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## **The Assassination of James Garfield**

In 1881, just sixteen years after the death of Lincoln, the United States suffered as it witnessed the shooting of yet another President. James Garfield was shot by a little known man who professed no animosity toward the President and had never demonstrated a tendency toward violence. The new President served four months before the attack and then struggled to survive for two months before dying. That struggle was made more difficult and his death more imminent by the grossly inadequate medical care that he received.

There was no question as to the identity of the shooter. There were several witnesses, and the assassin was captured at the scene of the crime. There were, however, suspicions that others might be involved – others like the Vice-President who obviously ascended to a higher office that he likely could never have reached had Garfield not been killed. A second man that many thought might be connected was a veteran senator who many believed to be the most powerful man in the country. His contempt for the President was well known, and Garfield's removal would have almost surely prevented legislation damaging to him.

James Garfield was born in a log cabin in Orange Township, Ohio. The cabin was an accurate indicator of the absolute poverty that Garfield would have to endure. When he was eighteen months old, his father died, leaving his ten-year-old brother Thomas as the main farmhand and his mother Eliza in charge of everything else. At sixteen James left home to

become a sailor. Life on the high seas fell through, so he took a job working on a canal boat. Not getting his dream job proved fortuitous because he kept falling off the boat, and being fished in from the canal was much easier than from Lake Erie or the North Atlantic. The downside to the frequent falls was an infection and serious fever that resulted in his being bedridden for several months. During his convalescence, James realized that he needed more education, so when he recovered, he moved to Hiram, Ohio, to attend the Eclectic Institute. Money was scarce, so he became the campus janitor, taught classes, and even preached for a while. He found that he excelled at everything he tried. From there the twenty-three-year-old moved to Williams College where he added debate to his resume and became even more proficient in Latin and Greek. After graduation, he accepted a teaching job back at Eclectic and soon became the Institute's president. While serving in that capacity, he encountered pressure to lead Eclectic into more of an abolitionist stance, and his refusal to do so lost him support from many of the strong abolitionists in the area.

In 1858, Garfield married Lucretia Rudolph, continued as president of Eclectic, took up the study of the law, and a couple of years later passed the bar. In 1859, Garfield realized that many of the skills that served him well as a preacher would serve him well as a politician, so he ran for and won the office of state senator. He campaigned for Lincoln and placed himself firmly in the President's corner after Lincoln's victory even as the Union began to fall apart. Garfield then sponsored a bill authorizing \$500,000 for the war effort, went to Illinois to borrow five thousand rifles, and joined the Union Army as a lieutenant colonel. He next recruited men to fill the regiment that he would command, finding great success around Hiram as many of the men he had taught were also willing to follow him into battle. In January of 1862, the actions of his

Ohio Infantry Regiment halted a Confederate advance, and Garfield was promoted to brigadier general. Following that promotion, Garfield fought the second day at Shiloh, suffered an embarrassing loss in the Battle of Chickamauga, was promoted to major general, and left the army in December 1863 to claim a seat in Congress to which he had been appointed the previous year.

While serving in Congress, Garfield supported Lincoln for re-election, demanded severe punishment for the South during Reconstruction, became chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, barely escaped censure in the Union Pacific railroad scandal, became minority leader, and sat on the fifteen-man committee that ensured the election of Rutherford B. Hayes over Samuel Tilden. He also became known as a man who spoke well and spoke often.

In 1880, President Hayes was not seeking a second term, and the Republican Convention started with General Grant, John Sherman, and James Blaine as frontrunners for the nomination. Garfield gave Sherman's nomination speech, and many began to consider him a viable compromise candidate. On the thirty-sixth ballot, Garfield became the Republican candidate for President and set his sights on the November election.

His Democratic party opponent was former Union General Winfield Scott Hancock. Hancock campaigned for civil service reform, tariffs, and an end to monopolies, but it was civil service reform that interested most people. The right to sell jobs or give them to friends had always been very appealing to those in power. The Republican party was split between two strong factions on patronage – one demanded reform, and the other wanted to keep things as

they were. Garfield promised only to listen to party leaders, a hedge that may have won the election for him. In November, the popular vote was close, but Garfield won the big states and carried the election.

Garfield took office on March 4, 1881, and immediately began having trouble with Republican Senator Roscoe Conkling who was still angry about the results of the Republican Convention. Conkling had supported Grant and was bitterly opposed to civil service reform. Conkling blocked several Cabinet appointments and did anything else he could to thwart the President.

About the same time, Lucretia or "Crete" as James now called her, developed malaria. Fearing that she might die at any moment, James stayed very close, even sitting at her bedside many nights. Her eventual recovery allowed James to plan a short trip with two of their sons. That trip was planned for July second, a date that drew the interest of someone else.

Months earlier on the day after the Inauguration, Charles Guiteau took a train from New York to Washington, D.C. The diminutive Guiteau had very little money, no desire to work, and changed boarding houses when the rent came due. Before coming to D.C., he had tried and failed in a law practice, in the ministry, and even started a free-love commune. He was thrown in jail; his wife left him, and his father believed he was insane. His plan and the reason he came to D.C. was to obtain an appointment from the President, and he believed that the position of Minister to Austria would be appealing to him. Hoping to speak to the President, Guiteau began to visit the White House almost daily. He also attempted to form an alliance with Vice-President Chester Arthur who recalled that Guiteau approached him many times on the street and in his

home. Guiteau also had a change of heart about his appointment and wrote to the President to deliver the news: "I think I prefer Paris to Vienna, and, if agreeable to you, should be satisfied with the consulship at Paris." Soon after the letter, Guiteau did meet the President at the White House one time and was able to introduce himself and give him a copy of a campaign speech he claimed to have delivered. This speech, which may or may not have been delivered, was apparently written by Guiteau and shown to the Vice-President many times during the campaign. In an effort to get rid of Guiteau, Chester Arthur authorized him to present the speech at an obscure campaign event. After that Guiteau credited himself with putting Garfield in the White House.

Finally in May, with no appointment offered, Guiteau decided the President must be removed. He insisted he had "no ill-will to the President," but was sure he was a danger to the Republican Party and the American people. Guiteau, who had never held a gun, purchased a .44 caliber British Bulldog and began to search for an opportunity to find the President out of the White House. He didn't have to wait long. He read about the President's July 2nd trip out of town and knew he would be leaving from the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad Station. Guiteau arrived before Garfield and Secretary of State James Blaine who accompanied Garfield to the station. Guiteau followed the two men, closed within three feet and fired two shots. The first shot hit the President's right arm, and the second lead bullet ripped into his back. Guiteau was immediately arrested, but before arriving at the jail, turned over a letter that he had written to General William Tecumseh Sherman. In the letter he admitted shooting the President, told Sherman he would be jailed, and asked Sherman to take possession of the jail in case he needed protection.

At that point Garfield may have needed more protection than the shooter. What medical experts would find out months later was that the President's wounds were not fatal. The second bullet had entered his back four inches to the right of the spinal column, traveled ten inches and now rested behind his pancreas and to the left of his spine. It had broken two ribs and grazed an artery but had missed his spinal cord and all vital organs. If he had received only basic first aid, been moved to a clean environment, not been poked and prodded, he likely would have survived. Of course, Dr. Smith Townsend, the first physician on the scene, knew none of this, but what he should have known was not to insert an unsterilized finger into the wound. Dr. Joseph Lister had tried to convince physicians worldwide that the introduction of germs into a wound was killing patients. Most physicians in Europe were finding great success following Lister's protocol, but many in the U.S. were not advocates. Dr. Townsend was not. He inserted his finger, trying to find the bullet. Dr. Willard Bliss also was not an advocate. But Dr. Bliss was a world-renowned physician who had been summoned to the station by Robert Todd Lincoln, Garfield's Secretary of War and Abraham's son. When Bliss arrived, he immediately took complete control of the President's medical care. He inserted both unsterilized fingers and probes into the wound. Garfield was then taken back to the White House with its rotting wood and leaking pipes. Dr. Bliss continued to assume himself to be in charge of the President's care and continued to make bad decisions. The first few weeks the President's fever began to rise, and he sweated profusely. Bliss inserted drainage tubes and gave Garfield rum, wine, and morphine every day. Rich foods and large doses of quinine were prescribed. Both led to persistent nausea and vomiting. No one knew exactly where the bullet was, and Bliss continued to search and continued to neglect the most rudimentary attempts at antisepsis. He either did

not know or refused to acknowledge that high temperatures, chills, vomiting, and profuse sweating were symptoms of severe septicemia. In less than two months, Garfield lost more than a third of his body weight, going from 210 pounds to 130.

After more than two months at the White House, and on the President's insistence, on September 6 he was moved by train to Elberon, New Jersey, hoping that the air and sight of the sea might help, but on the evening of September 19, the President spoke a few words, went to sleep, and died.

Who might have benefited from the death of President Garfield? Of course, Roscoe Conkling was the senior Senator from New York who was described by many as the most powerful man in the United States. I mentioned earlier that there were multiple issues in the general election of 1880, but by far the most important, particularly to Conkling, was civil service reform – the spoils system. As the government was set up at that time, officeholders could dole out jobs to friends or political allies or sell them outright. It was a source of both power and wealth, and Roscoe Conkling had control of more jobs than anyone. The fourteen year Republican senator was not about to allow a merit-based job placement system to rob him of his influence. He was already beginning to understand that Garfield might not be easy to control when the President did something that shocked and enraged Conkling. The President appointed William Robertson, a man already on Conkling's enemy list, to the collectorship of the New York Customs House. This was Conkling's most prized post and one he had once bestowed on Chester Arthur. Conkling was so angry that on May 16th, he resigned from the Senate. His plan was for the New York legislature to reinstate him and his triumphant return to

the Senate would be a rebuke of the Garfield administration, but he overestimated his influence, and on May 31, New York said no to his bid. *The New York Times* wrote, "Roscoe Conkling has thrown away his power, destroyed his own influence." But as Conkling knew, he still had Chester Arthur.

Arthur was the Vice-President of the United States, but he was still Roscoe Conkling's man. After Garfield won the nomination, Arthur was picked as his running mate because he was from New York, and the party felt they would need the state to win in November. Arthur was a virtual unknown whose only political experience was accepting the job at the New York Customs House. He did nothing there that would impress the American voter. He liked fine clothes, old wine, and dinner parties, and he rarely came to work before noon. Many Republicans supported the Garfield/Arthur duo, assuming the young Garfield would live the next eight years, and they would not be stuck with Arthur. What everyone knew was that as Vice-President or President, he would continue to follow Conkling which meant above all protecting the spoils system.

But after Garfield's death, there was a perceptible change in Arthur. When he delivered his Inaugural Address, the new President made it clear that he planned to follow the path of his predecessor. He became the most powerful advocate for civil service reform and in 1883 signed the Pendleton Civil Service Act.

Conkling did visit the White House one more time and demanded that he be made Secretary of State and Robertson be removed from the New York Customs House. The President refused and was offended by the assumption that he would agree.

For the remainder of his term, Arthur did have to put up with the occasional whisper or newspaper report that Garfield's death had been very fortuitous for him. After all, he admitted meeting Guiteau ten or twenty times, and as Guiteau was arrested, he shouted, "I am a Stalwart, and Arthur will be President." The whispers and critical news stories occurred less frequently as people were able to get to know Arthur better. At the end of his term, not being renominated by the Republican Party, Arthur returned to New York and died two years later.

In October, Guiteau pled not guilty, saying, "Insanity, in that it was God's act and not mine." His trial began on November 14, less than two months after Garfield's death. Guiteau interrupted the proceedings repeatedly. He criticized his attorney, questioned witnesses, refuted testimony, and made appeals for financial assistance. He was on the stand himself for almost a week. Thirty-six experts testified on the subject of his sanity. Finally on January 26, 1882, after more than two months of testimony, the case was turned over for the jury who returned in less than an hour with a guilty verdict. In June, Charles Guiteau was hanged.

All of this darkness and misery leaves us hoping that something good might have come out of this horrible affair. Well, there were a few. The abrupt change and heroic stand by President Arthur that helped rid this country of the spoils system certainly was one. His ascension to the Presidency did what we always hope it will do. He became stronger and cared more for the people that he served. Another that is less measurable but still important was the uniting of our country. Garfield's death brought the country together. Lucretia received a letter from a Southerner after the shooting that was printed in newspapers across the country. It said, "Garfield does not belong to the North alone. From this vigil shall be a new birth of the nation."

Finally, the Joseph Lister method of wound treatment gained almost immediate favor in the U.S., and that quick change can almost certainly be attributed to the attention paid to the last days of President Garfield.

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