

We at D&A have been “spooked,” in an agreeable way, by the ghost of James A. Garfield, the 20th President of the United States. As returning visitors to this Web site may recall, we discovered back in 2004 that Garfield, while a member of the House of Representatives, built a three-story brick home on the northeast corner of 13<sup>th</sup> and I Streets in Northwest Washington. More exactly, Bob Dawson’s desk in D&A’s second-floor suite at 1225 I Street sits about where Garfield had an upstairs office.

We’ve been thinking about our Garfield connection and doing some research into the life of this Ohio Republican. He is best known now as the second president to be assassinated. Like Lincoln, he died from gunshot wounds, on September 19, 1881 at age 49, after six months in office. Vice President Chester A. Arthur of New York became the 21<sup>st</sup> president.

Beyond those well known facts, we have wondered what is interesting and significant about Garfield. Which of his qualities resonates with us? Which of his skills and traits have we at D&A inherited, so to speak, by working in the very space he and his family occupied while he was a United States Representative from Ohio’s 19<sup>th</sup> District, in the northeastern corner of the state? The 19<sup>th</sup> elected him nine times. (Garfield has no lineal successor in the House because Ohio now has only 18 Congressional districts.)

James Abram Garfield was a studious, thoughtful man, a man drawn more to scholarly research and reflection than to the rough-and-tumble of electoral politics. As a presidential candidate in 1880, he was content to remain at home in Mentor, Ohio, as campaign protocol of that era dictated, playing with his children and reading.

Garfield was a man who grew in government service. First elected in 1862, to the 38<sup>th</sup> Congress, which convened on December 7, 1863, Garfield’s early efforts as a legislator included a number of missteps. He was an incompetent legislative tactician who evolved into a skillful floor leader in the late 1870s. In the Civil War, he had been a hard-driving army colonel and brigadier general; he achieved a measure of fame in the Union victory in Sandy Valley, Kentucky. In the House he discovered that success required more subtle methods than a penchant for the offensive.

As an army officer and as chairman, successively, of the Military Affairs, Banking and Appropriations committees, Garfield demonstrated the importance of doing one’s homework—a discipline that we at D&A embrace. To prepare for army service, Garfield and a friend read biographies of Napoleon and Wellington. In 1869, his scholarly habits of mind having been recognized, Garfield directed a special subcommittee tasked with modernizing the decennial census. He worked long days and evenings in a basement room in the Capitol. He liked the work because it required thoughtful analysis and was “not distorted by partisan politics.” He said, “I have a passion for figures when they have a scientific significance.” The subcommittee produced a report of more than 200 pages which led to important changes in the census schedule and the way the census was conducted. In place of U.S. marshals, the door-to-door inquiries were to be conducted by enumerators hired for their ability (not their political drag) and trained for the work. A similar sensibility led Garfield to advocate civil service reform.

When Garfield served in Congress (1863-80), each member had his own desk on the House floor (unlike today's open seating on benches), but only committee chairmen had private offices in the Capitol. (The first House office building had not been built.) When he headed the Committee on Appropriations, before the arrival of oversight hearings and research support from the Library of Congress or fiscal analysis by the Congressional Budget Office, Garfield would visit Executive Branch departments in person to learn what the agencies were doing and how they would spend the money they sought. He walked downtown from Capitol Hill or took a horse-drawn tram.

In four years as chairman of Appropriations, Garfield sought to bring order and discipline to a process that had been devoid of both. The Executive Branch had no centralized budget office. Each department lobbied Congress for money. Garfield introduced specificity, so that a department at its own whim could not divert money from one function to another. As a biographer, Allan Peskin, put it, "Vague, lump-sum appropriations gave way to detailed, itemized estimates." Garfield also tightened up on carryover of unexpended funds from one year to the next and clamped down on indefinite appropriations. Garfield "acquired an unsurpassed knowledge of the inner workings of government," Peskin wrote.<sup>i</sup>

We at D&A like to think that we have similar expertise. We visit departments or Congressional committees where our clients have problems. Where a state is involved, we may delve into practice in other states. We scope out the issues by reading the regulations and asking questions. We search for practical ways to resolve those problems honestly and constructively, within the spirit and letter of the law and the regulations.

Garfield, like every member of Congress, found himself torn on occasion between his personal beliefs and politics. He favored low tariffs as a matter of principle. But after a good deal of ambivalence and calculated ambiguity, he yielded to iron-and-steel interests in the 19<sup>th</sup> C.D. and supported high tariffs on steel. In his heart, he would have preferred to keep tariffs low to help the farmers in his districts, and because he leaned towards a laissez-faire philosophy.

On the coinage of silver, Garfield experienced a conflict of interest. Ultimately, he vote for principle, not personal interest. He had invested several thousand dollars in Nevada silver mines, a large sum then. As a result, although well known as a champion of "sound money" who believed that currency should be redeemable in gold, he flirted with bimetallism—redemption in gold or silver. However, when push came to shove, Garfield held fast to his "honest money" views, voted against the Bland-Allison silver coinage bill and voted to uphold Hayes's veto. (So hostile to Hayes was the Democratic Congress, and so eager to do something to inflate a soft economy, it overrode the veto without, as Peskin put it, "the courtesy of a debate.")

He could be humanly inconsistent. He championed civil service reform and disliked obligatory kickbacks to the party by political appointees. But he expected those he helped

to get appointments to support his campaigns. The contest was invariably for the nomination, because the 19<sup>th</sup> District was reliably Republican.

Garfield was a gifted orator who seized and held the attention of an audience. He did extensive research and drafted his speeches painstakingly. But on occasion he delivered superb speeches with little preparation. His speaking skills and his long service put him in line to become Speaker, but that was not to be. The Democrats seized control of the House in the 1874 election and held it in 1876, the Hayes-Tilden struggle that vaulted Republican Rutherford B. Hayes into the White House after a protracted impasse on the House floor. Garfield became House minority leader. Despite some reservations about Hayes, Garfield worked closely with him (even though Hayes disingenuously had maneuvered Garfield into abandoning a bid for a vacant Senate seat). Garfield led House Republicans with considerable success. Despite the Democratic majority, the House sustained five Hayes vetoes of Democratic bills. Garfield was so pleased with his contributions to these victories that he named his dog "Veto."

Although not seen as a religious man, as that term is usually understood, Garfield was a lifelong member of the Disciples of Christ, a Protestant, largely rural denomination (which in the 20<sup>th</sup> century would attract Lyndon B. Johnson and Ronald W. Reagan). He showed some flair for preaching as a young man, but at age 31 pronounced it "too narrow a field for the growth and development one feels he must have." By then, the terrain for his intellectual and oratorical skills was shifting to politics.

As he matured, Garfield showed a growing sense of respect and toleration for other religions. Even as a young man in the Army, he attended Catholic services and sought to calm any fears such attendance aroused in his mother. "I hope you are not alarmed," he wrote to her. "You ought to be glad that I take time to think and talk about religion at all. I have no doubt the Catholics have been greatly slandered."

Years later he would write, : "I try not to be a religious partisan and I call all men my brethren who acknowledge and follow Christ..."

In the few months of his presidency, Garfield's principal declaration touching on religion came in his Inaugural Address (March 4, 1881). Drawing a distinction, he reaffirmed his commitment to the First Amendment's separation of government and religion but he also expressed emphatic disapproval of the practice of polygamy by Mormons, which Congress had sought to prohibit in the Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act of 1862. The Mormon church, Garfield declared, "offends the moral sense of manhood by sanctioning polygamy." Congress, he went on, must "prohibit within its jurisdiction all criminal practices, especially of that class which destroy the family relations and endanger social order."

Garfield was habitually reluctant to seek office actively, a curious ambivalence which led one biographer to dub him "the available man." And so he often walked a fine line. In January 1880, the Ohio legislature elected him to the Senate (for a term to start March 4, 1881). That enhanced his stature as the preeminent Republican in the House and as a

possible candidate for the presidency. His fellow Ohioan, John Sherman, then Secretary of the Treasury, sought the presidency and recognized Garfield as an undeclared rival for the Republican nomination. Craftily, Sherman asked Garfield to agree to put his name before the convention. Garfield did, in a floor speech that was restrained. Days earlier, as chairman of the convention's rules committee, Garfield had spearheaded defeat of the unit rule sought by delegates trying to win a third term for U.S. Grant (who had served in 1869-77).

The convention was deadlocked among Sherman, Grant and James G. Blaine of Maine. With no authorization from Garfield, on the 34<sup>th</sup> ballot a Wisconsin delegate and political friend declared Wisconsin was giving Garfield 16 votes. After a moment of stunned silence, the delegates erupted into enthusiastic cheers. Garfield, having presented Sherman to the delegates, sought to demur, but the chairman gavelled him down—deliberately. On the 36<sup>th</sup> ballot, the impasse dissolved and the convention nominated Garfield. Some called him “the accidental candidate.”

Garfield won in November and took office on March 4, 1881. Five days later, he ordered his postmaster general to make a thorough investigation into widespread corruption in the Post Office, despite political risk to the Republican party. Again, principle had prevailed over interest. As 20<sup>th</sup> president, Garfield won a protracted tussle with the Senate over the president's power to appoint, an outcome that signaled a stronger presidency to come and a weakening of the tradition of “Senatorial courtesy.” Parleying his years of study of finance into a signal achievement of debt management, Garfield presided over a large Treasury refunding in which most holders of maturing 6 percent bonds agreed to replace them with coupons at 3-1/2 percent. In the field of diplomacy, Garfield and Blaine, now Secretary of State, sought to reinforce the Monroe Doctrine by reasserting U.S. leadership in Latin America. However, the brevity of Garfield's service as president prevented that initiative from coming to much.

On July 2, 1881, a Saturday, Garfield was walking through Washington's Baltimore & Potomac railroad station to board a train to join his wife, Lucretia, at the New Jersey shore, where she had been recovering from malaria. With Congress in recess, they contemplated a long, summer holiday in the Northeast and Ohio. They were to escort two of their sons to Williams College, Garfield's alma mater. A disappointed office seeker, Charles J. Guiteau, a man who had been barred from the White House and who was delusional, had been stalking the president for days. He shot Garfield up close, twice, with a ten-dollar, .44 caliber, ivory-handled revolver.

Incapacitated, Garfield languished at the White House all summer. His health improved and worsened in several cycles. Blaine sought to have the Cabinet find him unable to carry out the duties of office and to declare Arthur acting president. Arthur objected and Blaine's proposal was aborted.

Early in September, Garfield insisted on being moved to Elberon, New Jersey to join Lucretia and to escape the heat and ennui of being bed-ridden in the White House. He died on the evening of September 15, 1881, nine days after leaving Washington. It is

now thought that physicians who probed repeatedly, and unsuccessfully, for the bullet with their unwashed fingers had introduced germs which caused a persistent infection that was the cause of death.

Garfield's body, wasted by two months of infection and pneumonia, lay in state for 48 hours under the dome of the Capitol, the building in which he had made his reputation. Seventy thousand people paid their respects. In Cleveland, before burial in Lake View Cemetery, some 150,000 people passed by Garfield's bier. A son of Ohio had come home. []

---

<sup>i</sup> Peskin, Allan "Garfield," Kent State University Press, 1999, p. 327