



The Assassination of President James Garfield: The History and Legacy of the President's Death

Charles River Editors

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*Includes pictures *Includes accounts of the assassination and trial *Includes online resources and a bibliography for further reading *Includes a table of contents "This is not murder. It is a political necessity. It will make my friend Arthur president, and save the republic. ... I leave my justification to God and the American people." – Charles Guiteau In 1880, Civil War veteran James Garfield was running as a Republican for president, and one of his supporters was a man named Charles Guiteau, who wrote and circulated a speech called "Garfield vs. Hancock" that aimed to rally support for the Republican candidate. Though few knew it, Guiteau's family had already deemed him insane and attempted to keep him committed in an asylum, only to have him manage an escape from confinement. Garfield went on to narrowly edge Winfield Scott Hancock in the election, and Guiteau, harboring delusions of grandeur, believed he had helped tip the scales in Garfield's favor. As such, he believed that he was entitled to a post in Garfield's nascent administration, perhaps even an ambassadorship, and he continued to rack up debts while operating under the assumption that he would soon have the government salary to pay them back. However, despite lobbying around Republican headquarters in New York City and even approaching Cabinet members, no post was forthcoming for the troubled man. Eventually, in May 1881, Secretary of State James Blaine told him to never show up again. Enraged by the perceived slight, Guiteau bought a revolver and plotted to kill the president. He got his chance on July 2, 1881 at a railroad station, shooting Garfield in the back twice and bragging to the authorities, "I am a Stalwart of the Stalwarts...Arthur is president now!" In reality, Garfield would live for nearly 3 more months, and the poor standards of medical care in the 1880s would end up being responsible for the fact he did not survive wounds that he would've survived at the end of the 19th century. Indeed, Guiteau would cite medical malpractice at trial, stating, "I deny the killing, if your honor please. We admit the shooting." Those kinds of statements and his generally odd behavior helped ensure Guiteau's lawyers would claim he was insane, one of the first high profile attempts to use that as a defense against a crime. However, that never had much chance of succeeding, and claims of insanity were heartily rejected by prosecutors. George Corkhill, a D.C. district attorney and member of the prosecuting team, insisted, He's no more insane than I am. There's nothing of the mad about Guiteau: he's a cool, calculating blackguard, a polished ruffian, who has gradually prepared himself to pose in this way before the world. He was a deadbeat, pure and simple. Finally, he got tired of the monotony of deadbeating. He wanted excitement of some other kind and notoriety... and he got it." Throughout his trial, which was all but a foregone conclusion, Guiteau kept up the bizarre antics, including singing in the court, passing notes back and forth with members of the crowd watching the trial, and even openly planning his own 1884 presidential campaign. Of course, those plans were all for naught, because after he was convicted in January 1882, Guiteau was hanged on June 30 of that year. To the end, Guiteau acted oddly, including dancing his way up to the scaffold and reciting a poem he had written as his last words before he met his fate at the gallows. Garfield was the 2nd president to be assassinated after Abraham Lincoln, and today he is often remembered as one of the presidents to die in office after being elected every 20 years starting with William Henry Harrison's 1840 election through John F. Kennedy's 1960 election. The Assassination of President James Garfield: The History and Legacy of the President's Death chronicles the shooting and its aftermath.

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