

Presidential Expectations

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After all is said and done, it is our preconceptions of candidates Gore, Bush, Buchanan, Nader, and what we think they will do once in office that guide many of us on Election Day. But we need to be careful, for history shows that the Oval Office can have a remarkable effect on its occupants. Nowhere is that clearer than with the largely forgotten New England-born president whose birthday we celebrate this month. Because while Chester A. Arthur, our nation's 21st president, rarely makes anyone's list of great or near-great presidents, he is the clearest choice for biggest surprise.

Born in Fairfield, Vermont on October 5, 1830, Chester Alan Arthur was, in the parlance of today's columnists, a career hack. He had spent his life in a number of appointed political posts, such as the patronage-rich position of Collector of the Port of New York. When in 1879, without any evidence, reform-minded President Rutherford B. Hayes charged Arthur with abuse of funds and removed him from the plum slot, Arthur became the poster boy for the "Stalwart," or pro-patronage wing of the Republican Party. The following year they nominated Arthur as vice-president to balance the ticket with reform-minded presidential nominee James Garfield of Ohio.

Since the Republicans pretty much owned the White House following the Civil War, the Garfield/Arthur ticket easily won the 1880 election. The reformists – and the rest of the country – were satisfied that Garfield would protect them from Arthur and others of his ilk. But just four months into his term, James Garfield was shot by Charles Giteau, a man who had recently been denied a patronage job and was out for revenge. (After he fired two bullets into the president he allegedly declared "I am a Stalwart and Arthur is now president!") Given Chester Arthur's resume, it was a completely logical assumption for the country – and Giteau – to make. Everyone braced for a feeding frenzy by the Stalwarts, led by Arthur.

Perhaps it was his sudden ascension to the office or the shocking manner in which it occurred. Some suggest it was the sudden death of his wife just a month previous to his inauguration, but in any case Chester Arthur surprised the country with an electrifying State of the Union address in which he called for Civil Service reform. It then watched as Arthur – the career hack - vetoed a rivers and harbors bill that was dripping with graft, revolted against his party and pursued fraud and corruption in the post office and then, in 1883, sign the country's first civil-service law - the Pendleton Act, which set up a civil-service commission.

The unintended consequence of Arthur's independence was to widen the schism between Reformers and Stalwarts, who fought bitterly in the years and months leading up to the next election. Arthur's enthusiasm for the 1884 nomination is in question, which is just as well, since the party never seriously considered running him for a second term. Maine Senator James Blaine of Maine, the Republican candidate, not only failed to become the second New Englander in a row to win the White House, but his loss allowed Grover Cleveland to become the only Democrat to be elected president during the period

spanning from before the Civil War until just before World War One. The now-former president Arthur returned to his New York home where he died on Nov. 18, 1886.

A contemporary of Arthur's, publisher Alexander K. McClure, wrote that "No man ever entered the Presidency so profoundly and widely distrusted, and no one ever retired... more generally respected." A month before the next presidential election it is safe to say that while Americans don't all agree on who should sit in the White House beginning this January, we all hope the next resident enjoys the same outcome.

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