

President James A. Garfield took the oath of office on March 4, 1881. His presidency lasted only six months, but his assassination led to the passing of sweeping civil service reform.

The Murder of President James A. Garfield

By James C. Clark

James A. Garfield's brief presidency is generally described in a single phrase: Shot by a disappointed office-seeker. But unlike the three other assassinated Presidents, who died soon after being shot, Garfield survived for eighty days. His assassination, which led to the passing of sweeping civil service reform, provides a penetrating look into late nineteenth-century American politics, medical care, and life in Washington.

On Friday, March 4, 1881, James A. Garfield took the oath of office and immediately revived a tradition of meeting anyone who wanted to see him. In the early days of the Republic it could be done, but by 1881 the crush of visitors was too great. Most of them came seeking jobs; thousands of men jammed the waiting rooms and spilled out along Pennsylvania Avenue. They were after the tens of thousands of jobs the President could fill, ranging from fourth-class postmasters to cabinet posts. In what was known as the spoils system, each incoming President was allowed to replace virtually every government worker and reward the party faithful.

The presence of the job-seekers concerned Garfield. He had difficulty sleeping, tossing at night and wondering if he had the ability to be President. He said his day was "frittered away" with the job-seekers "when it ought to be given to the great problem[s] which concern the whole country." Garfield called the job-seekers a "Spartan band of disciplined office hunters."¹

Early Sunday morning, less than forty-eight hours after the inauguration, Charles Guiteau arrived in Washington from New York with five dollars in his pocket and a single shirt. Guiteau was a forty-year-old misfit who had lurched from career to career, always finding absolute failure but always pushing on to something new. He had spent several years as an unhappy resident of the Oneida Community in New York, tried to start a daily newspaper, traveled as an evangelist, practiced law, and sold life insurance.

In early 1880, Guiteau became convinced that he could obtain an important government job if he campaigned for the successful presidential candidate. He began haunting the Republican headquarters in New York, wrote a rambling speech in support of Garfield, and made one sorry attempt to deliver it. When Garfield won, Guiteau thought he would receive a foreign posting.

Guiteau took a room at Mrs. Lockwood's boardinghouse at 810

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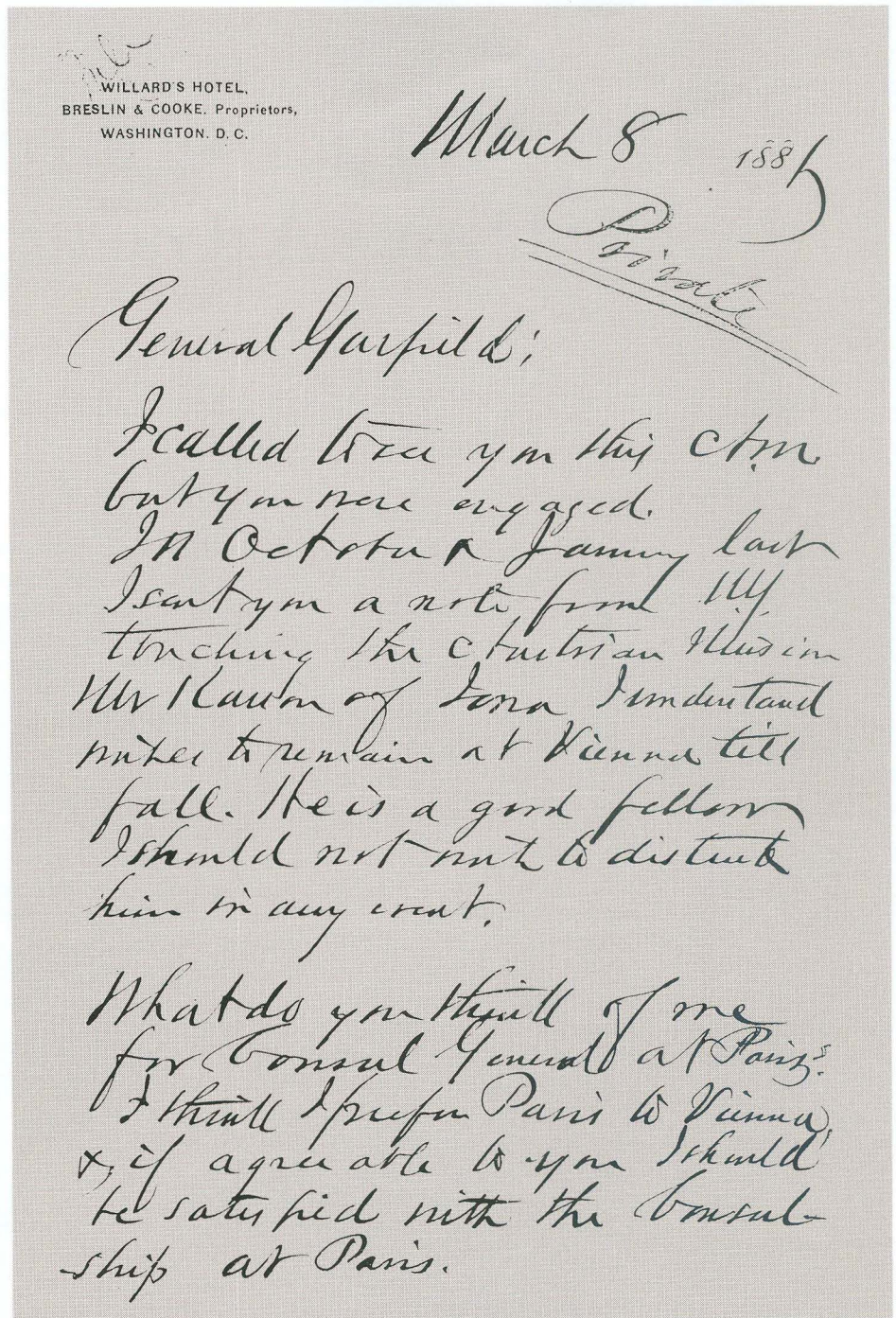
Twelfth Street, NW, one of the more respectable places in Washington, where Illinois Senator John A. Logan was a boarder. Mrs. Lockwood was suspicious of the new guest and assigned him a room in an isolated part of the house. Even then he managed to bother the guests, pestering Logan to help him secure an appointment and walking so quietly that he would suddenly appear behind guests and frighten them. Although he could not afford Mrs. Lockwood's rates, he felt her boardinghouse was beneath him. His choice would have been the prestigious Riggs House. To convince people he was staying at the Riggs, he received his mail there and wrote his letters on Riggs stationery.²

Monday morning Guiteau was at the White House with the other office-seekers. Garfield's secretary, Joseph Stanley-Brown, allowed visitors into a waiting room. There they filled out cards and were admitted to see Brown or the President, or their cards were returned, and they were told that no one would see them. In addition to his White House visits, Guiteau began making regular trips to the nearby State Department and writing letters to both Garfield and Secretary of State James G. Blaine.

On March 8 Guiteau went to the White House to see Garfield. He did not get in and sent him a letter later that day:

I called to see you this A.M., but you were engaged. In October and January last, I sent you a note from New York touching on the Austrian Mission. Mr. [John A.] Kasson, of Iowa, I understand, wishes to remain at Vienna till fall. He is a good fellow. I should not wish to disturb him in any event. What do you think of me for Consul General at Paris? I think I prefer Paris to Vienna, and if agreeable to you I should be satisfied with the Consulship at Paris.³

Guiteau returned to the White House on March 13 for one of his regular visits. The White House was crowded with office-seekers and a delegation of senators and congressmen. Guiteau told usher Charles Laffeler that he had been a delegate to the Chicago convention and



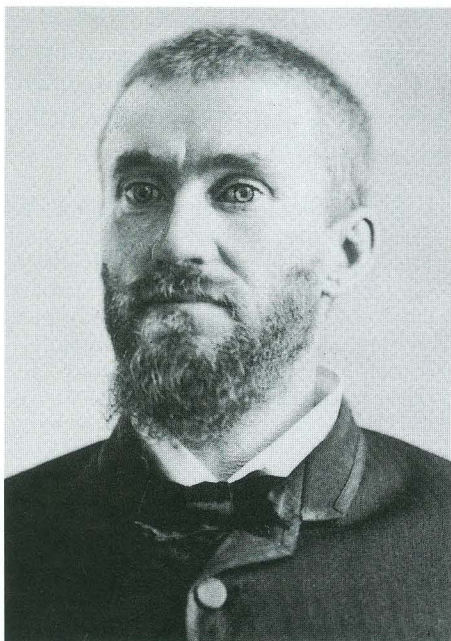
Charles Guiteau wrote this letter to President Garfield only four days after the inauguration. It was the first of many written on stationery from prestigious hotels.

claimed he had done more to get Garfield elected than the others in the room. Laffeler told Guiteau it did not matter and that he would have to wait. Guiteau sat down next to Laffeler and waited briefly. When Laffeler looked up, he saw Guiteau entering Garfield's office. By the time Laf-

feler reached the door, Guiteau was inside the office and had taken a seat next to the door. Laffeler told him to leave. Garfield had been surrounded by visitors, and Guiteau did not see him.⁴

Guiteau visited the White House several days later and was allowed to see

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Charles Guiteau visited the White House almost every day, convinced that he would be appointed to a consulship.

Garfield. He was admitted with a group of visitors and thrust a copy of his speech into Garfield's hand. On the speech he had scribbled that he wanted the Vienna post. After that meeting, which lasted only a few seconds, the White House staff denied him access to the President. Still, Guiteau called nearly every day. He would leave a card for either Blaine or Garfield, but secretaries quickly learned not to forward the cards, and they filed them with other crank correspondence.⁵

After his brief meeting with Garfield, Guiteau wrote to Blaine: "I think the President feels well disposed towards me about the Austrian Mission and with your help I can get it. Am glad he selected you for his Premier. You are the man above all others for the place."⁶

In all, he submitted three applications: for the ministry to Austria, the consul generalship to Paris, and the consulship in Liverpool.⁷ Once he cornered Blaine in the State Department elevator and handed him a copy of his speech.⁸

While Guiteau roamed Washington seeking the job he was confident would bring him financial security and prestige, Senator Roscoe Conkling of New York was trying to hold on to his leadership

role in the Republican party. Conkling, the leader of the party's Stalwart faction, had opposed Garfield's nomination and supported former President Ulysses S. Grant. Conkling's power rested on his ability to control thousands of federal jobs in New York, primarily at the New York Customs House. Blaine and his supporters, known as Half-Breeds, opposed Conkling, and now Blaine was not only Garfield's secretary of state but also his primary domestic adviser.

On March 20 Conkling met with Garfield to discuss appointments in New York. Garfield said he would name nine Conkling friends to government posts, but within forty-eight hours, Garfield submitted nominations that included both Conkling allies and opponents. It was the beginning of the feud with which Guiteau would soon identify. Amid the furor caused by the nominations, one nomination went almost unnoticed, except by Guiteau. Garfield nominated someone else for the Vienna post, and Guiteau switched back to seeking the Paris position. He wrote to Blaine on March 25, "This is the only office I ask for myself or friends, and I think I am entitled to it. I ask it as a personal tribute."⁹

On April 7 he apparently saw Garfield again and spoke to him briefly. The following day he wrote:

From your looks yesterday, I judge you did not quite understand what I meant by saying, "I have not called for two or three weeks," intended to express my sympathy for you on account of the pressure that has been on you since you came into office. I think Mr. Blaine intends on giving me the Paris Consulship with your and General Logan's approbation, and I am waiting for the break in the Senate.¹⁰

Although the battle over the New York appointments sparked nationwide interest, Garfield had other concerns. On April 25 Garfield and his wife, Lucretia, attended the unveiling of the statue of David G. Farragut several blocks from the White House. It was warm, and during a reception at the White House after the dedication, Mrs. Garfield began suffering

chills. One of those at the reception was Guiteau, who introduced himself to Mrs. Garfield. He told her that he had helped put her husband in the White House. He said he found her "quite chatty and companionable."¹¹ Mrs. Garfield had apparently come down with malaria, an ailment not uncommon in Washington.

Garfield spent much of his time beside his wife's sickbed while Conkling continued his fight against the President's nominees. Conkling had few allies: fellow New York senator, Thomas Platt; Vice President Chester Arthur; and soon Charles Guiteau. In May, Platt came up with a scheme to restore Conkling's standing. He thought that if he and Conkling resigned, the New York legislature would reelect them and show Garfield that they still controlled the Republican party in the state.

The resignations of Conkling and Platt came on May 13, as Guiteau learned that his career in government would never begin. For his entire time in Washington he had clung to the belief that he would surely receive an appointment. To the clerks at the White House and the State Department he was "a kind of butt, sent



Guiteau eventually allied himself with Senator Roscoe Conkling, the leader of the Republican party's Stalwart faction.

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around from place to place, his own egotism sustaining him."¹² Guiteau certainly did not see himself as a butt. Rather he listened carefully and took inspiration from what he heard. When an usher at the White House told him that the President would not see him that day, he took it to mean that the President might see him the next day. No one had told him he could not be the minister to Vienna or Paris.

On Friday, May 13, he had a disagreement with ushers at the White House and was banned from the waiting room. The following day, he approached Blaine on the street outside the State Department to once again inquire about a post. This time Blaine became angry and shouted, "Never bother me again about the Paris consulship as long as you live."¹³ In Guiteau's twisted mind it all became clear: Blaine was seeking to drive all of the Stalwarts from office, and Guiteau was just as much a victim of Blaine as Conkling and Platt.

He wrote to Garfield again on May 16, lashing out at Blaine: "Until Saturday, I supposed Mr. Blaine was my friend in the matter of the Paris Consulship; but from his tone on Saturday I judge he is trying to run the State Department in the interest of the Blaine element in '84."¹⁴

On May 18, as Guiteau lay in his bed, he had what he called an inspiration. "If the President was out of the way, everything would go better." Guiteau saw himself as the instrument for removing the President. Guiteau believed that the assassination would create a demand for his book, *The Truth*, and he spent nearly two weeks revising it.

But his assassination planning gave way to more mundane matters—his rent was due, and he had no money. Mrs. Lockwood demanded payment and Guiteau fled as he had hundreds of times before. He left behind a note promising to pay her as soon as he received his new job with its \$6,000 salary. Mrs. Lockwood showed the note to Logan, who told her Guiteau was a lunatic.¹⁵ His new residence was the boardinghouse of Mrs. W. S. Grant on Fourteenth Street, just

two blocks from the White House, but he spent most of his time in Lafayette Park across from the mansion.

As others had learned, Mrs. Grant and her boarders soon found that Guiteau could talk on nearly every subject and seemed to be on a friendly basis with every important person. At the end of May, Mrs. Grant sent him a bill. As usual, he resorted to delaying tactics.

Guiteau had always prided himself on his appearance, but he began to look shabby. His shirt collar became frayed, and eventually it was discarded. He pulled his coat collar tight around his neck. It was difficult to tell if he was even wearing a shirt. His cuffs were dirty and drooped over his hands.¹⁶

To get money, Guiteau turned to George Maynard, a distant relative who had established an electrical business in Washington. Guiteau had borrowed money from Maynard in March and reappeared at his office on June 8 to ask for an additional fifteen dollars. Guiteau took the money to John M. O'Meara's gun store one block from the White House. Guiteau had never fired a pistol before and asked O'Meara about the guns. He had a choice between two guns, a pearl-handled pistol that cost ten dollars and a pistol with a hard-rubber handle that cost eight dollars. He decided on the more expensive gun because it would look better in a museum. O'Meara agreed to sell him the pistol, a small knife, and a box of cartridges for ten dollars.¹⁷

On Sunday morning, June 12, Guiteau went to Lafayette Park to wait for Garfield. Garfield left for his church on Vermont Avenue, and Guiteau returned to his room to get his gun and then went to the church. He entered the church and watched Garfield. "I could not think of a more sacred place for removing him than while he was at his devotions," Guiteau wrote. The church was crowded, and with his poor aim he was as likely to hit someone else. After the service he went outside and looked through a church window. He would be able to shoot through the window and kill Garfield without hitting anyone else.¹⁸

On Wednesday, Guiteau returned to the church and made his final plans to kill Garfield the following Sunday. On Thursday, he wrote a letter to the American people:

I conceived of the idea of removing the President four weeks ago. Not a soul knew of my purpose. I conceived the idea myself. I read the newspapers carefully, for and against the administration, and gradually, the conviction settled on me that the President's removal was a political necessity, because he proved a traitor to the men who made him, and thereby imperiled the life of the Republic. . . . Ingratitude is the basest of crimes. That the President, under the manipulation of his Secretary of State, has been guilty of the basest ingratitude to the Stalwarts admits of no denial. . . . In the President's madness he has wrecked the once grand old Republican party; and for this he dies. . . . I had no ill-will to the President. This is not murder. It is a political necessity. It will make my friend Arthur President, and save the Republic.¹⁹

His plan to kill Garfield in church was dashed when Garfield decided to leave for New Jersey so that his wife could continue her recuperation away from the Washington heat. Guiteau decided to carry out his plan at the train station.

As Garfield and his wife walked through the Baltimore and Potomac Depot to their train, Guiteau was waiting. At the last minute he had a change of heart and returned to his room and wrote: "I intended to remove the President this morning at the depot, as he took the cars for Long Branch. Mrs. Garfield looked so thin, and clung so tenderly to the President's arm, my heart failed me to part them, and I decided to take him alone."²⁰

Garfield remained in New Jersey with his wife until June 27. He returned to Washington to conduct some business but planned to leave for the summer on July 2. Guiteau had to act quickly or forget his scheme. On Wednesday evening, June 29, Garfield and one of his sons went for a carriage ride. Guiteau watched from Lafayette Park. He clutched his pis-

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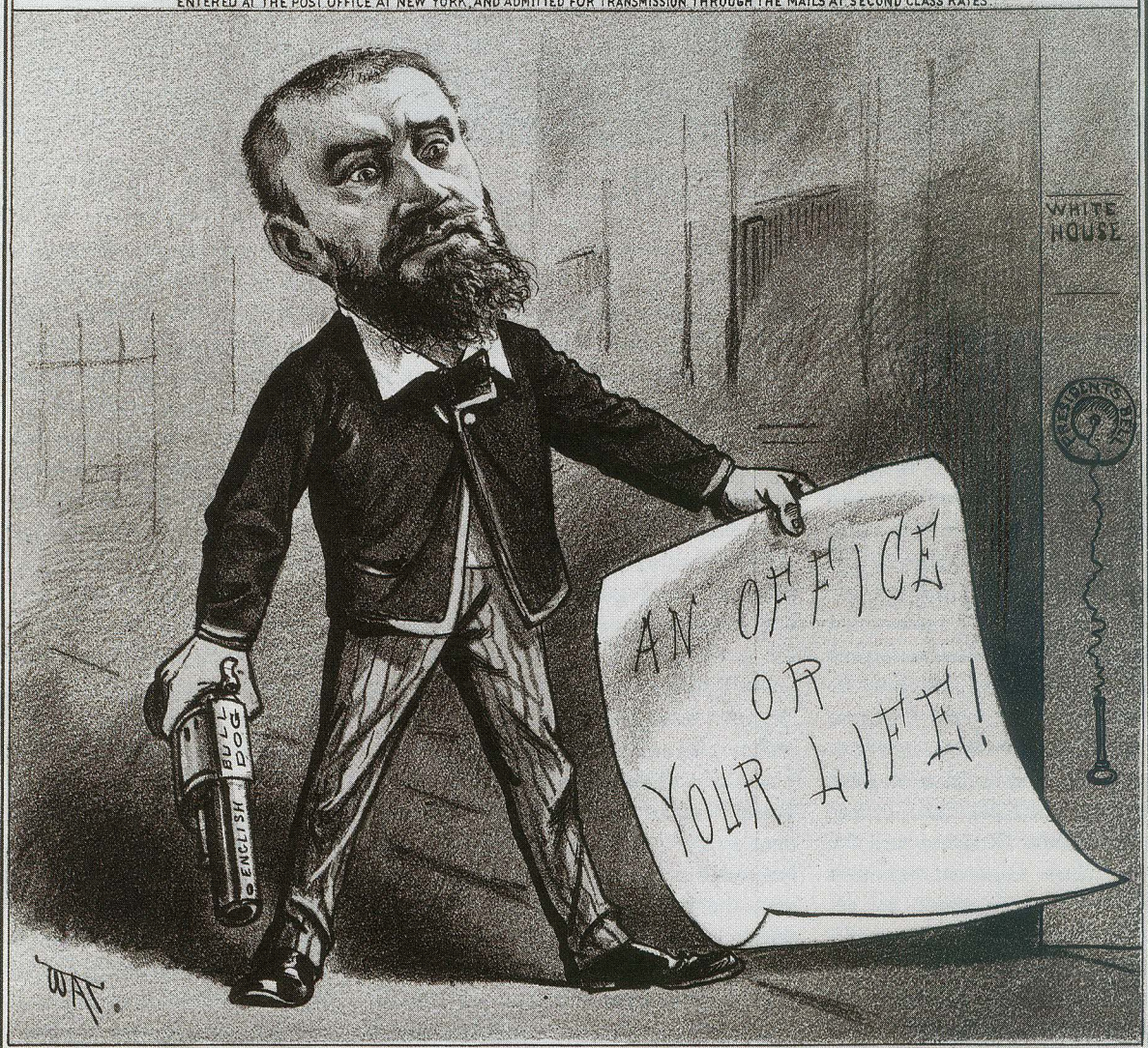


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"ENTERED AT THE POST OFFICE AT NEW YORK, AND ADMITTED FOR TRANSMISSION THROUGH THE MAILS AT SECOND CLASS RATES"



A MODEL OFFICE-SEEKER.

"I am a Lawyer, a Theologian and a Politician!"—Charles J. Guiteau.

Charles Guiteau felt that he was a victim of the battle between the Stalwarts and the Half-Breeds, and on May 18, 1881, he had an "inspiration." He began to see himself as the instrument for removing the President.

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tol and decided to act when Garfield returned but grew tired of waiting and returned to his room.²¹

Guiteau was once again confronted with an overdue board bill. Mrs. Grant waited until the end of June before confronting Guiteau about the growing debt. He wrote her, "I can't do anything for you today but I certainly will in a day or two. You have been kind and I appreciate it. Please do not mention this to anyone as it will do me harm, as I will settle in a day or two, you can depend on this." Guiteau told Mrs. Grant he expected an appointment, and it should come within a few days.²²

After receiving the note, she went to Guiteau's room to demand payment. He had already left, taking his few possessions. At the dinner table Thursday evening, Mrs. Grant told her other guests of Guiteau's departure. Unlike other boardinghouse operators, who had simply written off Guiteau, Mrs. Grant decided to place an advertisement in the *Washington Post* to expose him. The guests laughed, but she said she was serious and would wait two or three days for payment, then place the advertisement.²³

Guiteau moved to the Riggs House, one of the most prestigious hotels in Washington, located two blocks from the White House. Since March he had used its public rooms and stationery to write his letters. He arrived Thursday night and stayed until Saturday morning.

On Friday afternoon, July 1, he called at the White House and said he wanted to see Garfield. Usher Alphonso Dunn refused to take his card, and Guiteau walked away. That evening at about seven o'clock he walked to the front door of the White House and asked if Garfield was in. Usher William D. Allen said the President was out. Guiteau asked if Garfield might see him when he returned, but Allen discouraged him. Guiteau said "thank you" and left.²⁴ He returned to a bench in Lafayette Park and watched the White House. Soon Garfield came out of the White House alone and walked two blocks to Blaine's house as Guiteau followed. Guiteau waited on the



This photograph of Garfield with his daughter, Mollie, was one of his favorite pictures. She was the only daughter to survive to adulthood.

corner of Fifteenth and H streets but became uneasy about standing on the corner and withdrew to a nearby alley. Guiteau checked his gun and continued his vigil. Eventually Garfield and Blaine emerged from the house and walked arm in arm to the White House. Guiteau said they were "in the most delightful and cozy fellowship possible; just as hilarious as two young girls." Guiteau did not shoot, saying later it was too hot and he did not feel like it.²⁵

He returned to the Riggs House and slept a few hours, rising at four in the morning to make final preparations. He wrote two more notes. The first was addressed to the White House: "The President's tragic death was a sad necessity, but it will unite the Republican party and save the Republic." The second was to the press and the public announcing that he was a Stalwart and would not be available for interviews.²⁶

Guiteau thought that once the American people realized that he had saved the Republic from certain disaster they would rally around him. But he worried that a

mob might lynch him before his motives were known and he could be proclaimed a hero. He wrote a note to General William T. Sherman:

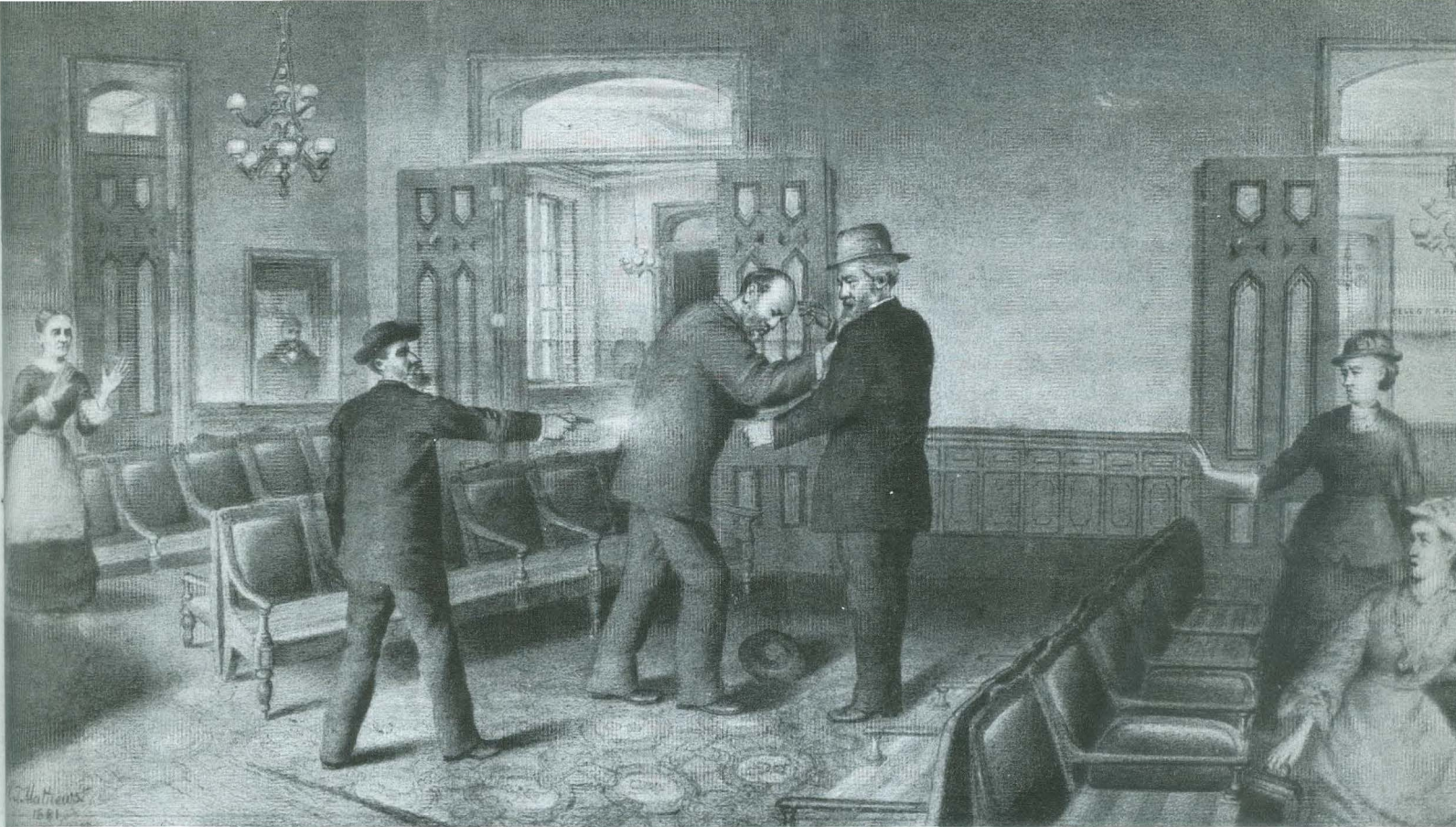
I have just shot the President. I shot him several times, as I wished him to go easily as possible. His death was a political necessity. I am a lawyer, theologian and politician. I am a Stalwart of the Stalwarts. I was with General Grant and the rest of our men in New York during the canvass. I am going to jail. Please order out your troops and take possession of the jail at once. Very respectfully, Charles Guiteau.²⁷

He put the notes into his pocket and went downstairs to breakfast. He ordered the most expensive items on the menu, then charged the bill to his room and for the last time left a boardinghouse without paying.

After breakfast, Guiteau went to Lafayette Park and, as he had done nearly every day for four months, sat watching the White House. Around half past eight he took the horsecar to the train station. His .44 caliber "British Bull Dog" pistol had five chambers, each one-and-a-quarter inch long and a barrel of two-and-a-half inches. The weapon had tremendous firing power but two drawbacks. Guiteau had wrapped the gun in a newspaper because any moisture tended to reduce its power, and the force varied from one shot to the next.²⁸

At the station, Guiteau arranged for a carriage to take him away after the deed. He told the driver, Augilla Barton, "I will be right out. . . . I want you to drive me very fast."²⁹

As Guiteau made his final arrangements, Garfield was preparing to leave Washington for the summer. He planned to stop in New York, where he would meet his wife, sail up the Hudson River, then travel to Williams College in western Massachusetts. Garfield was to attend the twenty-fifth reunion of his college class, receive an honorary degree, and enroll his eldest sons in the school. From there he planned to travel in the New Hampshire mountains and then spend the summer at his farm at Mentor, Ohio.



On July 2, 1881, having convinced himself that President Garfield's death was a political necessity, Charles Guiteau went ahead with his assassination plan. His second shot hit the President in the back and was eventually fatal.

He rose early and went to his son Harry's room. At times Garfield was more like a brother to his children than a father. In Harry's room the President sang one of his favorite songs, "I mixed those babies up" from Gilbert and Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore*. Harry did a handstand on his bed and teased his father, "Don't you wish you could do that?" Garfield said, "Well, I think I can." The President quickly did a handspring on his son's bed.³⁰

The White House domestic staff lined up, and Garfield shook hands with each one. Blaine picked up Garfield in the State Department carriage for the ride to the Baltimore and Potomac Depot at the foot of Capitol Hill on the site of what is now the National Gallery of Art. When the carriage reached the depot entrance at about 9 A.M., Garfield asked Patrick Kearney, the officer on duty at the door, "How much time have I?" Kearney showed Garfield his watch and said, "About ten minutes, sir." Blaine and Garfield talked for several minutes, then Kearney told them it was time for Garfield to board.³¹

They entered through the door to the

ladies' waiting room on B Street. The room was carpeted and nicely furnished, designed to give women a place to sit where they would not be bothered by men and could wait in cleaner surroundings than the main terminal provided. Guiteau had arrived at the station about 8:30 A.M. He was nervous and paced the floor and spent much of his time in the main depot. The presence of a man alone in the ladies' waiting room would surely attract attention, so he walked in and out of the room. He was sweating and wiped his face repeatedly.³² He entered the waiting room for the final time as Garfield and Blaine sat in the carriage.

Garfield and Blaine entered the ladies' waiting room and had walked several steps when Guiteau fired the first shot. It grazed Garfield's arm, and he turned around. Kristoph Plockschis, a fifty-one-year-old Prussian immigrant who had arrived in the United States in 1880, was on his way to work that morning when he entered the station to obtain change for a ten-dollar bill. He carried his glazier tools in a box on his back and was removing the box when he heard the shot, felt a slight jar, and heard his glass breaking.

Confused and unable to speak English, he rushed from the station and onto the Mall. Nearly two weeks later, as he was looking for some putty, he found the first ball fired at Garfield.³³

Guiteau then took two steps to the right and fired his second shot.³⁴ It struck Garfield in the back on the right side, four inches from the spinal column and just above his waist.³⁵ He slumped slowly to the floor, extending his arms and crushing his top hat as he hit the floor. The back of his light gray summer suit was quickly covered with blood. The first man to reach Garfield was Jacob P. Smith, a janitor who at first thought the shots were firecrackers. When he saw Garfield fall, he rushed up and held the President's head. Smith was told to go for a doctor, and Sarah White, the ladies' room attendant, brought a pillow and placed it under Garfield's head. Garfield said nothing until one of his sons appeared. He spoke with his son, then vomited.³⁶ Guiteau himself saw the pandemonium his act had caused and began saying "It is all right, it is all right."³⁷

Officer Kearney ran into the station and bumped into Guiteau, who said he

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had a letter for General Sherman. Kearney had no idea Guiteau had fired the shots but took hold of him and said, "Look here, you are coming from the scene where there is firing, and I will stop you until I see what the result will be."³⁸ When Joseph K. Sharp, the assistant train master, learned it was the President who had been shot, he sent two boys to the nearby police station and told them to bring back twenty policemen.

Two policemen walked Guiteau two blocks to the police station. When asked his name, he produced a stack of his cards and handed one to the officer: "Charles Guiteau, Chicago, Ill." In the excitement, the police officers had forgotten to take Guiteau's pistol. It was still in his hip pocket when he was searched at police headquarters. He had just two dimes in his pocket, the pocket knife he received when purchasing the pistol, and newspaper clippings dealing with the Garfield-Conkling feud.

Guiteau was taken from the precinct to the city jail by Detective George McElfresh. On the way, Guiteau asked him if he was a Stalwart. When McElfresh said yes, Guiteau smiled and said he would make him police chief.³⁹

Dr. Smith Townsend, the city health officer, was working in his office when a fireman arrived shortly before ten o'clock and told him the President had been shot. Townsend rushed to the station, arriving four minutes after the shooting.⁴⁰ Townsend asked Garfield where he felt the most pain. Garfield said his right leg and foot hurt. Townsend was worried that Garfield might be suffering from paralysis and asked him to turn over. Garfield turned over and asked what Townsend thought of his condition. "I gave him an encouraging reply . . . but I fear he was not much encouraged."⁴¹

Other doctors began arriving. Garfield said the pain in his legs and feet reminded him of when he was a little boy and his foot would go to sleep. He said he needed more air, and a window was opened slightly. Within minutes Garfield said he was getting a chill, and the window was closed. More people arrived,

watching Garfield but staying in a corner across the room.⁴²

Secretary of War Robert Lincoln, the son of Abraham Lincoln, ordered his carriage to go for Dr. D. W. Bliss, one of the city's leading physicians. Bliss was walking along Pennsylvania Avenue, about four blocks from the station, when the driver found him. Bliss took charge of the case and kept control until Garfield died. He turned Garfield on his side and examined the wound and then ordered several bottles of hot water placed around Garfield's feet and wrapped his legs in blankets. Garfield complained that the bottles on the top of the feet were causing him pain and Bliss removed them. Bliss probed for the bullet several times and sent for yet another doctor.

Dr. Robert Reyburn gave the President an ounce of brandy and some spirits of ammonia. He placed his little finger into the wound, the third doctor to probe the wound in less than an hour. His finger reached the eleventh rib and felt the fracture, then he stuck a probe three inches into the wound. Eventually there were about twenty people in the room, including at least ten physicians, most of whom hesitated to offer advice.⁴³

Young Jim Garfield began to cry, and his brother Harry comforted him.⁴⁴ Garfield was worried that his wife would learn of the shooting from reporters in New Jersey. He called an aide to his side and told him to send a telegram to his wife: "Tell her I am seriously hurt, how seriously I cannot yet say. I am myself, and hope she will come to me soon. I send my love to her."⁴⁵

While the doctors discussed possible treatment, Garfield was becoming more impatient. He repeatedly demanded that he be taken back to the White House. A police ambulance arrived, and some cushions from the Pullman car were gathered and placed inside. Eight men carried Garfield through the train station to the ambulance. The ambulance moved slowly over the brick streets. Dr. Philip S. Wales was inside the ambulance and attempted to steady Garfield's body.⁴⁶ The carriage was surrounded by policemen

who lifted up the wheels when they came to a pothole.

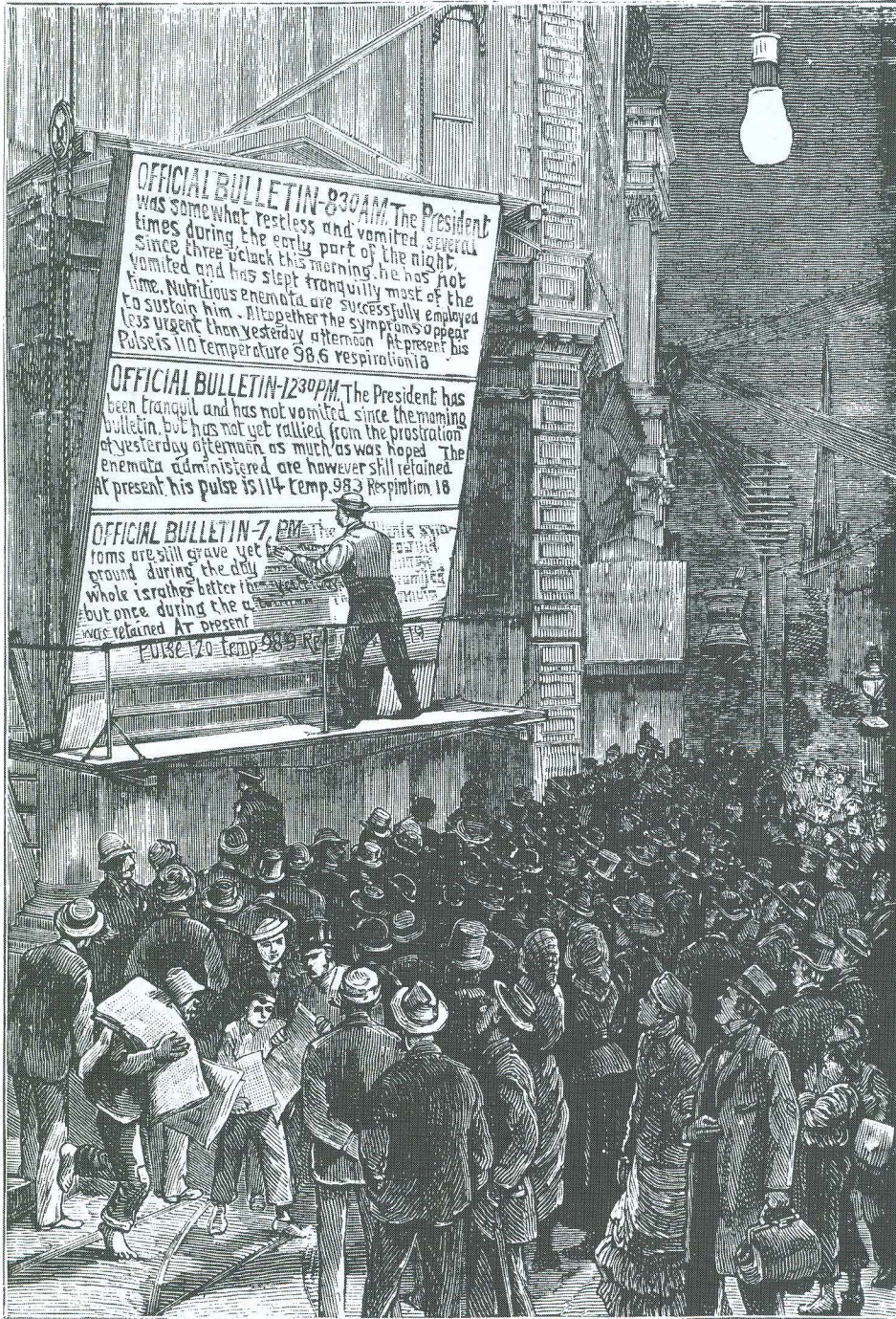
At the White House, a dozen men lifted the mattress holding Garfield and carried him up the outside stairs, through the Blue Room, up the main staircase, and into his bedroom. There was confusion everywhere.⁴⁷ Mrs. Blaine was standing in the hall as Garfield was carried by. He pulled her close, kissed her, and said, "Whatever happens, I want you to promise to look out for Crete. Don't leave me until Crete comes."⁴⁸

Garfield was given a quarter grain of morphine and one ninety-sixth of a grain of sulphate of atrophina. It was the first of scores of morphine injections he would receive. Shortly after noon Garfield vomited and then said to Reyburn, "Well, Doctor, I suppose that was the result of your hypodermic." Two hours later he was given another injection of morphine and ninety minutes after that, a third dose.⁴⁹

News of the shooting spread quickly, helped by word of mouth and extra editions of newspapers. Early Saturday morning, Guiteau's former landlady, Mrs. Grant, went out to do her shopping and decided to carry out her promise to take action against Guiteau. She wrote an advertisement and placed it in her pocket. As she was shopping, word swept through the market that Garfield had been shot. She finished her shopping, then went to place her advertisement. When she put the copy of the advertisement on the counter, the clerk read what she had written: "Wanted—Charles Guiteau of Illinois, who gives the President and Secretary Blaine as a reference, to call at 924 14th St. and pay his board bill." When the clerk came to the name, he said, "Why this is the man that shot the President."⁵⁰

Rumors spread that Garfield was already dead. In fact, the doctors expected Garfield to die Saturday evening, but Garfield not only survived, he seemed to grow stronger. Sunday morning, nearly a dozen doctors met at the White House to discuss his care. Dr. J. J. Woodward was the first to speak, pulling a piece of paper

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Fraudulent daily bulletins on Garfield's condition were released because the President's doctors feared that if their patient read negative news, he might become depressed.

from his pocket and admitting that he knew nothing about gunshot wounds. Woodward said that he had looked up the subject in some books, and he began to read about treatment from his notes. He read for a few moments, then was interrupted by Bliss, who quickly adjourned the meeting. To Wales it was

clear that Bliss was about to make changes in the medical lineup.⁵¹

Sunday afternoon, three of the doctors, Townsend, N. S. Lincoln, and Wales, received a letter from Bliss telling them their services would not be needed. Two who were retained, Surgeon General J. K. Barnes and Woodward, were cer-

tainly not chosen for their medical knowledge. They had been at Lincoln's deathbed in 1865, and since then they had spent most of their time as administrators, not physicians.

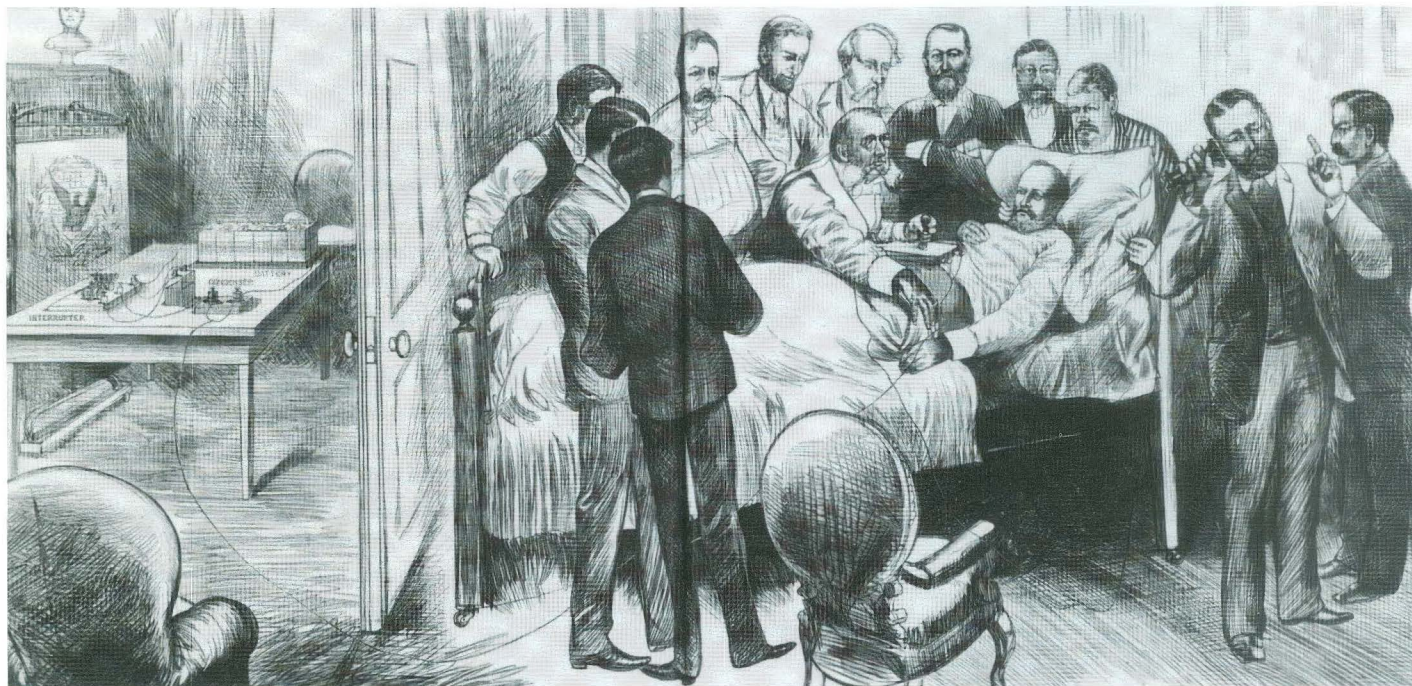
Their duties were quickly defined by Bliss: Barnes came twice a day to examine the patient; Reyburn was to keep records on the case and release medical statements to the press; Woodward was to help take the President's temperature and write the daily bulletins.⁵²

From the beginning, the bulletins were a fraud. The doctors were confronted with a patient who was alert and hungry for news. If the doctors released negative news, their patient might read it in a newspaper and become depressed. Bliss decided to keep negative news from reporters. In effect, Reyburn was keeping two logs, one telling the true condition of the patient, the other a fairy tale put out for public consumption. Reyburn's logbook for August 23 reads: "In spite of all our efforts to nourish the President he is emaciating so rapidly that it is distressing to look at him. His weight has gone from 210 down to 130 pounds." The public bulletin for the same day read, "The President continues to take by mouth and retain an increasing quantity of liquid food. At the morning dressing the wound looked well, and the pus was of a healthy character."⁵³

There was much the doctors did not know about Garfield's condition, including the location of the bullet. The bullet had entered Garfield's back, fractured the eleventh rib, then traveled to the left and downward and fractured the twelfth rib. It came to rest in fatty tissue below the pancreas. But the doctors thought it had taken a different direction, entering the back, hitting the liver, and stopping to the right of the groin about five inches above the navel.

Although it was unclear what the doctors might do if they located the bullet, they were obsessed with its location. They called Alexander Graham Bell into the case. Bell had been working on a machine to locate a bullet in a wounded man. His machine consisted of two elec-

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Garfield's doctors called in Alexander Graham Bell to help them locate the assassin's bullet. Bell tried, using a device consisting of two electromagnets connected to a telephone receiver, and failed.

tromagnets connected to a telephone receiver. When the fields of the magnets overlapped and a metal object came between them, a click was heard.

On July 26 Bell went to the White House with his device. Garfield was turned on his side and his bed clothes were drawn up. Bell could not hear any noise and only later found that the condenser had been connected incorrectly. Bell's second attempt also failed, although it was not because of his machinery. The doctors had told him to look for the bullet where they mistakenly thought it was located.⁵⁴

The bullet itself caused Garfield little discomfort. His complaints centered on the heat and humidity that grew worse each day. Garfield's room was in an upstairs corner overlooking a swampy area that was a breeding ground for mosquitoes. When he was shot, Garfield was leaving Washington to escape the heat. Now he was trapped in the city with the temperature and the humidity rising. The doctors received scores of suggestions on how to make Garfield's sickroom cooler. On July 11 an unsuccessful effort was made to cool the room by hanging long

strips of muslin over wooden frames and wetting them with ice water. A man was hired to soak the White House lawn each day in an attempt to reduce the heat. The physicians also sent for engineers from the Steam Engineering Bureau of the United States Navy to help construct a cooling system.⁵⁵

The first idea was to try a large air compressor that had been used to ventilate mines in Virginia City. The Rand Manufacturing Company sent a compressor from New York. As the engineers began assembling the unit, they realized that they did not have an engine powerful enough to drive the compressor. The engineers removed the machines and turned to a more basic plan. A large box of ice was placed in Garfield's room. The air coming into contact with the ice was supposed to cool the room. It did not, and the box of ice was removed.

Four days after the shooting, Bliss received a telegram from R. S. Jennings, the owner of C. H. Roloson & Co. in Baltimore. "We have an apparatus ready for immediate use which could be put up this afternoon & would be effective in refrigerating the President's room. Shall I bring

it down for your inspection. It is now largely in use."⁵⁶

The Jennings machine was installed, but it failed to provide enough cool air. On the evening of July 9, Professor Simon Newcomb of the Navy Department was called in to devise a new system. He built a unit that provided cool air, but he was not allowed to enter the room to take temperature readings.

The new system did reduce the heat but did nothing to improve Garfield's medical condition. Although the doctors claimed that "ultimate recovery is beyond all reasonable doubt," massive infection had already set in.⁵⁷ On July 23 he got a severe chill, and his temperature rose dramatically.

Garfield rallied, and on July 29 he held his only cabinet meeting after being shot. But the members had been told to withhold any real problems.⁵⁸ On August 17 there was another setback. Garfield complained of pain on the right side of his face. On the nineteenth the swelling became so great that his right eye was nearly closed.⁵⁹

Throughout August, Garfield began to talk more and more about leaving Wash-

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ington. At times he spoke of going down the Potomac on the presidential yacht or going to the mountains or the beach. In early September, it was decided to take Garfield to Elberon, a New Jersey resort town. A twenty-room cottage had been offered by an Englishman, Charles G. Franklyn, who had never met Garfield. Moving Garfield was a major technical undertaking, both in Washington and at Elberon. On September 5 workers built a spur line from the train station to the cottage. In Washington a spur line was run from the train station to Sixth Street so Garfield would not have to pass through the station.⁶⁰

At Elberon, the doctors continued to put out encouraging statements, but their patient was dying. At 10 P.M. on September 19 Garfield gasped and tried to speak. His friend Gen. D. G. Swaim went to his side. Garfield said, "Oh my! Swaim, what a pain I have right here." He put his hand on his heart. The room quickly filled with people, including Mrs. Garfield and their daughter Mollie. At 10:35 he died.⁶¹

Garfield's assassination increased the pressure on Congress for civil service reform. President Arthur, a product of the New York political machine, became a champion of reform and pushed through

legislation establishing the Civil Service Commission. Although the Civil Service Act covered most government workers, it did not cover the job Guiteau was seeking. Guiteau was executed for the assassination despite being clearly insane. It is doubtful that Garfield would have championed major Civil Service reform. He thought government workers should be chosen based on merit, but only from the winning party. □

NOTES

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³H. G. Hayes and C. J. Hayes, *A Complete History of the Trial of Charles J. Guiteau, Assassin of President Garfield* (1882), p. 209.

⁴Charles Laffeler statement, *U.S. v. Charles J. Guiteau*, Criminal Case 14056, Records of District Courts of the United States, Record Group 21, National Archives, Washington, DC (hereinafter cited as *U.S. v. Guiteau*).

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¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 120–123.

¹²Rosenberg, *Trial of the Assassin*, p. 38.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 37–38.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

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¹⁸George B. Corkhill statement, *U.S. v. Guiteau*.

¹⁹Hayes and Hayes, *Trial of Guiteau*, p. 216.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹Corkhill statement, *U.S. v. Guiteau*.

²²Ellen Grant statement, *U.S. v. Guiteau*.

²³*Ibid.*

³³Kristoph Plockschis statement, *U.S. v. Guiteau*.

³⁴Judson Wheeler statement, *U.S. v. Guiteau*.

³⁵Robert W. Pritchard and A. L. Herring, Jr., "The Problem of the President's Bullet," *Surgery, Gynecology and Obstetrics* 92 (1951): 625.

³⁶White statement, *U.S. v. Guiteau*.

³⁷George Adams statement, *U.S. v. Guiteau*.

³⁸Kearney statement, *U.S. v. Guiteau*.

³⁹*Ibid.*

⁴⁰Robert Reyburn, "Clinical History of the Case of President James Abram Garfield," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 22 (1894): 8.

⁴¹"Editorial," *Walsh's Retrospect* 2 (1881): 455.

⁴²William Tindall, "Echoes of a Surgical Tragedy," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 23 (1920): 151.

⁴³Reyburn, "Clinical History," p. 412.

⁴⁴Ruth S. B. Feis, *Mollie Garfield in the White House* (1963), p. 82.

⁴⁵Rockwell to Swaim, July 2, 1881, Garfield Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

⁴⁶D. Willard Bliss, "Report of the Case of President Garfield," *The Medical Record* 20 (1881): 628.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

⁴⁸Gail Hamilton, *Biography of James G. Blaine* (1895), p. 539.

⁴⁹Reyburn, "Clinical History," p. 413.

⁵⁰*Washington Post*, July 2, 1881.

⁵¹*Walsh's Retrospect*, p. 628.

⁵²Reyburn, "Clinical History," p. 414.

⁵³*Ibid.*, p. 549.

⁵⁴Alexander Graham Bell, "Upon the Electrical Experiments to Determine the Location of the Bullet in the Body of the Late President Garfield; and Upon a Successful Form of Induction Balance for the Painless Detection of Metallic Masses in the Hu-