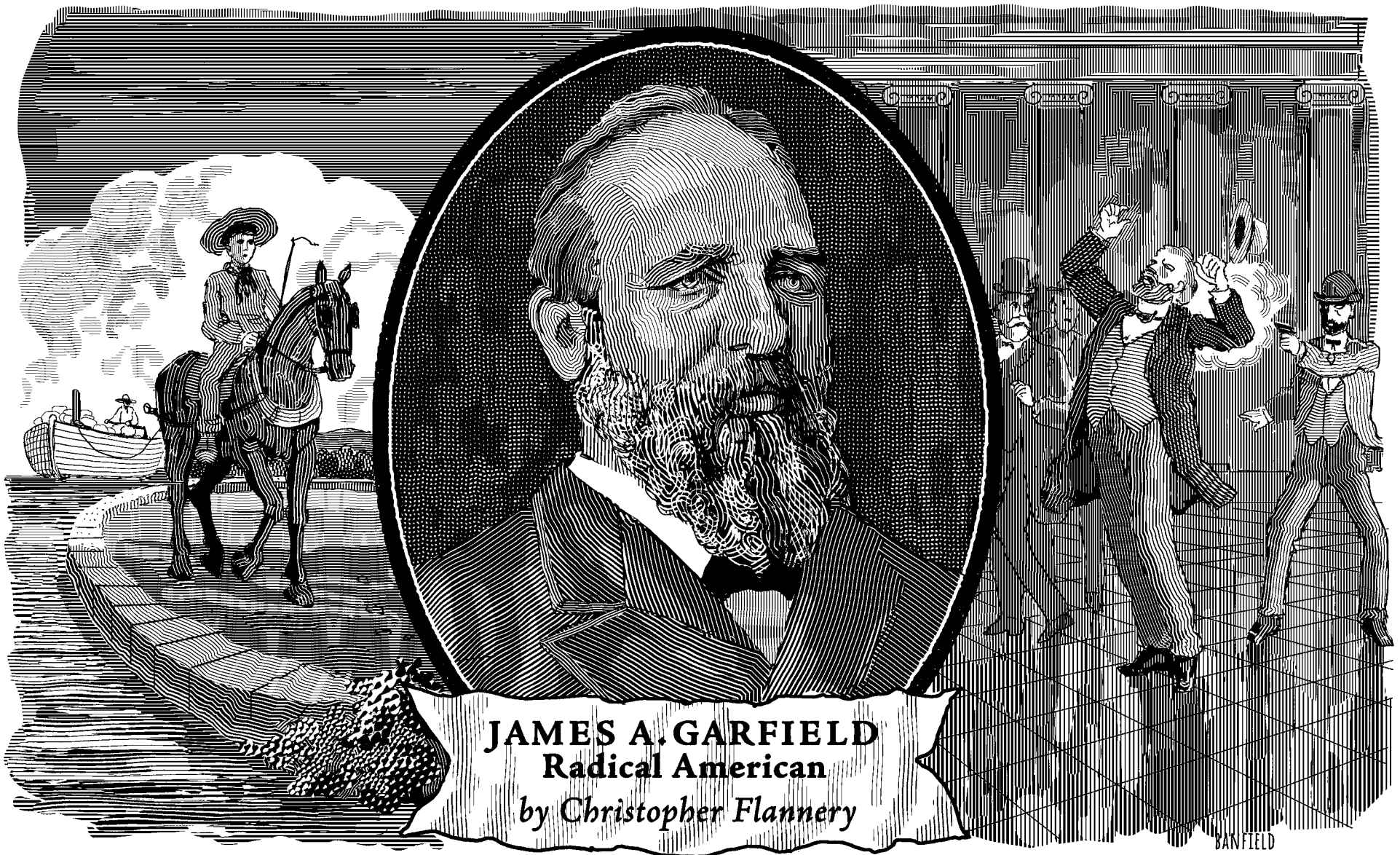


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# CLAREMONT

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*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*



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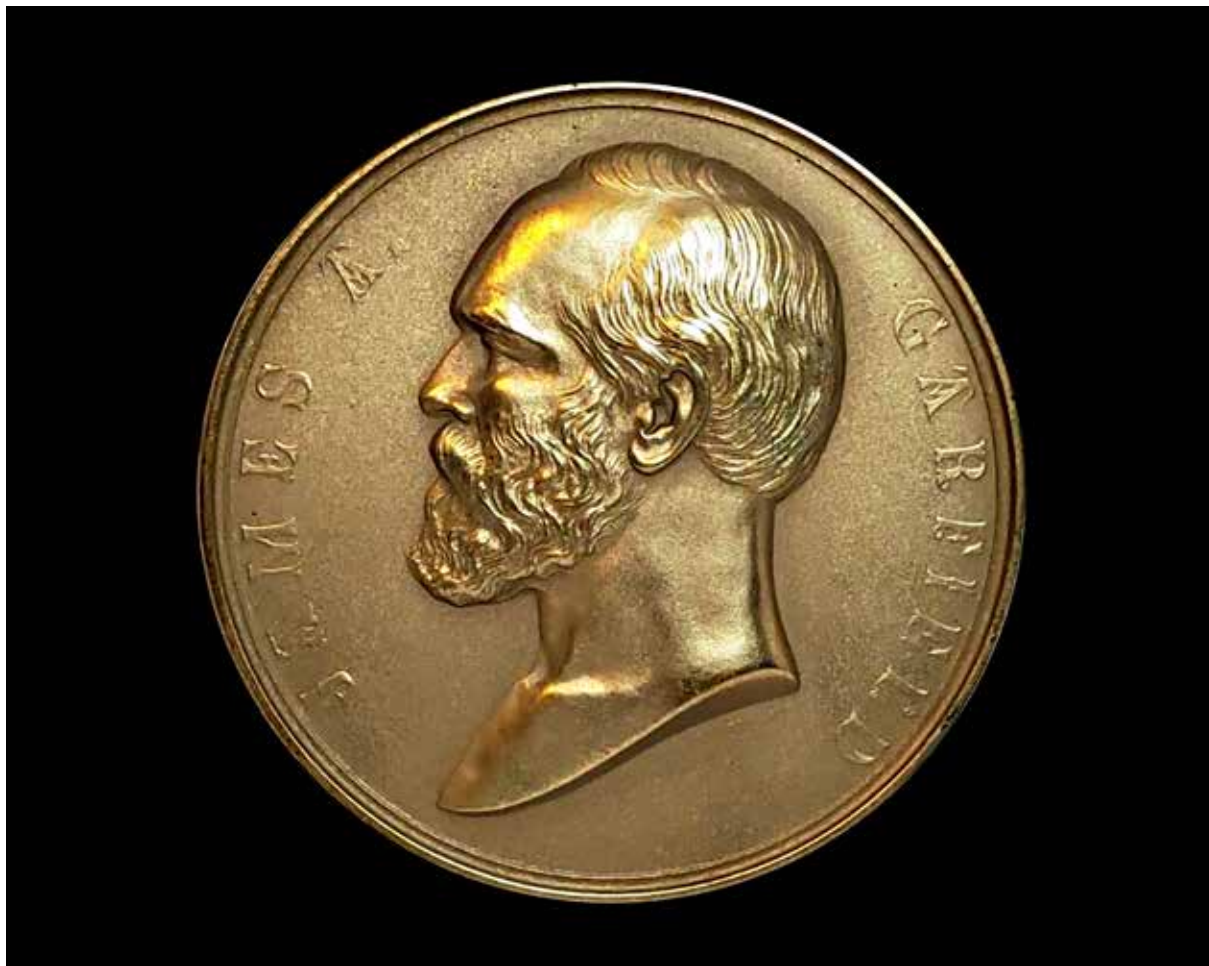
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Essay by Christopher Flannery

## RADICAL AMERICAN

*The wisdom and justice of James A. Garfield.*



Commemorative presidential medallion by C.E. Barber, c. 1881.

“Old boy! Do you think my name will have a place in human history?”  
—James A. Garfield, September 18, 1881

JAMES ABRAM GARFIELD WAS INAUGURATED president of the United States on March 4, 1881, shot by a deranged office-seeker four months later on July 2, and tortured for many weeks by doctors applying primitive medical science until he died on September 19, 1881. Practically no one remembers any of this. Garfield, along with Rutherford B. Hayes, Benjamin Harrison, and Chester A. Arthur, is one of the bewhiskered forgotten presidents of the late 19th century. C.W. Goodyear does what he can to remedy this in his new biography, *President Garfield: From Radical to Unifier*.

This is Goodyear’s “debut book,” blurbled by award-winning historians John Lewis Gaddis and James McPherson, among others. His writing is a bit showy, but brisk. He condescends to the past as the 21st-century progressive Ivy Leaguer that he is, and he is better

at describing street scenes than at analyzing characters. His is a popular, not a scholarly, biography, but he has done his homework, and it is a welcome thing to have an ambitious young writer taking an interest in American historical figures like Garfield and treating their lives and times as something more than an occasion to scold the world about transphobic racism.

Goodyear gratefully acknowledges his indebtedness to Allan Peskin, “the monolith of modern Garfield scholarship.” Peskin’s *Garfield* (1978), which has been the standard biography for nearly 50 years, is itself indebted to “the immense and well-organized collection of manuscripts and other private papers Garfield left behind,” much of which is now available online. Professors Harry Brown and Frederick Williams of Michigan State University were editing the Garfield diary when Peskin was writing his biography. The abundant annotations and commentary in their four-volume edition make it a rich resource

not just on Garfield but on his whole era. As Peskin notes, Theodore Clarke Smith’s two-volume 1925 study, *The Life and Letters of James Abram Garfield*, was for many years the standard biography. It’s twice as long as Peskin’s or Goodyear’s, full of lengthy citations of Garfield’s writings, and worth reading, though it suffers from some careless editing. Candice Millard offers a very well-written, more recent, shorter, popular treatment, *Destiny of the Republic* (2011), that is a good place to start. Those interested in Garfield’s personal life will want to read *Crete and James: Personal Letters of Lucretia and James Garfield* (1994), edited by John Shaw. It is full of the candor and complications of love.

Goodyear’s subtitle, *From Radical to Unifier*, indicates the direction or thesis of his book, and the epigraph for the book indicates the meaning of that thesis: “Time is the only healer—with wisdom and justice at work.” What most needed healing from time, wisdom, and justice was what Garfield called “the South-



ern question”: what to do about the freed slaves in the conquered Southern states after the Civil War. According to Goodyear, the radical (antislavery) Garfield would become a unifier (primarily) by leaving the Southern question to the ministrations of time.

Garfield grew up fatherless in poverty; was big, strong, impressive-looking, and physically courageous; loved Shakespeare, Horace, Tennyson, and Goethe, and read them and other great (and lesser) authors avidly all his life; was a teacher, preacher, president of a college, Civil War hero, leading Republican legislator, and a gifted and prolific speaker. He taught himself law and argued his first case anywhere—successfully—before the Supreme Court in *Ex parte Milligan* (1866). As his political life got busy, Garfield became concerned when his German started getting rusty, but he never had to worry about his Greek or Latin. He was irrepressibly friendly—apt to bear-hug acquaintances out of spontaneous bursts of affection. He was a romantically inclined, beloved husband who fell deeply in love with his wife after some hard years of marriage and a regretted affair. In between assignments in the Civil War, he was preparing an edition of a work of Frederick the Great on the art of war when he was called back to the war at hand. In addition to publishing articles in *The Atlantic* and other respected journals of the day, he published an original proof of the Pythagorean theorem in the *New England Journal of Education* when he was a congressman.

In his brief few months as president, he read Lew Wallace’s *Ben-Hur* and nominated Wallace as minister to Turkey so he could go to Constantinople and gather material for a sequel. Before leaving the White House on the morning he was shot, the 49-year-old president was doing handsprings—in glee that he was leaving soul-killing Washington to join his beloved convalescing wife at the seaside.

### Slumbering Thunder

**G**ARFIELD WAS BORN ON NOVEMBER 19, 1831, in the semi-wilderness known as the “Western Reserve” (local contemporaries called it “the Reserve”) in the northeast corner of Ohio, and was the last American president (so far) to be born in a log cabin. His father, who died at age 33, left two-year-old James, an older brother, and two sisters with his mother, Eliza, in the cabin on 30 acres of land (after she sold the rest to pay the mortgage).

Young James showed great aptitude for learning, and his widowed mother and older brother worked hard to enable him to go to school and flourish, which he did, starting

with a little school a mile and a half down the road from the farm. He did all kinds of odd jobs in the neighborhood to earn money for the family: chopping wood for 50 cents a day, helping at house-raising and plantings, washing sheep, mowing wheat. He loved to hunt and to read, especially fiction, and most especially sea stories. The sea stories so stimulated his lively imagination that he dreamt of running off to sea. Finally, in the summer of 1848, and despite the tearful pleas of his mother, 16-year-old James left home to go to sea—or as close as he could get to it, Lake

were urging Garfield to kick the man’s head in, but he magnanimously let the man up and the affair ended amicably. As he said of himself, “I am a poor hater.”

A serious case of malaria forced him to call an early end to canal work and go home to recover, but his adventures as a canal worker—the lowest of the low—would become part of the Garfield legend, akin to Abraham Lincoln’s log cabin and rail-splitting. While he was at home recuperating, his mother, with the help of an inspiring local teacher, persuaded him to set dreams of the sea aside for a season and continue his schooling at a nearby seminary. Garfield was now 17 and quickly became one of the top students. In less than a year, he got his first teaching job, on a four-month contract at \$12 a month, with students of all ages in a one-room school.

Garfield’s life was transformed on March 3, 1850, when he “[d]etermined to obey the gospel.” He was baptized the next day, a new birth of freedom for him. While he was still 18, having become a man of faith, Garfield came to the conviction that he was also a man with a destiny, and reflected: “I know without egotism that there is some of the slumbering thunder in my soul.” But as late as 1852, now a star student at a local college called “the Eclectic” (today’s Hiram College), he still looked down on the worldly work of politics, though he delighted in debating and excelled at it. He began to preach in local churches, and also began to think of going east to college.

Going east was not just a geographical notion. He was aware that he was a country boy—a “western” boy—in need of polish, who also needed to measure himself against the best his country had to offer. In June 1854, he set off for Williams College, in northwest Massachusetts, to “liberalize” his mind and expand his horizons. Mark Hopkins, a Congregationalist theologian, was president of the college as he had been since 1836 and would continue to be until 1872. The college had a reputation for serious scholarship and New England Calvinist orthodoxy.

Williams didn’t have an Office of Institutional Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in those days, nor even a dean of admissions; Garfield presented himself directly to the president, and then was examined in mathematics by one professor, in Greek by another, in Latin by a third, and was admitted as a junior with two years to finish his course of study. Garfield knew that the other scholars at Williams had had more thorough training, and he meant to catch up. To give an idea of his competitiveness: he was there for just a couple of weeks when he wrote a friend that he meant “to stand at least *among* the first, or

#### Books mentioned in this essay:

*President Garfield: From Radical to Unifier*, by C.W. Goodyear.  
Simon & Schuster, 624 pages, \$35

*Garfield*, by Allan Peskin.  
The Kent State University Press,  
720 pages, \$49.95

*The Diary of James A. Garfield*  
(4 volumes), edited by Harry James  
Brown and Frederick D. Williams.  
Michigan State University Press,  
2,234 pages, out-of-print

*The Life and Letters of James Abram  
Garfield* (2 volumes), by Theodore  
Clarke Smith. Yale University Press,  
1,283 pages, out-of-print

*Destiny of the Republic: A Tale of  
Madness, Medicine, and the Murder  
of a President*, by Candice Millard.  
Anchor Books, 432 pages, \$18 (paper)

*Crete and James: Personal Letters  
of Lucretia and James Garfield*,  
edited by John Shaw. Michigan State  
University Press, 397 pages,  
\$44.95

Erie. Rudely and obscenely rebuffed by the half-drunk captain of the only ship in port, he swallowed his pride and went to work as a canal boat “driver” on the Pennsylvania & Ohio Canal—the P & O. “As canaling was at the bottom of sailing,” he recorded, “so driving was at the bottom of canaling.” His job was to prod the horses that pulled the barge from a towpath along the canal.

In his brief career, an older canalman attacked him on his boat and Garfield defended himself ably and induced the man to quit. The other roughnecks (including the captain)



die.” Garfield was fully conscious of his ambition. He discussed it as a matter of importance with the young woman who would later become his wife, saying of it in one letter he wrote her at age 22:

It is to the man what the fire is to the steam engine.... It urges one to action. So, let it burn. Restrain it only by the laws of God.

He became what many classmates thought was the best orator and debater at the college, and his skill at debating included a great capacity for self-deprecating humor, laughing at himself as a country bumpkin. Before organized college sports, a great debater brought glory to his alma mater the way a great football team does today. Garfield was admired by fellow students, who looked up to him and typically chose him to lead any of the campus organizations in which he became active.

In November 1855, a year and a half after the Kansas-Nebraska Act had become law, Garfield heard a couple of speeches about the outrages taking place in “Bleeding Kansas.” It was another experience that changed his life. His reaction was remarkably similar to Lincoln’s when he first learned of the Kansas-Nebraska Act—“the repeal of the Missouri Compromise aroused him as he had never been before,” Lincoln would later put it, and his historic political career began at that moment. Garfield, after hearing these speeches, recorded in his diary, “At such hours as this I feel, like throwing the whole current of my life into the work of opposing this giant Evil. I don’t know but the religion of Christ demands some such action.” I’m inclined to think Garfield’s political career began at that moment—the beginning of his life’s work.

### Apostle of Liberty

**B**Y THE TIME HE GRADUATED FROM Williams in 1856, Garfield had, with some reluctance, become persuaded by friends in Ohio to take a one-year teaching contract back at the Eclectic and soon became its new president, or principal. He was a great teacher, as many student testimonials affirm. One student, in old age looking back, wrote: “Mr. Garfield was the standard by which they measured men.” Before long, hundreds of these students would follow Garfield to war.

In addition to running the college, Garfield taught six classes (or more) a day—he was officially a teacher of ancient languages, but he taught mathematics, philosophy, English literature, and even introduced the novelty American History, which was not part of the

standard curriculum in those days; his well-regarded geology class met at 5 a.m. (5 a.m.! Geology!) He preached on weekends and by this time was active in the new Republican Party, volunteering his oratorical powers on behalf of the anti-slavery, or “free soil,” cause.

Within a few years Garfield came to feel he needed larger fields for his capacities. He started to study law, on his own, in 1859. And he decided that his educational work could prepare him for work in the wider field of politics where, after all, the statesman’s noblest purpose was to teach. He knew that his teaching, preaching, and public debating had established a reputation for him in the Reserve. Whatever he did, it would have to be compatible with his Christianity. Abiding by what he would come to call “the law of my life,” he would not seek office or make any promises to obtain it. The office would have to seek him, and he would take it—if he took it—on his own terms.

In August 1859, he accepted the nomination as the Republican candidate from the 26th Ohio State Senate district. Once he had been nominated by others for the position, it did not violate the law of his life to campaign for his senate seat; in all of his over 30 campaign speeches, slavery was his central theme. Fellow Republicans and even more objective observers were impressed with the power of his speaking. In the view of one political reporter, “[E]very word carries its thought. No public figure within our acquaintance uses fewer empty figures of speech, or utters more weighty thoughts in apt and expressive words.” Garfield had not become as economical with words as Lincoln in his prime, but he was moving in that direction.

At 28 years old he was the youngest member of the Ohio legislature. At the moment of his election, one of his constituents was preparing a desperate act: John Brown, whose antislavery opinions were largely shared by Garfield’s other constituents, led his band in an attack on the federal armory and arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, on October 17. When Garfield learned of it, he was deeply sympathetic to Brown, though he disapproved of his methods. When Brown was hanged a couple of months later, Garfield recorded in his diary: “*Servitium esto Damnatum*”—slavery be damned. It wouldn’t be long before a local paper observed of him that he had become “an apostle of Liberty...proclaiming the Gospel which demands equal obedience to God and resistance to tyrants.”

He became something of a celebrity in his first year as a senator in the Ohio legislature. Newspapers wrote of him as Senator Garfield, Professor Garfield, or the Reverend Garfield.

His youthful work on the canal was already part of his public legend. He remained principal of the Eclectic and a preacher in local parishes while doing his duties as state senator. In the 1860 campaign season, he spoke for Lincoln’s candidacy on at least 40 occasions, having to turn down an equal number of invitations. He was a rising man.

Upon Lincoln’s election, Garfield shouted, “God be praised!” But the American world was pivoting fatefully. In the weeks following Lincoln’s election and before his inauguration, seven Southern states seceded from the Union, and six of them established the Confederate States of America and inaugurated Jefferson Davis as their president. Garfield observed all this with horror and growing conviction that war would be necessary to preserve the Union and subdue the slave power. He finished his private study of the law, passed an examination, and was admitted to the Ohio bar in early 1861. But already, legislators were drilling on the Capitol grounds in Columbus, and Garfield was taking instruction in the use of the light infantry musket.

Lincoln left Springfield by train on February 11, making almost 80 stops in several states on his way to his inauguration in Washington, D.C., on March 4. Garfield met him for the first time when he came through Columbus on February 17. Garfield thought the president-elect showed a “want of culture” and marks of “the primitiveness of western life,” but reported to his friend Burke Hinsdale:

There is no touch of affectation in him—he is frank—direct—and thoroughly honest. His remarkable good sense—simple and condensed style of expression—and evident marks of indomitable will—give me great hopes for the country.

As soon as Fort Sumter surrendered in April, Garfield was sure a long, bloody war lay ahead. He felt the times he was living in called for greatness, and he was determined to rise to the times.

### Go There Armed

**B**Y THE SUMMER OF 1861, GARFIELD HAD accepted from the governor of Ohio an appointment as lieutenant colonel of a regiment, of which at the time he was the only member; he was expected to raise the rest himself. He began his recruitment with his students and parishioners and then went from town to town and county to county—calling his neighbors to the cause of their country, as he had recently called them to the



Lord. Soon he had a full regiment of over a thousand recruits. Neither he nor practically any of them had any military experience. He was acquiring what he could by studying hard at night—military tactics, military history—and practicing what he learned by day.

He recruited and drilled and by the end of November had a full regiment—the 42nd Ohio—and the rank of full colonel. By New Year's Day, he was leading not just his regiment but a brigade of 2,500 men into eastern Kentucky with orders to drive rebel forces out and take control of some 6,000 square miles of wilderness in the dead of winter. He succeeded, and his fame began to spread beyond the Reserve and Ohio as “the praying general,” the “teacher in shirtsleeves”—the celebrated victor in what became known as the Battle of Middle Creek.

Because of this victory, he was commissioned as a brigadier general—the youngest in the U.S. Army, according to Goodyear—and found himself following General Don Carlos Buell and the Army of the Ohio into Tennessee, Mississippi, and eventually Alabama, where he observed large-scale slavery in practice for the first time and was tormented by his inability to do anything about it.

He thought what he called the “West Point” officers running the war were practically treasonous in their incompetence, timidity, and sympathy with the enemy, and began to wonder if he could be of much use in such an army. His friends, in the meantime, were writing him from home that he might be of greater use in Congress. He tended to agree and allowed his name to be put forward. In September 1862, while home on sick leave, he was nominated as a Republican candidate from his congressional district in the Reserve. In October he was elected, but his term would not begin until December 1863—still more than a year away. He was determined to do what he could in the army in the meantime. After a few impatient months, he received orders to report to Murfreesboro, Tennessee, to join General William S. Rosecrans, commander of the Army of the Cumberland. Rather than offering Garfield command of a division, Rosecrans asked him to be his chief of staff. Garfield took the position and soon, against practically the unanimous opposition of Rosecrans's senior generals, persuaded Rosecrans to launch the Tullahoma campaign in the summer of 1863, forcing the Confederate armies out of middle Tennessee.

The famous Union victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg at virtually the same time made the Tullahoma campaign an afterthought in the public mind, but it was part of that great

turning point in the war. Journalist Whitelaw Reid called it “a campaign perfect in its conception, excellent in its general execution.”

In the subsequent battle of Chickamauga, Rosecrans was to lose his composure under pressure and flee the battle scene in confusion, while Garfield made what would become a famous heroic ride through enemy fire to the front where General George H. Thomas (“The Rock of Chickamauga”) was still holding the line in what would ultimately be a costly Union defeat. As Garfield later reflected on the ride, “How I escaped death I do not know.” But he did. And when he got back to Washington after Chickamauga, he found that he had been promoted to major general, dated the day of the battle.

He had hoped that the war would be over by the time Congress convened. Now, as a major general, with his term in Congress set to begin, he wondered whether he should resign his seat and return to the field. He consulted President Lincoln on the subject, and Lincoln told him that the government “had more commanding generals around loose than they knew what to do with,” but not so many reliable congressmen with military experience.

Garfield resigned his commission and was to be sworn in the next day, December 7, 1863—at age 32. Because of a reported (and real) plot by the Democrats to capture the House by revolutionary intrigue, Garfield wrote in a letter home: “The members have been advised to go there armed tomorrow.”

### Radical...Not a Fool

FROM HIS FIRST MOMENT IN THE HOUSE, while the war was still unfinished and the outcome uncertain, Garfield and his fellow legislators were confronted with a series of fundamental questions: Did the seceding states have a constitutional right to secede? A natural right? Was the Union a creature of the states or the states of the Union? Were the seceded states now foreign powers? Were they still in the Union and possessed of all the constitutional and legal privileges of other states? Were they still in the Union having forfeited all constitutional rights and privileges? Should rebels be tried for treason (which ones?) or granted amnesty (which ones)? Did punishment for treason include confiscation of property? Should the slaves be emancipated? Was that constitutional? What should be done to protect the freed slaves? What conditions should be placed on seceded states for returning to regular relations with the Union? How might any of these questions affect the war still being waged? What powers had the president in these matters? What powers be-

longed to Congress? All these questions were elements of “the Southern question.”

Garfield wrote at the time, “I have never been anything else than Radical on all these questions of freedom and slavery, rebellion, and the war.” What he meant by “radical” he laid out clearly in one of his first speeches in the House, arguing that the peoples and the states in rebellion are under the laws of war and may rightly be treated as such. These laws of war “convert every citizen of the hostile State into a public enemy.” But—and here the freshman congressman, the youngest member of the House, disagreed with the leader of the Radical Republicans in the House and its oldest member, the irascible Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania—these rebel states are not foreign nations. “[T]he obligations of the Constitution still hang over them; but by their own act of rebellion they have cut themselves off from all rights and privileges under the Constitution.”

The American Revolution, he argued, offered a conclusive example of how to deal with rebel property. “Our Fathers,” in their civil war, confiscated loyalists' estates and properties for life and forever. In addition, they drove the Tories out of the country and “would not permit them to remain on American soil.” In the present Civil War that was still going on, political power in the rebelling states was in the hands of a very small number of slaveowners who owned great estates on which their slaves worked. These few men “plotted the rebellion and thrust it upon us.”

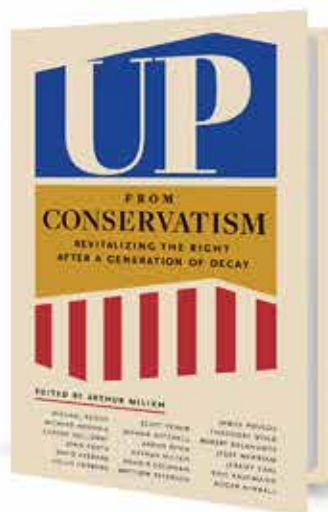
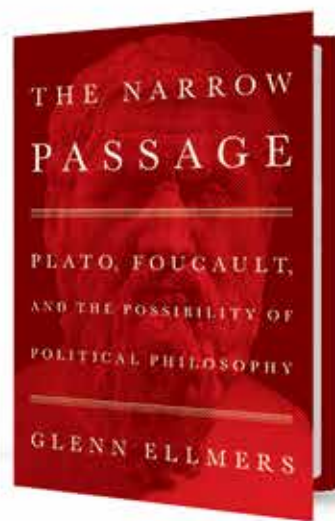
They have had the political power in their hands, and if you permit them to go back to their lands, they will have it again.... [I]f we want a lasting peace, if we want to put down this rebellion so that it shall stay forever put down...we must take away the platform on which slavery stands—the great landed estates of the armed rebels of the South.

Garfield urged: “Take that platform from beneath their feet, take that land away, and divide it into homes for the men who have saved our country.”

He went further, again summoning the example of the American Revolution: “I hold it as a settled truth that the leaders of this rebellion can never live in peace in this Republic.” He did not hold this truth out of vindictiveness, but as a matter of fact. “If you would not inaugurate an exterminating warfare...set it down at once that the leaders of this rebellion must be executed or banished from the Republic. They must follow the fate of the Tories of the Revolution.” To triumph not just

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on the battlefield but in history, generational effort would be required: “We can hold the insurgent States in military subjection for half a century if need be, until they are purged of their poison, and stand up clean before the country.”

Garfield certainly changed his views on some of these practical questions as circumstances shifted over the remaining years of his life, but he always remained a radical and believed that only radicalism ever accomplished anything. By this, I think he meant that going to the root (“radical” comes from the Latin *radix* for “root”) is what is necessary in order to do anything significant. In these questions, the root was the principle over which the war was being fought: the proposition that all men are created equal. What to do about this fundamental principle—to tolerate slavery where it was, to fight a war to emancipate the slaves, to grant equal civil rights to blacks, to grant the right to vote to blacks, to use federal troops to enforce these guarantees—these were matters for prudential judgment depending decisively on shifting contingencies.

Garfield was nothing if not principled, but he was not doctrinaire. Distinguishing himself from his Radical Republican caucus at one point, he joked, seriously, “I am trying to do two things...be a radical and not a fool, which if I am to judge by the exhibitions around me is a matter of no small difficulty.” Through all the daunting complexities of wartime and reconstruction, he showed the kind of consistency in politics later described memorably by Winston Churchill: “The only way a man can remain consistent amid changing circumstances is to change with them while preserving the same dominating purpose.” In the realm of politics, the practical judgment of the statesman in the circumstances is plenary. You cannot deduce that judgment from any theory. As Garfield understood, “There are no theories for the management of whirlwinds and earthquakes.”

Garfield was a leading Republican congressman from 1863 to 1880. During these momentous years, the Union achieved victory in the Civil War; the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery was ratified in 1865; the Civil Rights Act of 1866, passed over President Andrew Johnson’s veto, guaranteed freed slaves equal rights under the law; the Reconstruction Acts of 1867-68, also passed over Johnson’s veto, established military rule in most rebel states, and set conditions for seceded states resuming regular relations with the Union; the 14th Amendment was ratified in 1868, making the guarantee of equal rights for all citizens part of the Constitution; the

rebellious Southern states were haltingly and painfully brought back into regular relations with the Union; the 15th Amendment was ratified in 1870, granting freed slaves the right to vote; the Civil Rights Act of 1875 passed, prohibiting racial discrimination in public transportation and public facilities; the contested election of 1876 took place, threatening to rekindle civil war; and Reconstruction came to an end.

### The Battle of History

**E**VEN AS LATE AS 1876, AND AFTER, THE Union victory in the war was still not complete or secure. As Garfield put it, speaking directly to the “gentlemen of the South” sitting with him in the House in August 1876, “[A]fter the battle of arms comes the battle of history.... [T]hose who carried the war for union and equal and universal freedom to a victorious issue can never safely relax their vigilance until the ideas for which they

God willing, with his  
wisdom and his justice  
and a small gift of time,  
Garfield might have  
done something future  
generations would  
remember, and cherish.

fought have become embodied in the enduring forms of individual and national life.” This was Garfield’s dominating purpose to the end: to make sure the ideas of the Civil War’s victors guided Americans. How best to accomplish that goal was always a question of prudence. Garfield thought Lincoln too generous to the rebels, for example, and supported the Wade-Davis bill, placing more stringent conditions on readmission of seceded states to the Union, which Lincoln pocket vetoed.

Garfield despised the pursuit of wealth, but he was in New York trying to earn money to keep his family solvent when he learned of Lincoln’s assassination. He was deeply struck. “I am sick at heart,” he wrote his wife, “and feel it to be almost like sacrilege to talk of money or business now.” Then something amazing happened, which Allan Peskin describes:

The city seethed with rumors and frightened crowds gathered in the streets for news and reassurance. They were in an

ugly mood.... The mob had just about decided to wreak its vengeance on the office of the Copperhead newspaper *The World* when a figure appeared on the balcony of the customhouse holding a small flag in his hand. “Fellow citizens!” he cried. “Clouds and darkness are round about Him! His pavilion is dark waters and thick clouds of the skies! Justice and judgment are the establishment of His throne! Mercy and truth shall go before His face! Fellow citizens! God reigns, and the Government at Washington still lives!” According to the eyewitness: “The effect was tremendous.” The crowd was miraculously hushed, turning its thoughts at once from violence to a contemplation of God’s eternal yet inscrutable will. It was the greatest triumph of eloquence the “public man” had ever seen, and he turned to a neighbor to ask who the orator was. “The answer came in a low whisper. ‘It is General Garfield of Ohio!’”

This incident became part of “the Garfield mythology,” one of the “best-known incidents of his career.” And it is at least possible that it happened, just like that.

A year later, on the first anniversary of Lincoln’s death, Garfield had another unexpected opportunity to honor him. The Republican leadership of the House was taken by surprise when President Johnson at the last minute ordered all government offices closed in commemoration of the occasion. As Peskin recounts, Speaker of the House Schuyler Colfax “burst into Garfield’s office at 15 minutes before twelve and told him to prepare ‘a happy, touching and eloquent’ tribute for delivery at noon.” Garfield did not disappoint. He was on the House floor 15 minutes later, making a motion to adjourn and asking to say a few words before the motion was taken. Then he delivered what a colleague regarded as “one of the most felicitous things of the kind in our Congressional history,” in which he honored in death the man who in life so often disappointed him: “Such a life and character will be treasured forever as the sacred possession of the American people and of mankind.”

Garfield was at first hopeful that Radical Republicans in Congress could work with the new president on Reconstruction. When Johnson proved much more lenient with the South than Radicals expected or thought proper, Garfield nonetheless opposed their determination to impeach the president because he thought the Senate would not convict, in any case. When Johnson continued to thwart Congress’s will, Garfield changed his



mind. As he also told the House, the 14th Amendment “did not meet all that I desired in the way of guarantees to liberty,” but he had been hopeful that the seceded states would accept it as a condition of readmission to the Union. If they accepted it in a reasonable time, he wrote to a friend in 1867, “I feel that...we are morally bound to admit them.” When ten Southern states refused to accept the amendment as a condition of rejoining the Union, Garfield was wholeheartedly in favor of the more severe Reconstruction measures Congress passed over President Johnson’s veto. He wanted legislation that “puts the bayonet at the breast of every Rebel murderer in the South to bring him to justice.”

When a Mississippi congressman, in the summer of 1876, argued that America needed a Democratic president, Garfield powerfully countered that a Democratic president would overturn the Union victory in the Civil War, and that “the colored race, lately enslaved, will not be safe in the full enjoyment of all the rights resulting from the war and guaranteed by the amendments to the Constitution.” The Democratic Party—North and South—had “persistently and with the greatest bitterness resisted all the great changes of the last 15 years, changes which were the necessary results of a vast revolution.” Goodyear writes that Garfield “played a more comprehensive role” than anyone in the settlement of the disputed election of 1876. In that election, 185 electoral votes were needed for victory. Democratic candidate Samuel Tilden had 184; Republican candidate Rutherford B. Hayes had 166. Voting irregularities in Louisiana, Florida, and South Carolina placed those states’ combined 19 electoral votes in question. Democrats threatened civil war if the election was taken from Tilden: “Tilden or Blood!” was one of their rallying cries. Garfield believed—and he had gone personally to Louisiana to study the matter there—that Democratic violence and threats against black and white Republicans in the three disputed states had stolen the election from Hayes.

Congress created a special commission to decide the disputed electoral votes. In the end, on strictly party-line votes, the commission gave the votes of each of the disputed states to Hayes, and he became president by one electoral vote. Garfield was passionately against the creation of the Electoral Commission, insisting that it was unconstitutional and that the Constitution (though admittedly ambiguous) placed the power to count electoral votes in the hands of the president of the Senate. Despite his principled opposition to the commission, he was selected to be a member of it. Body-

guards sometimes attended him on his way home from late commission meetings, for fear of assassination by an enraged Democrat. Garfield downplayed the danger but admitted he hadn’t experienced such tension since Chickamauga: “You can hardly imagine the strength of passion that seethes and hisses in this city.”

### Wisdom and Justice at Work

**G**OODYEAR THINKS THAT A LIFETIME of struggling with the Southern question finally “led Garfield to shrug and surrender the Republic’s greatest problem to the solution of all things”—time. Thus the epigraph to his book. The “shrug and surrender” do not do justice to Garfield. The “wisdom and justice at work” were meant to include his own, as far as it was in him to give them. They were his life’s work, and he carried that work with him into his presidency and to his dying day. Goodyear’s book, true to its title, makes Garfield’s life a journey from being “radical” to becoming a “unifier.” In this account, one ironic way he unintentionally became a unifier was by being killed—becoming a “martyr to the spoils” in the popular mind—that is, the spoils system, by which the victorious party filled government offices with its supporters—and thus bringing both parties together in support of civil service reform, which he himself never wholeheartedly endorsed. But the essential, non-ironic, chosen way Garfield became a unifier, in Goodyear’s account, was by abandoning the Southern question, abandoning the fight for the equal rights of freed slaves and turning his and the country’s attention to business, instead. To the contrary, for all Garfield’s very serious interest in business and public finance, he never wavered from his Lincolnian conviction that America could only be successfully *unified* on the *radical* principle that was the central issue in the Civil War, the principle that all men are created equal. The question was, and remains, how to do that.

After his nomination (over his objection) as Republican candidate for president in 1880, Garfield expressed his abiding disposition on the question in a speech to fellow veterans, the “Boys in Blue.” He quoted Shakespeare’s St. Crispin’s Day speech and recalled the four million black people “God-inspired with the spirit of liberty,” who were “our allies who fought with us” and were our friends and the friends of the Union. “So long as we live we will stand by these black allies.” His fellow veterans roared their approval.

This is why freed slaves were Garfield’s ardent supporters and why Frederick Douglass joined them. Douglass was the keynote

speaker at a campaign rally at the Cooper Institute in New York—the same Cooper Institute where Lincoln 20 years before gave the speech that made him president. The hall was filled to standing room only with black men and white men “in almost equal proportion throughout the hall and on the platform.” His point was simple and received with loud cheers: “James A. Garfield must be our president. I know him, colored man; he is right on our questions. Take my word for it.”

Some 50,000 people gathered for Garfield’s inaugural ceremonies. Former slaves and Southern whites stood next to one another. When Garfield and the presidential party stepped out on the portico for him to deliver his speech, they were led by Douglass. The central theme of Garfield’s inaugural address, which he took with the utmost seriousness, was the Southern question:

The will of the nation, speaking with the voice of battle and through the amended Constitution, has fulfilled the great promise of 1776 by proclaiming “liberty throughout the land to all the inhabitants thereof.” The elevation of the negro race from slavery to the full rights of citizenship is the most important political change we have known since the adoption of the Constitution of 1787.... So far as my authority can lawfully extend they shall enjoy the full and equal protection of the Constitution and the laws.

As Garfield spoke, former slaves in the crowd could be seen weeping. When he finished, he stood for a moment with his hands raised to the sky. “There was the utmost silence,” according to a reporter present, then Garfield prayed for the blessing and support of Almighty God.

It is impossible to say how Garfield would have addressed the great Southern question as president had his life not been cut short. Whatever the complications—the requirements of prudence—we can be sure that he would not have forsaken the dominating purpose that had animated his whole political life. God willing, with his wisdom and his justice and a small gift of time, he might have done something future generations would remember, and cherish. But a madman had unifying ideas of his own.

### My Work is Done

**N**O SOONER WAS HE ELECTED THAN Garfield became immersed in struggles over appointments to his cabinet and other positions. This was the kind of political work he found most wretched—dealing





with ceaseless clamorings for office coming at him from all sides. His greatest challenge was dealing with the two main factions of the Republican Party, each led by a powerful senator: the “Stalwarts,” whose boss was “Lord Roscoe” Conkling of New York, and the so-called “Half-breeds” led by the voraciously ambitious James G. Blaine of Maine, with whom Garfield had been friends in Congress from the beginning. When Garfield selected Blaine to be his secretary of state—regarded as the most prestigious cabinet post—Conkling was furious; he took it as a personal affront, and the war escalated.

In almost all of the contemporary reports of this battle, Garfield is presented as a tool of the powerful man he had chosen to be his secretary of state and as no match for the great “Lord Roscoe.” In reality, Garfield was completely his own man and conducted the battle with the consummate skill of a political general—with keen anticipation, accurate assessment of the forces at work, patience, bold decision, and deft maneuver. In his usual way—which critics often took to be a sign of weakness—he intended to be fair to all concerned, if possible, and to keep the party and the country united behind him. But his primary motive was constitutional: he was determined to defend and uphold the president’s constitutional power to make appointments. Garfield wasn’t going to let “Lord Roscoe” lord it over the presidency. “It had better be known, in the outset,” he said, “whether the Pres[ident] is the head of the government, or the registering clerk of the Senate.” As he told one newspaperman, “Of course I deprecate war. But if it is brought to my doorstep the bringer will find me at home.”

The result of the war—which Conkling had insisted on and Garfield had done everything he could to avoid—was the resignation of Conkling from the Senate and the end of his political career. Newspapers and politicians began to take note of a force they hadn’t realized their new president possessed. After Garfield’s death, his friend George F. Hoar reflected, accurately, I think:

His will would, in my opinion, if he had been spared to us, have been the dominant will in our government for eight fortunate and happy years. His intelligent, informed, highminded patriotism made his life matter to the country. Next to the assassination of Lincoln, his death was the greatest national misfortune ever caused to this country by the loss of a single life.

Among the thousands of office-seekers swarming the streets of Washington since Garfield’s inauguration was a 40-year-old mentally unstable petty swindler with delusions of grandeur and divine inspiration named Charles Julius Guiteau. He had written a speech—never delivered—which he believed was responsible for Garfield’s victory in the presidential election, and now expected to be appointed minister to Austria-Hungary. He was among thousands of office-seekers who got in to see President Garfield the week he was inaugurated. When he heard nothing back from the president after his visit, he wrote him daily letters through March and April and shuttled back and forth between the White House and the State Department leaving his card. Eventually, in mid-May a White House usher banished him, and Blaine exploded at him never to speak to him again about consulships.

All this time, Stalwart newspapers blared the White House’s treachery in denying good Stalwarts the offices they deserved and threatening to destroy the country. Finally, an inspiration came to Guiteau: the problem was Garfield. If only he could be removed from the presidency, the Stalwart vice president (Chester A. Arthur) would take his place, the Republican Party could be united, and the country saved from Southern rebels and their Northern allies. He sent the president one last warning, borrowed money to buy himself a .44 caliber ivory-handled handgun known as a British Bulldog, and started tracking the president’s movements, looking for an opportunity to do the historic work the country would thank him for. He even studied the local jail

to see if it would be comfortable and dignified, but also secure enough to withstand the lynch mob that might come after him before people realized they should be celebrating him.

He tracked the president for a whole month, usually carrying his gun with him. He followed him to church one Sunday, but the angle of the shot would be too difficult. Finally, knowing the president’s intention to leave on vacation, he positioned himself a little after 9:00 on the morning of July 2 near the ladies’ waiting room at the Baltimore & Potomac Station. Just a few minutes later, the State Department carriage arrived with the president and his secretary of state in it. As the carriage pulled up, Garfield was just beginning to discuss with Blaine a summer tour of the South he was planning and a major, and probably controversial, speech he was to deliver in Atlanta on Reconstruction and issues of race. They got out of the carriage together in conversation and headed toward the platform; Guiteau stepped out behind Garfield and shot him from a yard away, then, as Garfield stumbled, crying “My God! What is this?,” Guiteau stepped closer and shot him again.

After two and a half months of agony and struggle, with his doctors still releasing optimistic reports to the public, Garfield called his friend from army days, Almon Rockwell, to his side and asked: “Old boy! Do you think my name will have a place in human history?” His friend recognized that this was a question from a man who knew death was near. He answered sincerely, “Yes, a grand one, but a grander place in human hearts.” Garfield would have welcomed both—but would have wanted more to deserve than to have them. And he did deserve them. Then with the kind of encouragement old friends instinctively want to offer, Rockwell added, “You must not talk in that way. You have a great work to perform.” Garfield knew better. “No,” he said. “My work is done.”

*Christopher Flannery is a contributing editor of the Claremont Review of Books.*

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