



Annotated Excerpt from Harrison’s Speech

William Henry Harrison spoke in public—unprecedented for a candidate for president. On at least one occasion, he addressed the accusation that he (and, by implication, his party) took no stand on the issues. He vehemently denied this in a speech in Dayton, Ohio, on September 10, 1840 (NOTE: All of the language in the following excerpt is from the original except explanations for words in italics are in parentheses, and some punctuation and/or spelling may be standardized.):

...I am fully aware, my fellow citizens, that you expect from me some opinion upon the various questions which now *agitate* (stir up strong feelings in) our country, *from centre to circumference* (from one end to the other), with such fierce *contention* (debate). Calumny (Misrepresentation), ever seeking to destroy all that is good in this world, hath proclaimed that I am *averse from declaring* (reluctant to declare) my opinions on matters so interesting to you; but nothing can be more false.

Have I not, time out of mind, proclaimed my opposition to a citizen’s going forward among the people and *soliciting* (seeking) votes for the Presidency? Have I not, many a time and often, said, that in my opinion, no man ought to aspire to the Presidency of these United States, unless he is designated as a candidate for that high office by the unbought wishes of the people? If the candidate for so high an office be designated by a portion or a majority of the people. They will have come to the determination of *sustaining* (supporting) such a man from a review of his past actions and life, and they will not exact pledges from him of what he will do and what he will not do, for their selection of him is proof enough that he will carry out the doctrines of his party. This plan of choosing a candidate for the Presidency is a much surer bar against corruption than the system of requiring promises. If the *pledging* (making promises) plan is pursued, the effect will be, to offer the Presidential chair to the man who will make the most promises. He who would pledge the most, he who would promise most, would be the man to be voted for, and I have no hesitation in declaring my belief, that he who would subject his course to be thus tied up by promises and pledges, would not stop to break them when once in office...

While then, fellow citizens, I have never hesitated to declare my opinions on proper occasions upon the great questions before the nation, I cannot consent to make mere promises the condition of obtaining the office which you kindly wish to bestow upon me. My opinions I am free to express, but you already have them, sustained and supported by the acts of a long and arduous life. That life is a pledge of my future course, if I am elevated by your suffrages to the highest office in your gift.

-- From William Nisbet Chambers (“Election of 1840,” History of American Presidential Elections, Volume 1. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Ed. 5 vols. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1971. 737-744.)

Questions:

1. How does Harrison characterize the accusation that he fails to take a stand on the issues?
2. Does Harrison deny or accept the accusations?
3. What is Harrison's opinion of a candidate actively seeking votes for the presidency?
4. What negative consequence does Harrison believe can result when a candidate makes promises about what he will do once elected?
5. What does Harrison suggest is the best way to judge a candidate for president?
6. Harrison says "nothing can be more false" than the claim that he is "averse from declaring [his] opinions." How would students characterize and evaluate his defense against such an accusation?

It should be noted that in the course of the speech, Harrison goes on to state opinions on some issues:

- He decries the degree of power now found in the executive saying, "The Government is now a practical monarchy."
- He seems to promise not to seek a second term, if elected, though his statement leaves open the possibility that the people could demand a second term. ("I pledge... to lay down at the end of the term... that high trust at the feet of the people.")
- Harrison declares himself in favor of paper money. ("Are you in favor of paper money? I am... If you would know why... I can only say it is because I am a democrat.")
- Of the national bank he says, "...of the power of Congress to charter a national bank... There is not in the Constitution any express grant of power for such purpose... if I was clearly of opinion that the majority of the people... desired such an institution, then, and then only would I sign a bill to charter a bank."