

CHAPTER V

SELF-RECONSTRUCTION AND PARTY POLITICS

The Elections of 1872 to 1892

The last quarter of the nineteenth century is an often neglected and forgotten period of presidential politics. Perhaps because of its setting between the Civil War and World War I and a string of 11 Republican election victories, interrupted only by Grover Cleveland in 1884 and 1892,¹ the period appears a dull interlude between grander excitement. But these general observations mask the considerable political maturation and intrigue occurring in the country and in Maryland.

The economic and social strain caused by the Civil War produced a unique political backlash in Maryland. Marylanders may have believed in the necessity for holding the country together but the state's citizens deeply resented the Federal presence in and occupation of the "Old Line State."² Although a slave state, Maryland was not subject to the reconstruction policies of Congress because the state had not seceded from the union. Accordingly, Maryland embarked on a "self-reconstruction" which saw a return to power of pre-war political leaders not subject to the approval or scrutiny of Federal overseers which occurred in the seceding southern states.³ While the nation chose Republican presidents in four out of six elections from 1872-1892 (the Democrat Cleveland won in 1884 and 1892), Maryland's electoral votes were cast for the Democratic candidate in every election. During this period the Republicans controlled Congress but Republican candidates only won 10 of 76 congressional races in Maryland from 1868-1892 and the state legislature was overwhelmingly Democratic.⁴

The Republicans were simply not organized in Maryland as an effective party during this period. Maryland voters had clearly rejected the party's name and origins in 1856 and 1860 and the wartime Unionist party quickly fragmented after hostilities ceased.⁵ Even those Marylanders who dared to call themselves Republicans acknowledged that "the Republican party, as a party, has never been in power in the State of Maryland . . ."⁶ On the other hand, the Democratic party retained its strength during the war years even though many of its leaders were dormant or had joined the Unionist coalition. After the war the Democrats had an existing political base in county organizations and had staked a firm claim to the issues felt most keenly by Maryland voters—states' rights, opposition to Republican reconstruction and fear of the black man. The extension of suffrage mandated by the Fifteenth Amendment aided the Republican electoral effort by adding thousands of voters to the rolls⁷ but this also gave the Democrats proof of the Republicans' tie to the "unequal" black man.⁸

Although elections were often close, Democratic party organizations made Maryland close to a one party state. The lack of successful statewide opposition coupled with the mechanics of party politics created fertile conditions for the growth of party bosses. There