

AN ACCIDENTAL PRESIDENT



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August 29, 2004 --

CHESTER ALAN ARTHUR
BY ZACHARY KARABELL

THOUGH he was one of only two New York Republicans to serve as president, chances are pretty good you won't be hearing Chester A. Arthur's name being bandied about Madison Square Garden this week at the GOP convention.

Fact is, you're not likely to hear or read much of Arthur in any venue, save a conference of historians. That's because Arthur — a man who never wanted to be president — must rank as one of the nation's most forgotten chief executives.

Before becoming vice president, and then succeeding the assassinated James Garfield in the fall of 1881, Arthur had held no office higher than that of Collector of the Port of New York. Little wonder, then, that when news of Garfield's death began to spread, one widely quoted official exclaimed: "Chet Arthur, president of the United States? Good God!"

In an effort to rescue Arthur from the pit of historical anonymity, Zachary Karabell has written this slim biography, part of a series on the American presidency edited by the noted historian Arthur Schlesinger.

If Karabell doesn't entirely persuade us that Arthur should be remembered, he is more convincing that he has been unjustly ignored.

Arthur was a successful lawyer and consummate political insider, firmly allied with the conservative Stalwart wing of the GOP, when he was tapped as Garfield's running mate as part of a compromise at the Republican convention between the party's warring factions.

Just six months after coming to Washington, Arthur unexpectedly found himself sitting in the Oval Office — and facing what were the least pleasant 3 1/2 years of his life. This despite the fact that there were no disasters or major crises during his presidency.

He never felt comfortable as president, although he acquitted himself well enough in a time when great demands were not being made of America's presidents — which was fortunate, since Arthur had never been a workaholic.

But he did enjoy the finer life, and he remodeled the White House to suit his lavish tastes, which delighted America: "He set trends for stylish living," writes Karabell, "emulated by thousands who could afford it and envied by millions who could not."

As president, surprisingly, he distanced himself from his Stalwart allies and launched a crusade to reform the nation's civil service.

It was a crusade that was to prove successful, largely ending the century-old spoils system. Indeed, the growth of the professional civil service "changed dramatically" the nature of U.S. politics and led to the "birth of the modern bureaucratic state" — a dubious legacy, to be sure.

He also took on Congress and the Western states, which were in a frenzy over Chinese immigration, by vetoing a bill that would have restricted it. He was burned in effigy in many Western cities, and Congress quickly passed another bill with a veto-proof majority.

Though suffering from Bright's Disease, a kidney ailment, and unhappy in his job, Arthur sought another term, refusing to "withdraw as if he was an embarrassment." But he'd so antagonized his erstwhile Stalwart allies that he no longer enjoyed a political base; he lost the 1884 nomination to James G. Blaine.

Less than two years after leaving office, he died at age 56. Following his death, writes Karabell, "Arthur's reputation didn't rise and it didn't fall. It disappeared." Yet this "voice of reason and moderation" was "certainly among the most honorable chief executives the country has seen . . . at a time when politics was venal and petty."

Certainly reason enough to be remembered.