The Doctors Who Killed a President

By KEVIN BAKER  SEPT. 30, 2011

"Charlie said, 'Hell,
If I am guilty,
Then God is as well.'
But God was acquitted
And Charlie committed
Until he should hang."

— Stephen Sondheim
"The Ballad of Guiteau,"
from "Assassins"

If an obscure 19th-century president falls, does he make a noise?

A cruel thing to ask, but historically the assassination of James A. Garfield made little difference. The death of Abraham Lincoln, 16 years earlier, was seen as a Christlike sacrifice — and left generations of historians guessing what his continued presence might have meant for Reconstruction. The later shootings of William McKinley and John F. Kennedy allowed the ascent of two of our most dynamic presidents, Theodore Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson, both of whom pushed through long overdue social and economic reforms.

The death of President Garfield led to . . . the presidency of Chester Alan Arthur, of whom the best anyone could say was that he was more honest than expected.
Garfield was one of the “Ohio Seven,” that spate of singularly undistinguished presidents from the Buckeye State who served between 1869 and 1923. At their best, they presided over some years of prosperity; at their worst, they gave us two of the most corrupt administrations in our history.

Yet it is one of the many pleasures of Candice Millard’s new book, “Destiny of the Republic,” that she brings poor Garfield to life — and a remarkable life it was. He was the last president to be born in a log cabin. His father died when James was just 1, succumbing to “exhaustion and fever” after fighting a wildfire that had threatened his home. The boy’s mother struggled desperately to make a living for James and his three siblings but donated some of her farmland so their community would have a schoolhouse. James was taught to consider himself the equal of any man — to walk “with his shoulders squared and his head thrown back,” a trait he would always possess.

A near drowning while he labored on the Erie and Ohio Canal convinced him that God “had saved me for my mother and for something greater and better than canalling,” he wrote. For the next few years, he worked his way up through local schools and Williams College; at the Western Reserve Eclectic Institute (now Hiram College), a preparatory school, he mastered his studies so thoroughly that he was promoted from janitor to assistant professor. Returning there to teach, he became the school’s president at 26. In his spare time, he passed the Ohio bar.

Excelling both in combat and as a top staff officer, he rose to the rank of major general during the Civil War but was sickened by the carnage of battle. “Garfield would later tell a friend,” Millard writes, “that ‘something went out of him . . . that never came back; the sense of the sacredness of life and the impossibility of destroying it.’ ”

Elected to Congress in 1862, Garfield fought for black rights and liberty, writing in his pocket diary, “Servitium esto damnatum” — “slavery be damned.” Modest to a fault, he toiled diligently in the legislative
vineyards for 17 years. Even his foibles were endearing; he loved to hear himself talk (speaking “on the floor of Congress more than 40 times in a single day”), something he admitted was a “fatal facility.”

To everyone’s amazement, he won the Republican nomination in 1880, in a deadlocked convention. With a plurality of just 10,000 votes, he became the last member of the House to go directly to the White House.

Personally, Garfield said he preferred the “quiet country beauty” of Mentor, Ohio, where he worked the fields and raised five children with his wife, Lucretia. After a difficult courtship and early marriage, complicated by the death of the couple’s first child, he began an affair with Lucia Gilbert Calhoun, a reporter for The New York Tribune; but by the time of his election he was inseparable from his wife, the “life of my life.” Their exuberant extended family included his mother, who wrote a friend from the White House, “I feel very thankful for such a son.”

On the morning of July 2, 1881, the president of the United States burst into the room of his teenage sons and picked one up under each arm, swinging them about as he sang a Gilbert and Sullivan tune. He did a flip, “then hopped across the room balanced only on his fingers and toes.” Garfield had reason to be happy. He had just finished outmaneuvering a major Republican rival and was about to travel with his boys to the Jersey Shore, where Lucretia was recovering from a bout of malaria.

A few hours later he lay on the floor of the Baltimore and Potomac train station, shot in the back by a deranged individual named Charles J. Guiteau, who imagined he was responsible for Garfield’s election and deserved to be made consul general to France.

Like so many American assassins, Guiteau was a shadow of the man he shot — one of that chilling breed for whom, as Stephen Sondheim so brilliantly wrote in “Assassins,” “There’s another national anthem playing, / Not the one you cheer / At the ballpark.” Raised by a father “so certain of his relationship with God that he believed he would never die,” Guiteau, suffering perhaps from syphilis, led a peripatetic existence, failing as a
lawyer and an evangelist, unable to find love even at a free love colony, where the women nicknamed him “Charles Gitout.” Unable to do, he would not stop believing himself a great man, awarding himself august, delusional titles like “Premier of the British Lion.”

His behavior became so strange that his wife and siblings feared for their lives and his, and his sister tried to find him help. In a depressingly familiar story, this proved hard to come by — but for Guiteau to pick up a cheap gun was easy. Denied a position befitting his illusions, he decided God wanted him to kill the president and stalked Garfield for weeks before the shooting.

Had Garfield been left where he lay, he might well have survived; the bullet failed to hit his spine or penetrate any vital organs. Instead, he was given over to the care of doctors, who basically tortured him to death over the next 11 weeks. Two of them repeatedly probed his wound with their unsterilized fingers and instruments before having him carted back to the White House on a hay-and-horsehair mattress.

There, control of the president was seized by a quack with the incredible name of Dr. Doctor Willard Bliss. Dr. Doctor Bliss insisted on stuffing Garfield with heavy meals and alcohol, which brought on protracted waves of vomiting. He and his assistants went on probing the wound several times a day, causing infections that burrowed enormous tunnels of pus throughout the president’s body.

Garfield’s medical “care” is one of the most fascinating, if appalling, parts of Millard’s narrative. Joseph Lister had been demonstrating for years how his theories on the prevention of infection could save lives and limbs, but American doctors largely ignored his advice, not wanting to “go to all the trouble” of washing hands and instruments, Millard writes, enamored of the macho trappings of their profession, the pus and blood and what they referred to fondly as the “good old surgical stink” of the operating room.

Further undermining the president’s recovery was his sickroom in the White House — then a rotting, vermin-ridden structure with broken sewage
pipes. Outside, Washington was a pestilential stink hole; besides the first lady, four White House servants and Guiteau himself had contracted malaria. Hoping to save Garfield from the same, Bliss fed him large doses of quinine, causing more intestinal cramping.

The people rallied around their president even as his doctors failed him. The great Western explorer and geologist John Wesley Powell helped design America’s first air-conditioning system to relieve Garfield’s agony. Alexander Graham Bell worked tirelessly to invent a device that could locate the bullet. (It failed when Dr. Bliss insisted he search only the wrong side of Garfield’s torso.) Two thousand people worked overnight to lay 3,200 feet of railroad track, so the president might be taken to a cottage on the Jersey Shore. When the engine couldn’t make the grade, hundreds of men stepped forward to push his train up the final hill.

The president endured everything with amazing fortitude and patience, even remarking near the end, when he learned a fund was being taken up for his family: “How kind and thoughtful! What a generous people!”

“General Garfield died from malpractice,” Guiteau claimed, defending himself at his spectacle of a trial. This was true, but not enough to save Guiteau from the gallows.

Millard, whose previous book, “The River of Doubt,” was about Theodore Roosevelt’s near-fatal journey of exploration in South America, is outstanding on this still darker story. She makes, at times, the common biographer’s mistake of inflating her subject’s importance and virtues. Contrary to what she implies, neither Garfield’s administration nor his death brought about advances in civil rights, nor a grand reconciliation with the South, then busy creating the Jim Crow state. The Garfield aphorisms with which she begins most chapters are often no better than greeting card sentiments. (“If wrinkles must be written upon our brows, let them not be written upon the heart. The spirit should not grow old.”)

Yet such enthusiasms are understandable concerning such a generally admirable man. Though Garfield’s death had little historical significance,
Millard has written us a penetrating human tragedy.

DESTINY OF THE REPUBLIC

A Tale of Madness, Medicine, and the Murder of a President

By Candice Millard

Illustrated. 339 pp. Doubleday. $28.95.

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