clear, but not the "why." It was a divine mystery that we mortals could hardly be expected to penetrate. All we can do is to keep our faith that some purpose is being served, that some good will come of it eventually because God is merciful. He cares about people, at least Christian people, and He has an interest in this country. We must trust Him in this national bereavement.

These were humble words, but comforting. Some listeners may have been disappointed that trained clergymen could not have supplied a better answer, but at least the answer did not provoke fear or lessen awe. Episcopalian George Upfold, later to be a bishop, spoke of the "inscrutable dispensation of Providence." He was echoed by the Presbyterian minister of Gettysburg, and the Congregational minister of Providence, Edward B. Hall. These men possessed one great Christian insight: they were going to redeem a catastrophe and turn it into a creative motive for future good. Twenty-two speakers, including seven who were not ministers, adopted this point of view.

In a second group were the ministers who would agree with their colleagues as far as they had gone, but the notion that this Divine intervention was a mystery they would dismiss as absurd or reflecting on the Christian competence of their brethren. Obviously, God's purpose was to remind and warn us of two affirmations: first, that any man may be

taken at any hour. Therefore, we must so live as to be prepared for death at any moment. Indeed, if the President of the United States could be snatched so abruptly from his high station, there was no hope that we lesser folk could expect a warning word or any merciful exemption. We can only repent our sins and be quick about it. Secondly, this little demonstration of Jehovah's rod should remind us of His sovereign power and emphasize by contrast our feebleness and our dependence upon Him. It showed us the vanity of our worldly pursuits and the futility of putting our national trust in men rather than in God.

These exhorters had no words of comfort for their listeners. They were heralds of a capricious God, intent on warning people to assume a contrite stance and hold it. They could not reconcile a God of Order with a God of Love. They were apologists for the Almighty, although their refusal to have faith in human nature was sound. The president of Amherst College, the Reverend Heman Humphrey, saw in Harrison's death the act of a jealous God who had been forgotten during the raucous political campaign. Similarly, the Reverend Parsons Cook of Lynn, Massachusetts, saw it as a rebuke to excessive party spirit because the victor was promptly relieved of his elected office. The Reverend John Richards of Hanover, New Hampshire, analyzed the situation further. He said God had dealt us two chastisements: commercial embarrassment in 1837, and now the President's death. Before the first we had sought riches by speculation, forgetting God, and He had let the bubble burst. Then we turned to Cincinnatus to save us and made an idol of him. Our motive was covetousness: Harrison was to save us from "the evil of not being quite rich enough." And so God had to teach the nation not to put such confidence in man.

In a similar vein the Reverend Edward Kirk recalled the warnings we had received since early 1837, but hope revived with the election of Harrison. The Lord saw we had

not yet learned where to put our trust. The implication here is that our trouble began with Van Buren, who should not have been trusted either. Incidentally, Mr. Kirk had once served the Presbyterian Church in Albany, which Van Buren attended, and from which Mr. Kirk had been dismissed.

The enthusiasm of the Whigs in the recent campaign was easily interpreted after their victory as idolatrous devotion to Harrison and hence an offense to the Almighty. How the Democrats reacted to inclusion in this wholesale accusation is better left to the imagination. Altogether 43 ministers took this general attitude, and they included 11 Congregationalists, 10 Episcopalians, 9 Presbyterians, and 4 Baptists.

Finally, there was a class of ministers to whom God was not capricious. He had not selected our President for death merely to demonstrate in jealous fashion His power or to warn others that they faced similar uncertainty in life. No, the situation was much darker and gloomier than that. Harrison's death was the Divine sentence of a wrathful God. Once upon a time we were safely in God's care, our enterprises prospered because undertaken by pious men, our national aims were realized because we sought the kingdom of heaven on earth. Lately we had turned away from God and from following in paths of righteousness. In our mad pursuit of money and success, our sins were rising like a stench to heaven. The blow to our President was not just a rebuke to our forgetfulness, but a punishment for our wickedness. There had been earlier warnings—the financial panic of 1837, recent shipwrecks, the New York fire of 1835, the cholera epidemic of 1833—but we had paid no heed. It was necessary for the Lord to deliver this most dramatic and stunning blow in order to get our attention, to demand, in short, President Harrison as a sacrifice. Now there was fear and whimpering, as there ought to be.

The national sins were obvious to these clergymen. There was the foul stain of Negro slavery across the land, matched only by our injustices to the Indians. There was the deliberate and official desecration of the Sabbath by the Postmaster General's decision to move the mails on Sunday. Party spirit had reached vehement proportions involving falsehood and corruption. Intemperance was notorious. Overriding love of money in all our exertions had led to the twin practices of swindling and extortionate speculation. These were the national sins most of the clergymen could agree upon. Others were mentioned, of course, by individuals, such as profanity, flouting of the law, crimes of violence, the sympathizing with suicides instead of condemning them, duelling, and one minister noted that children no longer obeyed their parents the way they used to.

All this was a harsh indictment. Expiation required more than turning our thoughts from man to God; it demanded sweeping social reforms. The Reverend William Ramsay of Philadelphia was convinced that "God has a controversy with this nation," because "we as a nation have departed from God." The Reverend Joseph Abbott of Beverly, Massachusetts, warned his church that God had destroyed ancient nations that angered Him. Taking this extreme position were 21 clergymen, approximately the same number that regarded Harrison's death as cloaked in mystery.

You may well ask at this point if Southern clergymen listed slavery as a national sin. They did not. Indeed, the Episcopal rector in Charleston, South Carolina, the Reverend C. E. Gadsden, perceived a sin that escaped all of his fellow ministers: it was the spirit of insubordination rampant in the land, an organized movement to break down distinctions among men which were not merely expedient and necessary but had a Divine sanction. His mind was as accommodating as his conscience, for the good rector managed to conclude that such antislavery efforts were a violation of the

fifth commandment to honor thy father and thy mother!¹²

Now to conclude with a few inferences that may be drawn from this somewhat doleful research. Denominational analysis was not particularly significant. Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Congregationalists dominated the hundred ministers; other leading and perhaps less prosperous denominations were not adequately represented to provide a proper cross-section. It soon became clear that each denomination harbored its liberal and fundamental clergy. One significant finding emerged. In the last group of ministers that saw in Harrison's death a retribution for the nation's sins, the Presbyterians clearly dominated: 13 out of 21.

Since their attitude, I felt, was erected largely on the factor that it was the President who had been killed, I began to wonder what would be said nine years later when President Zachary Taylor died in office. So I sampled a baker's dozen of sermons published in 1850 about Taylor's death. Three of them admitted that it was a mysterious Providence; the other ten pointed out that it was designed to teach us once again the vanity of earthly glory and the folly of attempted independence from God. The remarkable aspect is that, among these samples at least, the idea that the President was sacrificed for our national sins had disappeared. Four of these ministers were Presbyterians, too.¹³

Perhaps after the passage of nine years the clergymen perceived something that is obvious to us today. To regard Harrison's death as a punishment to the nation, it is requisite to endow the President and Whig principles with all the virtues. Only then can the nation be said to have suffered by his removal. But looking back from mid-twentieth century—and possibly even from 1850—we can hardly

¹² C. E. Gadsden, *The Sermon Preached at St. Philip's Church* (Charleston 1841), p. 9.

¹³ I am indebted to Joseph Allen of the Library of Congress for a list of 31 sermons preached at the death of Zachary Taylor in 1850.

see that the nation was staggered or even jarred in its course by President Harrison's death. William Cullen Bryant's coarse dictum may even be true. The point is that the evil or punitive effect of Harrison's death is impossible to measure today, and therefore if it were caused by God, the lesson is all the more obscure.

The "golden age" theory of history was popular among the ministers under review. The nation had once been favored by God, they argued, but no longer. In addition to the spiritual motives of the Puritans and Washington's unequalled virtues, the framers of the Constitution were already firmly ensconced on their pedestals as enlightened political scientists with a guiding piety which contrasted with the new generation of Congressmen. A time of trouble had fallen on the land; the sun was darkened by a Divine frown. Yet this backward glance did not penetrate very far; little was heard of man's depravity since being driven from the Garden of Eden. On the contrary, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries man seemed to have recovered his Paradise in America. It was this latter Golden Age that the generation of 1841 had lost and its clergy mourned.

The Golden Age delusion stems partly from an ignorance of the past but mainly from a mistaken idea about the relationship of God and man. History is always the story of apparent Providence being countered by human aberration.¹⁴ The ministers granted that man might interfere with or obstruct the will of God, and thereby be punished as in the present instance, but they could not bring themselves also to believe that accident, or natural law in the form of disease germs or gravity, might have the same effect temporarily. Their despair arose because they did not distinguish between the intentional will of God or ideal plan for men, and the ultimate will of God or final realization

¹⁴ Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (London 1949), p. 106.

of His purposes after setbacks occasioned by man's freedom to make mistakes and suffer accidents.¹⁵ Because of their narrow view of God's will as embracing everything that happened, they lived in a peculiarly inelastic world devoid of accidents, the penalties of ignorance, or the results of immutable laws of nature. This is the dilemma of Calvinism. Since everything that happens has a Divine cause and was Divinely intended, then it has a purpose which men must comprehend and learn from. Hence, the endless interpretation of little signs.

The whole idea of Divine intervention implies that God has motives which we can understand. The result is that these clergymen ascribe finite or human motives to God, thereby reducing the very majesty and sovereignty of God which they were attempting to glorify. This error is common to the concept of a Chosen People. Actually, then, we must credit a greater wisdom to the ministers who confessed to ignorance of God's purpose in Harrison's death.

It is not my intention to evaluate more than I have the merits of the religious ideas expressed by the groups of clergymen, but certain further observations cannot be resisted. The ministers should not be condemned as poor historians. Rather, they point up the limitations of history. They had the "facts" before them, but they wanted and felt obliged to interpret them. They simply went beyond the timid, technical historian and imposed an interpretation based on their religion. The historian who ventures to make interpretations does the same thing: he brings to his facts a commentary drawn from his ideas about human life and values. He is seldom aware that he is then standing on the threshold of prophecy.¹⁶ These ministers had a juvenile notion of what it meant to call Americans a Chosen People. They considered it meant being a favorite of God on whom

¹⁵ Leslie D. Weatherhead, *The Will of God* (London 1944), chap. I.

¹⁶ Butterfield, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

special blessings would fall, and the corollary of this idea was that catastrophe was punishment. Such a view of the Almighty produces two other attitudes:

The first is chauvinism, a zealous and belligerent patriotism based on the assumption that since God is on our side we must be right. In these sermons I think we discern the religious basis for the American patriotism that gained so much vigor from the conviction that we were carrying out God's purposes.

The second is spiritual pride. This was the failing of the ancient Jews who similarly regarded themselves as a Chosen People. It arises not only from the concept of God's providence, but also from this misconstrued role of being Chosen. Patriotism and pride produced a sense of separateness in the Jews, and in these same attitudes we perceive the roots of American isolationism, nurtured further by our physical remoteness from Europe and Asia.

The national sin which our clergymen did not denounce was their own self-righteousness. The great denominations of Protestantism had proliferated into numerous factions, each one asserting that it alone knew the will of God and the proper ritual of worship. Soon the schisms would be doubled by the splitting of churches North and South over slavery. The furious indictment of the nation for its sins of commission and omission may have been unconsciously motivated by clergymen who were reflecting their own interdenominational antagonisms. They could not agree among themselves, unless it was on their anti-Catholicism. They felt called upon to correct everyone who differed from them, for tolerance was a vice in this age of religious particularism. They could defend themselves only by insisting that everyone else was wrong; yet they were aware as servants of God they ought to be able to agree, and this sense of guilt sharpened their outward hostility. They saw Jehovah's rod in

Harrison's death, and in terror to deflect its blow projected a scapegoat of the sins of the people. Those public sins were genuine enough, but the blackest of them—slavery—again had its clerical defenders and apologists. The churches had been unanimous at the end of the eighteenth century in denouncing slavery, but now they were divided on this plainest of issues, and in another decade they would hear themselves denounced as "bulwarks of slavery." These overlaying conflicts were enough to make ministers sound a little shrill in their calls to repentance and humiliation.

Even so, convinced as they were that God had selected America and the people who first settled here to achieve His ends, they tried to recall their fellow men to the significance of their responsibilities. They beseeched their hearers to discern the will of God and follow or fulfill it. This is good advice and quite unrelated to any interpretation of the cause of Harrison's death; but it is not as easy as the pastors represented. It is not a matter of turning a corner into a street whose vista is suddenly clear, or of "making a decision for Christ," as a modern evangelist tiresomely phrases it. Discovering the will of God may require a lifetime search, and the last two thousand years of history have not charted the course very clearly. Further, these clergymen only added to the fog by asserting that every adversity and evil is also willed by God. The world was not, therefore, entirely what individuals could make it, and a paradox results. The remedy of individual repentance and social reform was not fundamentally sustained.

Noble as the motive was of these clergymen, by their general misinterpretation of President Harrison's death they invoked an image of Divine relationship that New Testament theology could not support. Consequently the Protestant churches were steadily to lose their authority in this century, especially after the split over slavery.

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