

WARREN G. HARDING, "ADDRESS OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES AT THE CELEBRATION OF THE SEMICENTENNIAL OF THE FOUNDING OF THE CITY OF BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA," BIRMINGHAM, AL (26 October 1921)

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Abstract: We explore how President Warren G. Harding re-envisioned an American sense of "equality" in a 1921 speech commemorating the semicentennial of the founding of Birmingham, Alabama—a speech that historians have dubbed "the most important presidential utterance on the race question since Reconstruction." Specifically, we argue that Harding's articulation of "equality" and "social equality" in Birmingham occurred in a political context dominated by the post-progressive vocabulary of *boosterism*. Ultimately, we maintain that Harding's 1921 address in Birmingham, when read within this context, offers a glimpse into the rhetorical and ideational struggle underway in American politics over questions of race and civil rights during an often forgotten era.

Keywords: Warren G. Harding; boosterism; civil rights; social equality

Following the horrors of World War I, and after the political tensions of a home front clamoring for reform and progress, Americans opted for "normalcy." Many felt they found such quiet optimism in the 1920 election of Senator Warren G. Harding (R-OH) as president of the United States. A skilled campaigner and a compelling orator, Harding won an election victory in 1920 like no other then or since, capturing 60.32 percent of the popular vote and defeating Democratic nominee James M. Cox (and Cox's vice-presidential running mate, Franklin D. Roosevelt) by a whopping 26.17 percent.¹

So complete was Harding's victory that he even carried the state of Tennessee—part of the Old Confederacy—while also coming close to carrying North Carolina. Harding thus became the first Republican since Rutherford B. Hayes' fraudulent Electoral College victory in 1876 to prevail in a Confederate state.² The sectarianism and sectionalism that had defined American politics since Reconstruction cracked just slightly in 1920, paving the way for increasing southern Republican gains in elections to come.³

Even as Harding coasted to his monumental victory in 1920, his front-porch campaign for the presidency was not without controversy. Notably, in the midst of the campaign, a professor from Ohio's College of Wooster, William Estabrook Chancellor, published two pamphlets that purportedly proved Harding's mixed racial heritage. Asserting that Harding had African-American ancestors, Chancellor's charges were widely circulated and caused a sensation in the campaign. Even though the scandal did not derail Harding's pursuit of the

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White House,⁴ it spoke to the role and relevance of race in the 1920 campaign. This scandal illustrated, at least in part, how race and civil rights operated as important concerns for American politics throughout the remainder of the decade.

On a purely political level, the period from Reconstruction's end until the onset of the Great Depression was a pivotal time in the shifting political dynamics of the New South. Political historians are continually fascinated, notes Edward O. Frantz, with the "white South's transformation from solidly Democratic to solidly Republican, and the Republican Party's transformation from a standard bearer of black civil rights to a vehicle for white resentment."⁵ Tracing this transformation, Frantz suggests, requires an acknowledgement of "the critical role played by their Republican predecessors between 1877 and 1933."⁶ As such, we attend to the ideational and rhetorical development of race and civil rights in the early 1920s. Following Ernest Wraga's lead, our study of this rhetorical moment of ideational development is not restricted to a "description of the great and noble thoughts." Our approach provides greater inclusivity and treats "political ideas as the product and expression of social incentives."⁷

Our goal here is to examine how race and civil rights were discussed publicly in the 1920s, at least through the prism of one important voice speaking at one important event. Specifically, we explore how President Warren G. Harding re-envisioned an American sense of "equality" in a speech to commemorate the semicentennial of the founding of Birmingham, Alabama. Harding visited Alabama in October of 1921 and presented what various historians have called "the most important presidential utterance on the race question since Reconstruction,"⁸ "the most controversial address on race relations given by any American president since Reconstruction,"⁹ and "the most important utterance on this question by a President since Lincoln."¹⁰ Addressed to a carefully segregated audience, Harding's speech, along with a little-noticed luncheon address that he gave on the same day in the same city, imagined a sense of "equality" that delimited the principle carefully. "Equality" on political and economic matters is carefully separated by Harding from "social equality," such that he supported full yet incremental integration of African Americans into southern and American culture even as he reinforced their continued restrictions from certain domains of civic and economic life.

Harding's expressions of "equality" and "social equality" in Birmingham occurred in a political context dominated by a post-progressive vocabulary of *boosterism*. In opposition to the rhetorical framework of reform that characterized the Progressive Era, boosterism celebrated rather than criticized civic accomplishment and national achievement. Where rhetorics of progressivism exposed flaws in political systems and processes, boosterism celebrated the successes achieved by those same systems and institutions. In the process, boosterism anticipated a better future—a more hopeful tomorrow. Indeed, such rhetorics were often confusing in their expression because they invoked shifting verb tenses; as Daniel Boorstin notes, the "American booster often was simply speaking in the future tense, asserting what could not yet be disproved."¹¹

The Rhetoric of Race and Normalcy in the 1920s

If there is one word that defines the rhetoric of Warren G. Harding, it is his invented neologism “normalcy.” Harding’s rhetoric of normalcy, John F. Wilson claims, was “a pliable oratory of a charming man with an unoriginal mind, suited to the immediate occasion, and instinctively adapted to the general American audience of the twenties.”¹² Despite the apparent vacuity of Harding’s rhetoric, he was a remarkably successful politician, able to take innocuous nostrums and make them palatable and meaningful for the U.S. voting public. Looking back on Harding’s rhetoric and recognizing his political success allows for the simultaneous recognition of his ideational impact on important questions of his time.

Discussions of Harding are often clouded, even decontextualized, by the revelations about personal and political scandals that emerged following his presidency. In a review of an anthology of Harding’s oratory, Robert Kraig wisely noted that Harding’s rhetoric is “worthy of re-examination [because] he was a significantly more able president than his historical reputation suggests.” “Scandal-mongering journalists” maligned Harding, Kraig argues, “resulting in “a badly distorted picture of his leadership.”¹³ The skewing of Harding’s historical memory has trivialized his presidency and his rhetoric as insignificant in American history, along with the issues confronting the American people at the time.

Harding’s rhetoric on race and civil rights, however, should not be trivialized or forgotten. Harding’s discourse on race expressed significant and important perspectives on an ongoing and complex public policy matter. Race relations, particularly in the South, were deteriorating by the 1910s and 1920s. In the almost fifty years since the end of Reconstruction, southern whites had fought to prevent “African Americans from ever reaching the polling place.”¹⁴ Alongside their entrenched systems of social and economic segregation, many white southerners now took bold new actions to prevent the political integration of African American voters. Their renewed efforts to thwart integration were in part due to a renewed sense of African American engagement in the late Gilded Age, as evidenced by the growing prominence of African Americans in a number of social and economic sectors. In the wake of the 1896 ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, (163 U.S. 537 [1896]) upholding the constitutionality of racial segregation, the challenges and dynamics of race in America—and in the South uniquely—were particularly nettlesome for the string of Republican presidents who dominated the national political scene from 1876 to 1932.

With the possible exception of Theodore Roosevelt, these Republican presidents, from Rutherford B. Hayes to Herbert Hoover, shared a “paternalistic, evolutionary attitude toward African Americans in mainstream society.” Most appeared to subscribe to Booker T. Washington’s vision of “economic independence and self-help” for African Americans, and this individualist mindset would ultimately come to define and shape articulations of “social equality” like Harding’s in 1921.¹⁵ Beyond the paternalism of the time was also a “pernicious pseudoscientific” rhetoric that treated “African Americans” as part of a “permanent underclass.”¹⁶ These views, which were visible in both Republican discourse and the broader national conversation about race and civil rights, contributed to what Kirt Wilson described as an effort, “through rhetoric, legislation, and coercion,” to “reestablish the caste system of the antebellum era” in the New South. The ideological, political, and legal limits on the Republican

presidents of the period “severely constrained” their “authority to protect black rights,” which “virtually guaranteed the continuation of slavery’s class system.”¹⁷

Confronted with these political and social realities, President Harding faced the challenging task of venturing to Birmingham in 1921 to celebrate the city’s 50th anniversary. The political context in which he operated was reflected in the 1920 Republican Party platform, a document that denounced lynching and “pledged a biracial commission to investigate abuses of electoral law.”¹⁸ At the same time, Harding displayed little willingness to confront civil rights issues in the months following his inauguration in March of 1921. The president’s major addresses said little about race or civil rights, even as Harding advocated—weakly—for anti-lynching legislation in Congress. As he wrote in a letter to the NAACP’s James Weldon Johnson in June 1921, “Congress ought to wipe the stain of barbaric lynching from the banners of a free and orderly, representative democracy.”¹⁹ His anti-lynching advocacy, as with most of Harding’s work on race and civil rights at the outset of his administration, was largely symbolic; in meetings with leading African American leaders, Harding was asked for many things but failed to follow through on most, including naming a national commission on race relations or appointing black undersecretaries in executive departments. By the time of the Birmingham speech, African American leaders were largely discouraged by the Harding administration’s efforts on their behalf.²¹

Harding’s Boosterism

Harding’s unwillingness or inability to move significantly on race and civil rights reflects the contradictions inherent between these questions and Harding’s general political worldview. In his calls for a return to normalcy, Harding manifested a longstanding political and rhetorical perspective that came to be known as “boosterism.” Unfortunately, this approach to political rhetoric was at odds with the intractable problems of race and civil rights. The “booster ethos,” as Sally F. Griffith has labeled it, “addressed the need in American communities for both economic growth and social order. It fused economic and moral values in the belief that a town’s prosperity depended upon its collective spiritual condition, particularly upon its citizens’ unity and public-spiritedness.”²² Boosterism was often a localized political philosophy, wherein cities and municipalities would trumpet their local accomplishments in anticipation of a better, more prosperous future. Indeed, this localized sense of boosterism reflects a central tenet of the rhetorical style; boosters did not simply celebrate accomplishment and success for their own sake but in anticipation of a brighter future. This future-orientation is evident in the power of boosterism in cities like Birmingham, Alabama. During the booster years of the early twentieth century, Birmingham, like other cities of the New South, “looked rarely, and with little nostalgia, to the days of the antebellum South.”²³ They instead envisioned an ethos for themselves aimed at the future and with an eye toward removing and eliminating the historical blots and messes of the past. In his examination of the development of boosterism from the founding era forward, the historian Daniel Boorstin refers to this particular form of boosterism as “the language of anticipation.”²⁴

Anticipation and hope operate as the cornerstone of boosterism and were characteristic of Warren G. Harding’s life and career as well. Born to a large family in Ohio just after the end

of the Civil War, Harding focused on the study and mastery of printing and journalism at Ohio Central College and pursued a career as a small town newspaper publisher following unsuccessful stints as a teacher and as an insurance sales clerk. As editor and publisher of the *Marion Daily Star*, Harding honed his boosterism in promoting his hometown and the surrounding area. From this foundation, Harding was able to launch a political career that took him to the state senate in Columbus, a failed gubernatorial bid, and finally to the U.S. Senate. Despite a rather undistinguished career in the Senate, Harding was well-liked and well-known as an effective public speaker and emerged as a compromise, dark horse choice for the Republican presidential nomination in 1920 when the national convention deadlocked.²⁵

Coming to the White House in the aftermath of World War I, it is not surprising that Harding would employ a rhetoric of boosterism in his bid for the presidency. Distancing himself from all the tumult and turmoil of that global conflagration, Harding's front-porch campaign in 1920 "used the ideology of civic boosterism to present an idealized past in order to convince voters that this was the future they wanted." Rooted firmly in his history as a small town newspaperman in Ohio, Harding "brought the well-worn slogans of boosterism to the Republican Party by offering a narrative of a glorious past...followed by a period of aberrant decline (during the Wilson years) with the promise of restoring progress through the return to traditional ideals and business leadership."²⁶ This passage, from Harding's acceptance address of the Republican nomination in the summer of 1920, is illustrative:

The American achievement under the plan of the fathers is nowhere disputed. On the contrary, the American example has been the model of every republic which glorifies the progress of liberty, and is everywhere the leaven of representative democracy which has expanded human freedom. It has been wrought through party government.²⁷ In this sense, Harding's conservative boosterism operated against the reform-minded progressivism that dominated American political culture in the early twentieth century. Into this context, Harding journeyed to Birmingham in the fall of 1921 to celebrate that city's 50th anniversary, invoking the same civic boosterism that had characterized his campaign rhetoric while also wrestling with the complicated question of race and civil rights in the New South.

Harding's Oratory in Birmingham

When Warren G. Harding journeyed to Birmingham in 1921, he participated in a grand and elaborate ceremony celebrating the city's semicentennial. The entirety of the president's southern trip in 1921 was celebratory—Harding's papers, in fact, contain letter after letter from southern civic leaders beseeching the president to boost their municipality with a visit. Typical was a letter from H. G. Hastings on behalf of the "officers of the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce" to presidential secretary George B. Christian, Jr. Hastings requests that President Harding visit Atlanta during his southern trip, noting that a presidential visit "can do great good both in a national and political sense by coming in contact with the people of the South to the fullest degree possible." Such contact could best be achieved, Hastings suggests, at the "great Southeastern Fair" in Atlanta where there "is always a very large attendance of people from all over the Southeast."²⁸

The atmosphere that greeted the president in Birmingham was quite festive; there were parades and fashion shows, beauty pageants and automobile shows to commemorate the city's momentous event. The president rode in one of the parades and was given an honorary doctorate of laws at the inauguration ceremony from the new president of Birmingham-Southern College.²⁹ And a highlight of the day was the president's speech to nearly 50,000 citizens gathered at Wilson Park. The audience was segregated, but both black and white Alabamans were present to hear their commander-in-chief discuss the glories of Birmingham and the challenges of race and civil rights in the New South.³⁰

Harding's speech begins like an ordinary commemorative address with an acknowledgement and praise of the "region's industrial development." Harding remarked that, "The basic, characteristic industry on which modern civilization rests is iron and steel; and Birmingham is the world's last word in development of the iron and steel industries."³¹ The President paralleled industrial progress with social progress, noting such progress in "the generation since slavery was abolished and the rule of free labor and unfettered industrial opportunity became the rule of all of our great Republic" (2). Indeed, the entirety of the speech's beginning is devoted to its primary boosterist theme—celebrating and amplifying the accomplishments of this "Magic City" in the New South.

Moving through a brief history of the region, the President links his audience with their past. He mentioned Fernando De Soto's expeditions through the region searching for precious metals. He then moved to link the region with a perceived great moment in American military history by mentioning General Andrew Jackson's march to the Battle of New Orleans and how "his metallurgists discovered that from these easily smelted ores they could supply their requirements of iron, of which they stood in great need" (4). Harding highlighted the industriousness of this part of the South during the Civil War, and in so doing, he fused his audience with this past: "In this connection I have many times wished that there might be a wider appreciation of the genius for industrial development which the people of the South demonstrated during that war" (5).

In the subsequent sections of his speech there is nothing but positive references to the South and the Civil War. Rather than focus on why the South was in the war, Harding instead addressed the industrial imagination of the participants during the war. The president even went so far as to propose a study of the "Aladdin-like industrial wonder which was a large part of the story of the South in the civil contest" (5). The language choice was sensitive to the immediate audience and built positive ground and rhetorical capital. Harding pointed out how both the North and the South built iron clads for naval battle, utilized both the railways and the telegraph, and produced massive amounts of war ordnance so that, "When we had done [sic] with our war we had well-nigh made over the whole art of war. The old times things were gone forever. By land or by sea both its material and its methods were sweepingly changed" (7).

Interestingly, Harding's rhetorical approach in the opening of his Birmingham speech perfectly reflected the boosterism that defined his political approach and perspective. While it is easy for the president to commemorate and celebrate the city's founding by DeSoto and its current economic development, it was much more delicate to boost up the legacy of the Civil War. Harding accomplished this carefully, even noting that "When we have studied the Civil War we have been so engrossed with military and political aspects that we have slighted the

industrial and economic phases” (5). This is a clever shift, away from the troublesome and difficult (the military and the political) and toward that which can be commemorated and celebrated with little political risk. Even Americans opposed to the South in the Civil War can reasonably celebrate the “industrial and economic phases” of the South during that conflict.

Maintaining the themes of progress and development, the President shifted his focus to the here and now and began to frame new areas of development by building on old progress. “So I have thought that here in your Magic City,” Harding stated, “whose story seems a very compress of yesterday, today, and to-morrow, it may be proper to suggest a few thoughts regarding the critical times which are faced by our country and all countries and some of the issues which command our consideration” (10). Significantly, the issue of race was absent from much of the speech. From the second paragraph of the text of the address until the twelfth paragraph, the issue isn’t mentioned. For six out of the twelve pages in that printed text of the speech, Harding carefully oriented the focus away from controversial matters of race and civil rights and toward the obviously boosterist impulse to celebrate and triumph. Harding prudently crafted positive grounds of identification, boosting the city and its past and pointing to its inevitably prosperous future. The President linked his boosterism themes of Southern progress, growth, and the industrial imagination with the progress of the nation as a whole. Indeed, Harding’s boosterism nicely fit the occasion’s purpose and the generic expectations for his oratory.

Consistent with his tendency toward boosterism, Harding devoted the last half of his address to the challenges facing the South and the entire nation—challenges that he believed had to be confronted in order to continue the prosperity manifested in Birmingham. Harding extended his ode to industrialization in this way: “If the Civil War marked the beginnings of industrialism in a South which had previously been almost entirely agricultural, the World War brought us to full recognition that the race problem is national rather than merely sectional” (12). The President specifically pointed out how the great migration of people out of the South in the post-World War I era contributed to the nation’s need to address racial issues. First, according to Harding, “It has made the South realize its industrial dependence on the labor of the black man.” Second, it “made the North realize the difficulties of the community in which two greatly differing races are brought to live side by side” (12). Labor supply and urban community development represented the initial concerns of the President, but he also articulated the potential for progress on the race problem:

I should say that it has been responsible for a larger charity on both sides, a beginning of a better understanding: and in the light of that better understanding perhaps we shall be able to consider this problem together as a problem of all sections and of both races, in whose solution the best intelligence of both must be enlisted (12).

Confronting the racial conundrum of his time, Harding argued, was not only a sectional problem or even a national one, but served as “only a phase of a race issue that the whole world confronts” (13). The President cited “The Rising Tide of Color” by Lothrop Stoddard and an article from the *Edinburg Review* by F. D. Lugard; he said, concerning the issue of race in the 1920s, that “we shall gain nothing by blinking the fact, by refusing to give thought to them. That is not the American way of approaching such issues” (13). This, again, did not isolate his

Southern audience, but actually unified them beyond their immediate and national identities to a global community dealing with racial issues and problems.

In pivoting to his discussion of race and civil rights in the Birmingham speech, Harding recalled a conversation he recently had with a “high-grade colored soldier,” where the veteran informed him that the Great War brought his race their first real conceptualization of citizenship, and the realization “that the flag was their flag, to fight for, to be protected by them, and also to protect them” (15). It represented a powerful anecdote that prompted Harding’s next rhetorical shift:

These things lead one to hope that we shall find an adjustment of relations between the two races, in which both can enjoy full citizenship, the full measure of usefulness to the country and of opportunity for themselves, and in which recognition and reward shall at last be distributed in proportion to individual deserts, regardless of race or color (16).

According to President Harding, the next step was further development of all citizens’ capacity to contribute to the growth of the nation. In the boosterist logic that guided Harding’s oration, empowerment comes to the individual through their contributions to the whole and not through the progressivist granting of civil rights or social benefits. Quoting Lugard’s essay, Harding categorized the areas where the races could share equally and he defined those social aspects which would remain separate and unique to each respective race. “Here, it has seemed to me,” Harding maintained, “is suggestion of the true way out” (18). The boosterism of unity and progress as evident in Birmingham’s success now shifted to a call for a defined future where the thorny problem of “equality” was parsed and resolved. Harding promoted empowerment for all, but only in politics and economics: “Politically and economically there need be no occasion for great and permanent differentiation, for limitations of the individual’s opportunity, provided that on both sides there shall be recognition of the absolute divergence in things social and racial” (18).

From the celebration of Birmingham’s achievement to the call for political and economic equality, Harding pivoted to a discussion of the precise delineation of “equality” that he articulated as necessary for southern and national prosperity. His first step was definitional:

Men of both races may well stand uncompromisingly against every suggestion of social equality. Indeed, it would be helpful to have that word “equality” eliminated from this consideration; to have it accepted on both sides that this is not a question of social equality, but a question of recognizing a fundamental, eternal, and inescapable difference (19).

This was a significant moment in Harding’s address. In upholding a specific and carefully—even delicately—defined vision of “equality” throughout the speech, Harding denied the very value and applicability of the word itself. There were fundamental differences, Harding reasoned, between whites and African Americans, and future prosperity and development required the recognition that “equality” might not operate as a meaningful construct any longer. It bears repeating Harding’s careful parsing of the precise meanings of “equality”; in Harding’s view, it would be “helpful to have that word ‘equality’ eliminated from this consideration” (19). In this way, “social equality” worked alongside the boosterism at the heart of Harding’s speech to offer the South—and the nation—a way out of its racial quandaries. Political and economic equality were meaningful, future-oriented goals that fit nicely into

Harding's boosterist equation; "social equality" was not relevant at all, or it served as a sign of problems and discord. At the same time, Harding's vision of "social equality," like many of the other versions of this construct circulating at the time, paved the way for a renewed rhetoric of integrated equality, in many ways premised on a boosterist sense of future progress and development rooted in contemporary pride and accomplishment.³²

So delicately balanced was Harding's view of "social equality" that he barely mentioned its characteristics and shape even as he carefully envisioned the political and economic equality of African Americans. Harding called for equal educational opportunity but noted the impossibility that both races "would become equally educated within a generation or two generations or ten generations" (22). He called for voting rights: "I would say let the black man vote when he is fit to vote: prohibit the white man voting when he is unfit to vote" (21). But Harding's vision of "equality" did not permit full, unparalleled equality: "Racial amalgamation there can not (sic) be. Partnership of the races in developing the highest aims of all humanity there must be if humanity, not only here but everywhere, is to achieve the ends which we have set for it" (23).

At another point during his visit to Birmingham, Harding also delivered an address to a luncheon convened in celebration of the semicentennial. While the bulk of his remarks at the lunch are decidedly boosterist, he did rearticulate his vision of "equality," albeit in vague and imprecise terms. Harding fully celebrated, in a very personal manner, his own relationships with Alabama political leaders before offering a rather abstract sense of "equality" toward the end of his brief remarks: "There will never come the day," the President said, "when the rights of any minority are denied, however formidable or weak it may be . . . no minority shall ever challenge the supremacy of the rule of law."³³ Harding's delicate "equality" dance was rhetorically manifest here, upholding "minority" rights while simultaneously championing the supremacy of legal systems and processes that often explicitly denied those same rights.

Whether in the main address, or at the luncheon, President Harding's delineation of "social equality" expressed a vision of race and civil rights that was finely tuned and specific. As such, it operated along with his boosterism—properly understood, the problem of race can be resolved so that society (and the South) can continue to progress and develop. Such a vision used a picture of communal success and achievement to anchor the arguments for change and progress. It is therefore unsurprising that the President returned to a discussion of education and the achievement of educational equality. His re-reading of education, in the wake of his articulated vision of "social equality," suggested that, "When I speak of education as a part of this race question, I do not want the States or the Nation to attempt to educate people, whether white or black, into something they are not fitted to be" (28). Instead, the President called for a system that "would fit every man not only to do his particular work as well as possible but to rise to a higher plane if he would deserve it" (28). Equality here, and throughout the President's address, was not universal and abstract but very specific and very applied.

Of course, Harding's rhetoric here, like so much of the discourse coming from his Republican compatriots, echoed the late nineteenth-century oratory of Booker T. Washington, particularly his famous Atlanta Exposition address. Though not addressing political matters specifically, Washington articulated a similar distinction between economic equality and "the social." As Washington famously extolled, "we shall stand by you with a devotion that no

foreigner can approach, ready to lay down our lives, if need be, in defense of yours, interlacing our industrial, commercial, civil, and religious life with yours in a way that shall make the interests of both races one. In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.”³⁴

Coming full circle in his conclusion, Warren Harding restored fully the boosterism of his address, generalizing beyond Birmingham to celebrate the achievements of “our astounding America” (33). These closing remarks continued the empowering themes of unity and progress and mentioned race or “equality” not at all. Indeed, Harding’s peroration called forth the best from Birmingham and, by extension, the nation:

If we are just and honest in administering justice, if we are alive to perils and meet them in conscience and courage, the achievement of your first half century will be magnified tenfold in the second half, and the glory of your city and your country will be reflected in the happiness of a great people, greater than we dream, and grander for understanding and the courage to be right (33).

Harding accomplished, with this conclusion, the recombination of his boosterism and his version of “equality.” This call for a brighter, more glorious future fulfilled the promise of Harding’s trip to Birmingham as his address articulated a new and powerful vision of the New South. The conclusion, and the entire speech, worked to achieve Harding’s inherently contradictory goals of “attempting to build up a southern Republican Party, to bind northern black voters more firmly to the Republicans, and to promote racial harmony.”³⁵ And it did so as it mightily sought a blending of celebration and commemoration with significant ideological work, a fusion of boosterism with sophisticated political policy rhetoric.

Rethinking “Equality” in the 1920s

At Wilson Park in Birmingham on that autumn day in 1921, Warren Harding was greeted with a polarized and mixed reaction to his address commemorating Birmingham’s semicentennial. Reportedly, the 15,000 or so African Americans gathered to hear the speech “cheered and roared applause,” while the 30,000 or so white southerners “noticeably stiffened and stood silent,” as he delineated the differences in racial equality. “Both races applauded when he urged that social equality be eliminated from consideration.”³⁶ Reading Harding’s delineation of “social equality” within the boosterism context of its articulation in 1921 explains, in part, the stark valence of reactions to his oratory. It also illuminates how the speech continues to resonant almost a century after its delivery in Alabama.

The coverage of the speech in the contemporaneous news media reflected the divisions and uncertainties expressed by the audience actually present at the speech. From the outset of its coverage of the speech, the *New York Times* headlined the story, “Harding Says Negro Must Have Equality In Political Life.” At the same time, the *Times* also featured the sub-headline, “Does Not Mean Same Social Plane, He Tells South in Birmingham Speech.”³⁷ The *New York Times* went right to the heart of Harding’s dualistic conception of “equality” in his oratory, with their opening paragraph reiterating his position and adding, somewhat erroneously, contextual details about the speech’s occasion:

Following ovations accorded to him by crowds conservatively estimated to have numbered more than 100,000 persons, President Harding, speaking today before a great audience of whites and colored people in Capitol Park, declared that the negro is entitled to full economic and political rights as an American citizen. He added that this does not mean "social equality."³⁸

The bulk of the report quoted extensively from the speech text, but there were also a few passages that illuminated the scene and context of the address. The report noted that blacks in attendance "gave vent to loud and lusty cheers" to the sections they approved, while the white audience showed support for a few parts of the speech. At the same time, the article reported that the whites in attendance never voiced any audible disapproval of the President's speech.

It is symbolic that a Yankee President like Harding received such a reception in the South, especially when considering the topic of his speech. "If any in the great throng resented what the President had said none indicated it by their remarks," the *New York Times* reported. "As a matter of fact," the *Times* continued, the newspaper's correspondent had not met a single citizen in Birmingham "who has expressed disapproval of the President's views."³⁹ The final paragraphs of the *Times* report elaborated on just how well received the President was in Birmingham, emphasizing the boosterism in Harding's visit. The paper reported that the President was awarded an honorary degree of "Doctor of Laws" from Birmingham Southern College, lunched with his fellow Masons, gave a speech of tribute at a memorial to the late Senator Bankhead, viewed street dancing performed by children, and stopped to look in on a beauty pageant. The *Times* concluded:

Birmingham gave to President Harding the greatest reception, according to old-time citizens, ever accorded any man in the history of this fifty-year-old steel and iron centre of the South. From the moment his special train rolled into the terminal station at 8:45 o'clock this morning until he returned to that train late tonight, the President was the recipient of one great ovation after another.⁴⁰

Like the *New York Times*, the Associated Press quoted heavily from the speech text, covered the main proposals, and again highlighted the President's contention that social equality will never be sought or achieved in the New South. "The right of the American Negro to broader political, economic and educational advantages, based on a pride of race but never on an aspiration for social equality, was championed by President Harding here today in a plain enunciation of his views on the whole American race problem."⁴¹ This story was circulated with different headlines and subtitles, but the content and quotations were always the same.

United Press correspondent Raymond Clapper wrote a report that was picked up by several papers. This journalist's summary of Harding's message was similar: "The negro must be given a chance to make good, President Harding declared in a frank discussion of the race problem in the heart of the South today."⁴² As with much of the press coverage of the President's speech, Clapper's story reiterated Harding's distinctions between political/economic equality and "social equality." Clapper also quoted heavily from the speech, and like the *New York Times*, summarized the proposals Harding put forth in the address. Consistent with much of the other coverage, the *Washington Post* reprinted large sections of the speech and accompanied its reprinting with a separate brief synopsis of Harding's equality proposals.⁴³

Interestingly, reactions to Harding's speech in the African American press were more muted. The *Washington Bee*, for example, ran a terse four paragraphs; each paragraph was a quote from Harding reflecting on his main goals for political and economic equality, extending the vote, and expanding education. At the same time, the paper emphasized Harding's opposition to extending social equality to African Americans.⁴⁴ Other African American papers relied less on details and facts and offered only a first impression of the speech's quality: "All *The Gazette* can say at this time, and until we can get a copy of President Harding's speech on 'Race Prejudice,' delivered in Birmingham; Ala., Wednesday, is that it is remarkable, to say the least."⁴⁵

At the same time, the *Washington Bee* featured several stories praising President Harding's speech. One article concluded that, "No utterance dealing with the race question in the last half century is regarded with more significance than those coming from the lips of President Warren G. Harding."⁴⁶ George R. Holmes, writing for the *Bee*, reported, "Friends of the President believe his frank handling of the race problem at Birmingham will have a beneficial result upon the country generally."⁴⁷ In an open letter published in the *Bee* from the Colored Baptist Ministry of the District of Columbia to President Harding, the group declared, "we recognize in you a high sense of justice, great wisdom and patriotic courage, and assure you as men who fear God, and love our country that our prayers and our good wishes are with you."⁴⁸

Aside from reporting on the actual content of the speech, the *Washington Bee* reported the reactions of Southern senators who found the speech objectionable: "Criticism of the President's address came chiefly from Senators Watson of Georgia, Harrison of Mississippi, Heflin of Alabama and McKellar of Tennessee, who pronounced it 'ill-conceived,' 'unfortunate' and 'a blow to white civilization.'"⁴⁹ The article, which featured long quotes from Senators Watson, Harrison, and McKellar, reminded readers of the *Bee* that white politicians in the South considered it disrespectful for the President to come and speak about race in one of their own states. McKellar went so far as to claim that the "only effect" of the speech would be to "arouse racial discussions and racial prejudices that had better been left dormant."⁵⁰

That left it for none other than W. E. B. DuBois to elaborate on the larger significance of the speech. As editor of the NAACP's *The Crisis*, DuBois was a leading voice for African Americans at this time, and in his view Harding's speech "shamelessly pandered to the prejudices of the white South."⁵¹ DuBois saw the President's speech as an endorsement of the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, which threatened to make segregation even stronger. DuBois did offer faint praise for Harding, saying that he "ought to be thanked for unblocking a public debate over a fifty-year-old evasion by 'throwing caution to the winds' in Alabama." Although Harding did little to diminish the power or influence of segregation as legally sanctioned by *Plessy*, DuBois noted the power of Harding's speech to renew the discussion of race and its role in the New South. Unlike Senator McKellar, who hoped that such questions would remain "dormant," DuBois welcomed the debate, recognizing its potential for progress and advancement.

Other African American leaders and journalists were not as charitable toward Harding. In St. Paul, Minnesota, the *Appeal* ran two lengthy editorials crying out against President Harding's speech. In "Jim Crow Leaders" the paper claimed, "No greater calamity could befall

the colored people than the harvesting of a new crop of ‘jim crow leaders.’” The editorial also quoted from other critical editorials from across the country. “From the way our distinguished President is handling the situation,” a Richmond paper opined, “we were just as well off under President Grover Cleveland and President Woodrow Wilson as we expect to be under President Warren G. Harding.” *The Denver Star* also condemned the speech: “The President has spoken. Let the historians write: ‘Failed.’” The *Philadelphia American* went even further, elaborating on some of the topics Harding had *failed* to address: “Not one word is here reported as uttering in favor of equal protection of the law, the enforcement of the Constitution, nor against lynching or the roasting of human beings at the stake.”⁵²

Another editorial from the *Appeal*, “Would Segregate Americans,” was even more critical of the President’s speech and his stance on race in America.⁵³ The *Appeal* observed: “President Harding made a speech Wednesday at Birmingham, Ala., on the race problem, which displayed remarkable misinformation on the subject due to the fact that he has evidently studied from one side only.” The editorial accused the President of misunderstanding social equality as amalgamation, and it criticized him for failing to consider the perspective of black America. The editorial railed against the President’s apparent support for a racial caste system, noting that racial segregation was both un-Christian and un-American: “In a democracy like ours, all men, whether they are black or white, red, yellow or brown, should meet in all human relationships without racial differentiations—simply as AMERICANS.”⁵⁴

Marcus Garvey, leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, immediately signaled his support of the President’s speech by sending a telegram to the White House gushing with praise.⁵⁵ *The New York Times* reprinted the telegram under the headline, “Negroes Endorse Speech.” Garvey did little to hide his passionate support of both the speech and the speaker:

The negro peoples of the world expect the South of the United States of America to give the negro a fair chance, and your message of today shall be conveyed to the four hundred millions of our race around the world. Long live America! Long live President Harding in his manly advocacy of human justice! I have the honor to be your obedient servant.⁵⁶

Marcus Garvey was not the only African American publicly supporting the President. In Chicago, the *Broad Axe* ran two editorials endorsing the address. One editorial writer predicted further fame for Harding, concluding: “His speech has already made him the greatest man in the world and he will grow apace to the benefits he has brought to the down-trodden and the oppressed.”⁵⁷ Dr. M. A. Majors observed, “Indeed the spirit of Abraham Lincoln is not dead . . . Nothing like that speech has ever before come from the lips of a man occupying such a high place of power and authority.”⁵⁸

The varied and often opposing reactions to Harding’s Birmingham speech speaks to the importance of recognizing Harding’s lost voice on the issue of “equality” in the 1920s. By doing so, we gain a greater appreciation of the ideational and rhetorical development of this critical ideological principle—the principle of “equality”—at a pivotal moment in American history. In 1921, Harding’s voice was a significant one. It was a voice that sought to recast and rethink a powerful problem in American life. Facing the political challenges of the nearly solid Democratic South, along with the ongoing struggle by African Americans for integration into American life

(not to mention the very material scourge of lynching), Harding opted to define “equality” in a context of boosterism that highlighted the problem of civil rights and race relations only as they connected to the industrial and economic progress of the New South.

Though mostly ignored by scholars, Harding’s rhetoric still lingers, most recently in an anthology of speeches and other documents about *Race and Liberty in America*. Published by the Independent Institute (an imprint of the University Press of Kentucky), this anthology offers a conservative alternative to anthologies filled with more conventional civil rights rhetoric. Praised by notable conservative voices on issues of race and affirmative action (e.g., Shelby Steele, Ward Connerly, Carol Swain, and Linda Chavez), the book prefaces its highly abridged version of Harding’s speech in Birmingham by claiming it was “daring” and had profound “subversive potential.” The editor concludes that Harding “spoke courageously against southern racism,” but was stymied by Democrats in Congress who “limited his power to do more.”⁵⁹

These reactions to Harding’s words in Alabama largely ignored his boosterism and focused almost entirely on his re-articulation of “social equality.” The sheer malleability of Harding’s rhetoric—the capacity of his words to elicit a profound range of emotions, responses, and reactions—may in some ways commend his oratory, but it also invites continued scrutiny. As we have tried to suggest, many of the reactions at the time missed the point of Harding’s remarks. They missed that Harding was a life-long booster, committed to seeing the good and the positive and sublimating the unsavory and problematic. They missed how “social equality” threatened this boosterist worldview, and how Harding defined the concept in ways that put new limitations on African Americans. Harding’s boosterism was an important and meaningful counter-voice—a retrenchment of sorts—to an emerging sense of equality in the fractious and racially sensitive 1920s.

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Notes

¹ For more on the 1920 election, see John Morello, *Selling the President, 1920: Albert D. Lasker, Advertising, and the Election of Warren G. Harding* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001); and David Pietrusza, *1920: The Year of Six Presidents* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2007).

² For more on the 1876 election, see Michael F. Holt, *By One Vote: The Disputed Presidential Election of 1876* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011).

³ By 1928, Republican gains in the South had increased considerably. Herbert Hoover carried several southern states, including Florida, Texas, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. For a discussion of Hoover's southern strategy, see Donald J. Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks, and Lily-Whites: A Study of Southern Strategies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

⁴ Interestingly, the Chancellor charges about Harding's ethnicity were collected and annotated into a book, published in 1922 at the height of the Harding presidency. See William Estabrook Chancellor, *Warren Gamaliel Harding, President of the United States: A Review of Facts Collected from Anthropological, Historical, and Political Researches* (Dayton, OH: Sentinel Press, 1922). The issue of Harding's background and ethnicity emerged again during the 2008 campaign; see Beverly Gage, "Our First Black President?" *New York Times*, April 6, 2008, retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/06/magazine/06wwln-essay-t.html?_r=0 (accessed 30 January 2015).

⁵ Edward O. Frantz, *The Door of Hope: Republican Presidents and the First Southern Strategy, 1877-1933* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 4.

⁶ Frantz, *The Door of Hope*, 4.

⁷ Ernest G. Wraga, "Public Address: A Study in Social and Intellectual History," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 33 (1947): 451. Shifting this argument to an ideological level, McGee suggests that tracing the development of political language in a culture involves appreciating not only the conflicts between ideological constructs, or ideographs, but also in tracing their individual development over time. See Michael Calvin McGee, "The 'Ideograph': A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66 (1980): 1-16.

⁸ Robert K. Murray, *The Harding Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969), 399.

⁹ Niall Palmer, *The Twenties in America: Politics and History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 46.

¹⁰ "President Harding Discourses on the Color Line," *Current Opinion* 71 (1921): 707.

¹¹ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The National Experience* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965), 296.

¹² John F. Wilson, "Harding's Rhetoric of Normalcy, 1920-1923," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 48 (1962): 411.

¹³ Robert Kraig, "Review of *Our Common Country: Mutual Good Will in America*," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 7 (2004): 421.

¹⁴ Frantz, *The Door of Hope*, 8. See also Richard B. Sherman, *The Republican Party and Black America from McKinley to Hoover, 1896-1933* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1973).

¹⁵ Frantz, *The Door of Hope*, 11.

¹⁶ Frantz, *The Door of Hope*, 14.

¹⁷ Kirt H. Wilson, "The Politics of Place and Presidential Rhetoric in the United States, 1875-1901, in *Civil Rights Rhetoric and the American Presidency*, ed. James Arnt Aune and Enrique D. Rigsby (College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press, 2005), 17.

¹⁸ Palmer, *The Twenties in America*, 46. See also Republican Party Platforms: "Republican Party Platform of 1920," June 8, 1920, retrieved from *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/republican-party-platform-1920> (accessed 30 January 2015).

¹⁹ Warren Harding to James Weldon Johnson, June 18, 1921, Warren G. Harding Papers, Ohio Historical Society (microfilm edition, roll 232, unnumbered private office files).

²¹ Eugene P. Trani and David L. Wilson, *The Presidency of Warren G. Harding* (Lawrence: The Regent Press of Kansas, 1977), 103.

²² Sally F. Griffith, "'Order, Discipline, and a Few Cannon': Benjamin Franklin, the Association, and the Rhetoric and Practice of Boosterism," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 116 (1992): 132.

- ²³ Blaine A. Brownell, "Birmingham, Alabama: New South City in the 1920s," *Journal of Southern History* 38 (1972): 46. A similar analysis of the booster philosophy in another city is Howard P. Segal, "Jeff W. Hayes: Reform Boosterism and Urban Utopianism," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 79 (1978): 345-357. See also Don H. Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860-1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).
- ²⁴ Boorstin, *The Americans*, 296-298.
- ²⁵ The definitive Harding biography is Francis Russell, *The Shadow of Blooming Grove* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968). See also John W. Dean, *Warren G. Harding* (New York: Times Books, 2004). For a discussion of Harding's journalistic career, see Sheryl Smart Hall, *Warren G. Harding and the Marion Daily Star: How Newspapering Shaped a President* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2014). For a good discussion of the 1920 campaign, see Pietrusza, *1920*.
- ²⁶ Phillip G. Payne, *Dead Last: The Public Memory of Warren G. Harding's Scandalous Legacy* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009), 20-21.
- ²⁷ Warren G. Harding, "Address Accepting the Republican Presidential Nomination," online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project* <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/276596>.
- ²⁸ H.G. Hastings to George B. Christian, Jr., August 16, 1921, Warren G. Harding Papers, Ohio Historical Society (microfilm edition, roll 188, presidential executive file 200).
- ²⁹ Harding did not speak at the inauguration ceremony—instead, he presented the key of the college and received an honorary degree. See The Inauguration of Guy Everett Snively, Ph.D., October 26, 1921, Warren G. Harding Papers, Ohio Historical Society (microfilm edition, roll 244, box 858).
- ³⁰ Accounts of the events of the day are found in Brownell, "Birmingham, Alabama," 47-48; and Jacquelyn M. Diener, "President Warren G. Harding's Birmingham Address," *Journal of the Alabama Academy of Science* 43 (1972): 63.
- ³¹ "Address of the President of the United States at the Celebration of the Semicentennial of the Founding of the City of Birmingham, Alabama," Documents Division, Library of Congress, 1921, 3-12. This passage and all other references will be cited according to the paragraph numbers that accompany the speech published with this VOD unit.
- ³² See Celeste Michelle Condit and John Louis Lucaites, *Crafting Equality: America's Anglo-African Word* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 147.
- ³³ "Remarks of the President of the United States at a Luncheon in Birmingham, Alabama," Documents Division, Library of Congress, 1921, 5.
- ³⁴ Louis R. Harlan, ed., *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, Vol. 3, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 585.
- ³⁵ Ronald Allen Goldberg, *America in the Twenties* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 35.
- ³⁶ Diener, "President Warren Harding's Birmingham Address," 67.
- ³⁷ "Harding Says Negro Must Have Equality in Political Life," *The New York Times*, October 27, 1921, 1.
- ³⁸ "Harding Says Negro Must Have Equality in Political Life," 1.
- ³⁹ "Harding Says Negro Must Have Equality in Political Life," 1.
- ⁴⁰ "Harding Says Negro Must Have Equality in Political Life," 1.
- ⁴¹ "Harding Champions Right of Negro," *Savannah Tribune*, October 27, 1921, 1; "President Harding tells South to Lay Aside Old Prejudices and Antagonisms—Get Together," *Plain Dealer*, October 28, 1921, 1; "Let Negro Vote," *The Capitol Times*, October 26, 1921, 1.
- ⁴² "Harding Makes Frank Speech On Negro Problem," *The Freeport Journal Standard* October 26, 1921, 9.
- ⁴³ "Text of President's Address," *The Washington Post*, October 27, 1921, 5.
- ⁴⁴ "Harding's View of Negro's Rights," *Washington Bee*, November 5, 1921, 8.
- ⁴⁵ *Cleveland Gazette*, October 29, 1921, 2.
- ⁴⁶ "President's Address an Equal Opportunity," *Washington Bee*, November 5, 1921, 1.
- ⁴⁷ George R. Holmes, "Harding Lauded for Frank Race Problem Views," *Washington Bee*, November 5, 1921, 6.
- ⁴⁸ "Colored Baptists Endorse President's Speech," *Washington Bee*, November 5, 1921, 4.
- ⁴⁹ "Harding Speech On Race Equality Roils Democrats," *Washington Bee*, November 5, 1921, 6.
- ⁵⁰ "Harding Speech On Race Equality Roils Democrats," 6.

⁵¹ David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. DuBois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), 70.

⁵² "Jim Crow Leaders," *Appeal*, November 5, 1921, 2.

⁵³ "Would Segregate Americans," *Appeal*, November 5, 1921, 2.

⁵⁴ "Would Segregate Americans," 2, capitalization in original.

⁵⁵ E. David Cronon, *Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1960), 194.

⁵⁶ "Negroes Endorse Speech," *The New York Times*, October 27, 1921, 11.

⁵⁷ "President Harding Awakes the South," *Broad Axe*, November 5, 1921, 2.

⁵⁸ M.A. Majors, "The President Has Spoken," *Broad Axe*, November 5, 1921, 2.

⁵⁹ Jonathan Bean, ed., *Race and Liberty in America: The Essential Reader* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 137-138.