

In Defense Of Chester Arthur

One hundred years ago last summer, Chester Alan Arthur was suspended from his position as collector of the New York custom-house. Accused of corruption and abuse of office, Arthur deftly parlayed the charges into a vice-presidential nomination in 1880 that led ultimately to the Presidency. Here we present some brief second thoughts on our 21st President's life and times, mindful that some who remember history would just as soon forget it.

by Sybil Schwartz

The difference between a moral man and a man of honor is that the latter regrets a discreditable act even when it has worked and he has not been caught.

—H. L. Mencken

Seldom has a towering historical personage been more successfully veiled from posterity than Chester A. Arthur. "Chet" to his friends, the best-dressed man in Washington during the Gilded Age, our 21st President enjoys no place in the national pantheon. In an age of presidential memorials, his consists of a weathering statue in New York's Madison Square that must stare across the park for eternity at a monument to his political crony-turned-nemesis, New York Senator Roscoe Conkling. Arthur's meager papers in the National Archives and the Library of Congress go unread, though they in-

clude a prolonged correspondence with Julia Sand, his 32-year-old confidante from Brooklyn. He himself burnt the rest of his memorabilia—reason enough, one would think, for the serious scholar to try to lift the veil.

Until Grover Cleveland and William Howard Taft came along, Arthur was the weightiest figure to occupy the White House, his corpulence nourished by state dinners that called for as many as 378 wineglasses for 54 guests. A presidential employee later recalled that "he wanted the best of everything, and wanted it served in the best manner." This



meant 14 courses when General Ulysses S. Grant was in town. It also meant hiring Louis C. Tiffany to redecorate 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Tiffany began by hauling away 24 wagonloads of furniture dating to the John Adams era.

It is difficult to say what, beyond blind fate, put Arthur in the White House. A preacher's son, Arthur was born in 1830 in Fairfield, Vermont. He attended Union College and during the Civil War served, comfortably, as quartermaster-general of New York State. He then moved through Republican politics to become collector of customs of the Port of New York, and ultimately gained the Vice Presidency. But history's great summons did not come until July 2, 1881, when President James A. Garfield was gravely wounded by an assassin's bullet at the Washing-

ton, D.C., railroad depot.* Arthur assumed the Presidency upon Garfield's death two months later.

"Arthur is President now!" This startling assertion by Garfield's assassin, Charles Guiteau, had raised the smell of scandal at the very outset of Arthur's three-year term. A disgruntled office seeker, Guiteau had had designs on the U.S. Ministry in Vienna and had written letters hinting at his availability. When apprehended, he calmly gave the police his recommendations for the new President's Cabinet and told one of his captors, "Arthur and all those men are my friends, and I'll have you made chief of police."

Though correctly interpreted by the jury as the outbursts of a mad-

*President Garfield had been on his way to speak at the commencement of his alma mater, Williams College.

man, Guiteau's words were not forgotten by those who knew Arthur to have surpassed all previous Vice Presidents but Aaron Burr in the extent of his disloyalty to the chief executive. In 1880, along with Roscoe Conkling, chief of the "Stalwart" faction of the G.O.P., Arthur had worked against Garfield on behalf of General Grant's near-nomination to a third term. Unfortunately, public concern over the general's qualities as world statesman had arisen when he summed up his latest foreign tour by stating that Venice would be more attractive if the streets were drained. Arthur was given the No. 2 spot on the Garfield ticket to assuage the Stalwarts.

Pro Bono Nostro

By the time of Garfield's assassination, Arthur had long demonstrated a refined ability to identify the Public Good with the interests of his own pocketbook and political faction. Nor was this a secret. Andrew Dickson White, for one, knew enough of Arthur's dubious machinations over three decades to greet the portly New Yorker's accession to office with the exclamation, "Chet Arthur President of the United States? Good God!"

That is not to say Arthur lacked public spirit. As collector of customs in New York he had earned up to \$80,000 a year—about \$530,000 in today's dollars; nevertheless, he willingly took a pay cut of \$70,000 to become Vice President. Ever solicitous for the well-being of the nation's leaders, while in New York he had personally guided 205 cases of imported French champagne through customs for the use of President

Grant and his Cabinet. No written expression of official gratitude for this generous service has survived.

Back in the days before income tax, the customs provided the federal government's chief source of revenue. As collector in New York, Arthur presided over an "industry" that grossed five times more than the nation's largest corporation. To encourage in custom-house employees a sense of civic spirit, Arthur expected them all to make "voluntary contributions" to the Stalwart cause. This *pro bono nostro* tithe was declared flatly illegal by the Civil Service Commission in 1872. Under Arthur's leadership, the custom-house was also assiduous in collecting fines and forfeitures. These "moiety" were then parceled out to informers and customs officials, including the future President and his friends—an efficient system of greasing the wheels of public life until it, too, was outlawed in 1874.

A Personal Burlesque?

Well before the end of Arthur's term at the custom-house, the entire operation of that agency came under widespread attack. Finally, President Rutherford B. Hayes called for a complete investigation by the so-called Jay Commission. Magnanimous as ever, Arthur took an active hand in selecting the members of the Jay Commission and saw to it that he was the first to testify. Later he attacked it for having a rigged membership. By the time Hayes suspended Arthur from his post on July 11, 1878, Civil Service reform had become a national crusade. And who better to champion that crusade than

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Chet Arthur, the "Gentleman Boss" himself?

Those who believe that only the blatantly virtuous can act virtuously in public office might study the career of Chester Arthur. When Civil Service tests were introduced at the custom-house, Arthur made sure that the questions on "general aptitude" were transmuted into a test of political reliability. A spoilsman's spoilsman, the young Arthur was described by reformer Horace Greeley as "a personal burlesque upon Civil Service reform."

To Catch a Thief

Yet it was this same Arthur who, as President, lent his support to the bill introduced by Senator George H. Pendleton of Ohio to outlaw politicking by public employees and to establish a new and permanent Civil Service Commission. Civil Service reform had been gaining momentum steadily well before Arthur's Presidency, and the circumstances of Arthur's accession to power made him more responsive to such pressures than he might otherwise have been. Still, President Arthur went on to administer the Civil Service Act of 1883 with fairness and vigor. Thanks in part to his expert knowledge of the subject, corruption in the federal bureaucracy was dealt a blow which, though less than fatal, prevented the evil genie from coming out of the bottle for decades. One wonders whether today's zealous Civil Service reformers would not do well to enlist the aid of people who, like Arthur, have tasted whereof they cook.

In three annual messages to Congress he called for federal aid for black education and criticized the Supreme Court for declaring illegal the Civil Rights Act of 1875. He went far beyond his predecessors in pro-

tecting Indian lands and made a personal inspection of the Yellowstone area to show his support of Missouri Senator George G. Vest's efforts to expand the park. Never mind that his expedition required 175 pack animals laden with whiskey and wine; the results anticipated Teddy Roosevelt's efforts on behalf of conservation. In any case, was not Arthur, as the *New York World* noted, "one of the best salmon fishers in the country"?

President Arthur also sought to set right U.S. relations with the nations of Latin America, handling with skill the "Isthmian question" concerning American rights to build a canal through Nicaragua. He vetoed the pork-barrel rivers and harbors bill when he realized that "as [it] becomes more objectionable it secures more support." He conscientiously pursued the Star Route Gang, which had amassed windfall profits by juggling the horse-drawn mail routes. Finally, he called for the abolition of excise taxes and still managed to leave office with a large surplus in the Treasury.

"Good Old Chet"

Chester Arthur, when he is recalled at all, is remembered as a mediocrity. Perhaps he was. But it is a special type of mediocrity who would take evening strolls through Washington, unprotected, after his predecessor had been assassinated by a man who had done his target practice on the banks of the Potomac. Maybe Arthur refused to parade his virtue because he knew he had little. He frankly enjoyed a good time and wanted others to do the same. An ordinary man, he did not play at being a common man. True, his modest background may have led him to indulge in such compensatory excesses

as designing a presidential flag or ordering 20 pairs of tailor-made trousers at a time (for which he quickly earned the newly popular epithet of "dude.")

But these were harmless projects, and may have distracted him from the more substantial mischief of which he was demonstrably capable. For the same reason, even his renowned sloth may have had a positive side. Not without admiration did a White House clerk note that "President Arthur never did today what could be put off until tomorrow." Thus did Chester Arthur apply Jefferson's maxim that "that government is best which governs least."

Since the 1960s the American Presidency, like the late Roman imperium, has been surrounded by artificial pomp while ridden with guilt over the office's more modest republican past. When an incumbent proclaims his keen sense of privacy, the public suspects, often with good cause, that even this is a move in the constant game of "image building." But Arthur cared not a whit whether people objected to the elegant green coach he had made for himself in New York, and when a visitor to the White House began prying into his personal world he told her, "Madam, I may be President of the United States but my private life is nobody else's damned business."

Direct, fallible, and disarmingly honest in his mediocrity, Arthur demonstrated a kind of uncalculating stubbornness. It was New York's Stalwart boss Roscoe Conkling who literally carried Arthur's suitcases when the Vice President raced back to Washington after Garfield's assassination. Yet within months Arthur had given Conkling and other Stalwarts the cold shoulder, to the extent that "Good Old Chet" was passed up for his party's nomination in 1884. By then he had Bright's disease, then an invariably fatal affliction of the kidneys, though typically he did not advertise the fact. He simply retired quietly, observing that "there doesn't seem anything else for an ex-President to do but go into the country and grow pumpkins." He died in 1886.

Partly because he had other, if more modest concerns in life than to perpetuate his term in office, partly because of his *volte-face* (executed without pride or smugness) on the question of Civil Service reform, Arthur earned the grudging respect of more than a few of his more cynical contemporaries. "In the opinion of this one-55 millionth of the country's population, it would be hard to better President Arthur's administration." So Mark Twain described the veiled knight of the Oval Office in the twilight of his Presidency. We, too, should pay our due respects.
