

***History on Trial***  
***Episode 4***  
***The United States v. Charles Guiteau***  
***Researched and Written by Mira Hayward***

***PROLOGUE***

Sarah White was starting to have a bad feeling about the man in the hat. As the ladies' waiting room matron at the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad Station in Washington, D.C, White was used to seeing all sorts of strange behavior. Travel could bring out the worst in even the most dignified citizens. But this man seemed especially off to her. She had been watching the man all morning, she would later recall, as he flitted from room to room at the station. "He would look in one door and pass on to the next door and look in again," she said.<sup>1</sup> He didn't seem to have a destination in mind, or a train to board. He just circled, head down, shoulders bent, face obscured by a dark hat. What business did he have at the train station?<sup>2</sup>

In fact, this man had very important business. A meeting of sorts. He had just arrived early, because he wanted to make sure he got everything just right. He'd stopped and had his shoes shined. Then he'd approached the line of taxi carriages waiting outside the station and asked a driver about his rates. Once he'd learned the fare, the man said he'd let the driver know in a few minutes if he needed a ride, once his business was complete. And then the man had walked inside the station and gone up to the newsstand counter. "Could I leave some packages with you for a few minutes?" he asked the clerk. "Certainly," the clerk replied, and took a stack of letters and a book from the man.<sup>3</sup> Next, the man walked into the bathroom and pulled another package from his pocket. He inspected the contents. Everything looked right. Everything was perfect. He was ready.

Outside of the station, another man was disembarking from his carriage. He asked a nearby policeman, Patrick Kearney, for the time. It was 9:20 AM, he learned. His train was scheduled for 9:30. In ten short minutes, the man and two of his sons would be speeding north, escaping the sweltering D.C. summer. He could hardly wait. His upcoming trip promised him a respite from his stressful job and an opportunity to see his beloved wife again after some time apart.

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<sup>1</sup> Candice Millard, *Destiny of the Republic: A Tale of Madness, Medicine, and the Murder of the President* (New York: Doubleday, 2011), Chapter 11, from *Report of the Proceedings in the Case of the United States v. Charles J. Guiteau, Tried in the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia, Holding a Criminal Term, and Beginning November 14, 1881* (1882), 141. Hereafter referred to as *United States v. Guiteau*.

<sup>2</sup> For more on Sarah White, see Charlotte Muth, "The Witnesses," (Boundary Stones: WETA, 11/23/2020), <https://boundarystones.weta.org/2020/11/23/witnesses#footnote-9>.

<sup>3</sup> Millard, Chapter 11, from *United States v. Guiteau*, 186, and "Guiteau's Murderous Plans," *New York Times*, July 15, 1881

Sarah White, from her perch in the waiting room, saw this second man enter the station, and smiled. She recognized him right away. How couldn't she? This tall, bearded man trailed by two teenage boys, was President James Garfield.

This was who the man in the hat had been waiting for. This was the moment he had been preparing for. Seconds after President Garfield walked into the train station, the man in the hat - an itinerant ex-lawyer and preacher named Charles Guiteau - reached into his pocket, and pulled out a gun. He raised his arm and shot the president twice.

The first shot hit Garfield in the arm; the second ripped into his back.

As Garfield lay bleeding on the station floor, Guiteau ran for the street. He didn't get far. A ticket agent grabbed him by the back of the neck, and called out "this is the man!" Officer Patrick Kearney, who had only just given Garfield the time, raced over and took hold of Guiteau.<sup>4</sup> Kearney knew he had to get the man to jail before the crowd at the station took justice into their own hands - already, people were shouting for Guiteau to be hanged on the spot. Guiteau offered no resistance to Kearney. Neither did he try to deny what he'd done. He seemed to be proud of his actions.

The rest of the country, of course, was horrified. Americans prayed for the president, who lingered between life and death for more than two months, and cursed his assailant. They called for Guiteau to be punished - to be thrown to wild dogs, to be burned alive, to be shot like he had shot President Garfield. No punishment seemed grave enough for what Charles Guiteau had done.

But after Garfield finally died in September, 1881, and the government prepared for Guiteau's trial, a problem emerged: Guiteau, many medical experts believed, was insane. If this was true, was he responsible for his actions? And if he wasn't responsible, how could the public get the closure - or the vengeance - that they longed for? In the end, many wondered, could the justice system truly deliver justice in a case like this?

Welcome to History on Trial. I'm your host, Mira Hayward. This week, *The United States v. Charles Guiteau*.

## ***ACT I***

No one expected James Garfield to become the Republican presidential nominee in 1880 - least of all James Garfield.

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<sup>4</sup> Millard, Chapter 11, from *United States v. Guiteau*, 186.

Born in 1831 in a log cabin in Ohio, and fatherless before his second birthday, Garfield grew up in profound poverty. His hard working single mother, Eliza, always stressed education, even giving up land she could barely afford to lose to the local community so that a schoolhouse could be built. Young Garfield chafed against his mother's dreams for him, and left home at sixteen to work on the Erie Canal, but after a close brush with drowning returned home and re-committed to his education. At age twenty, he was accepted to the Western Reserve Eclectic Institute, a college preparatory school. To pay for his education, Garfield worked as the school's janitor and handyman. But his innate academic gifts soon came to the notice of the administration, and in his second year he traded in his job of handyman for that of assistant professor. It's all very Good Will Hunting. A year later, he was accepted to Williams College in Massachusetts, where he graduated second in his class. He returned to the Eclectic Institute, quickly rising in the ranks to become the school's president by age 26. He also married his longtime sweetheart, a fellow Ohioan named Lucretia Rudolph, and the two began their family, which would eventually grow to include five surviving children. At the same time, he studied law, and was admitted to the bar in 1861.

A year later, Garfield was nominated to replace a state senator who had died in office. But his burgeoning political career was interrupted by the outbreak of the Civil War. Garfield became a lieutenant colonel in the Union Army. He hated the violence of war, but as a lifelong ardent abolitionist, he was devoted to the Union cause. Though he had no military experience, he applied his intellectual prowess to the job, organizing a clever ruse at the Battle of Middle Creek that convinced his Confederate opponents that they were vastly outnumbered - despite the opposite being true. His surprise victory there made him a war hero.

Ten months later, Garfield was elected to the House of Representatives, even though he hadn't campaigned at all. He was reluctant to take up his seat in Washington, believing he was of most use on the battlefield. It was not until a year after his election that, at the insistence of President Lincoln, he went to Congress. Garfield would spend seventeen years in the House of Representatives, gaining a reputation as a powerful - if occasionally long-winded - speaker.<sup>5</sup>

It was for his speaking skills that Garfield was chosen to introduce John Sherman at the Republican National Convention in June, 1880. A fellow Ohioan and current Secretary of the Treasury, Sherman was a leading candidate for the Republican presidential nomination. If anyone could be said to be a leading candidate at this deeply contentious convention. In the summer of 1880, the Republican Party faced a schism, divided into two factions who hated each other almost as much as they hated the Democrats.

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<sup>5</sup> Biographical information from Millard, *Destiny of the Republic*.

One part of the Republican Party was a group called the Stalwarts, supporters of the system of political patronage known as the spoils system. In this system, government jobs were awarded to a political party's supporters, as a way to encourage party loyalty and government unity. The Stalwarts were led by the charismatic, controversial New York Senator Roscoe Conkling. On the other side of the Republican Party was a group called the Half-Breeds - a name given to them by the Stalwarts, who charged that they were only half-Republican. Given this name's racially offensive connotations, I'm going to avoid using it in this episode. This second group supported civil service reform - instead of appointing party loyalists to government positions, they wanted appointments to be done on the basis of merit. James Garfield was a member of this second faction, as was the man he had come to nominate, John Sherman. The group was also considering nominating Maine Senator James Blaine, Senator Roscoe Conkling's longtime enemy.

The Stalwarts had brought former President Ulysses S. Grant as their candidate. Everyone expected a heated battle. Garfield just wanted to make his nominating speech and get home to his family.

But things would not be that simple. By the fifth day of the convention, relations between the two factions were so fraught that observers worried whether the party would even be able to choose a nominee. Opposing politicians gave increasingly vitriolic speeches, driving the crowd wild. And then James Garfield rose to speak. Calm and commanding, Garfield took control of the frenzied crowd, speaking slowly and eloquently about the need for thoughtful action. He reminded the crowd about the true purpose of their work there: to find the best representative for the Republican voters and the best candidate to serve the country. And then, returning to his own purpose - nominating John Sherman - he asked the crowd: "And now, gentlemen of the Convention, what do we want?" From somewhere in the hall, a voice cried out, "We want Garfield!"<sup>6</sup>

Garfield did not want the job. He had long felt that running for president was a toxic quest: "I have[...]so often seen the evil effects of the presidential fever upon my associates and friends," Garfield wrote in his diary in 1879, "that I am determined it shall not seize me."<sup>7</sup> So the audience member's call caught Garfield off guard. He took a moment before resuming his speech and then continued on to nominate John Sherman - to raucous applause from the crowd. But the seed planted by that lone voice crying out for Garfield had taken root, and though Garfield repeatedly and strenuously denied that he wanted the nomination, momentum for his candidacy was growing.

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<sup>6</sup> Millard, 74. N.B. Page numbers come from a digital edition of the book and may vary.

<sup>7</sup> Millard, 54, from James A. Garfield, *The Diary of James A. Garfield*, ed. Harry James Brown and Frederick D. Williams (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1967), February 5, 1879.

The next Monday, state delegates began to vote for the nominee. As ballot after ballot came in without a clear winner amongst the big three candidates of Blaine, Sherman, and Grant, delegates began wondering if it might be better to choose a new candidate altogether. And after his unifying performance on Saturday, who better, some said, than James Garfield? Slowly, slowly, more states switched their votes to Garfield, until finally, on the thirty-sixth ballot, as one reporter put it, “the stampede came.”<sup>8</sup> State after state pledged themselves to Garfield, giving him a landslide victory. The man who had called the desire to run for president a sickness, was, all of a sudden, the nominee. His vice-presidential candidate would be Chester Arthur, a staunch Stalwart and protege of Conkling’s, whose addition to the ticket was an attempt to unite the party. Garfield, though horrified by the situation, knew that he could not back out - not if he wanted the Republican Party to maintain its fragile unity.

But by the time Garfield won the election in November, that unity was already crumbling. The two factions were at each other's throats, each determined to control the direction of the party and the work of Garfield’s administration. As he contemplated his role the night before his March 1881 inauguration, Garfield did not sugarcoat the challenges he faced: “To-morrow I shall be called to assume new responsibilities, and on the day after, the broadside of the world’s wrath will strike. It will strike hard.”<sup>9</sup>

Garfield could not know just how prescient those words would be.

## ***ACT II***

Like James Garfield, Charles Guiteau had not had an easy start to life. He was born on September 8th, 1841, the fourth child of Jane and Luther Guiteau. Jane died shortly after Guiteau’s seventh birthday, leaving him and his two surviving siblings in the care of their father Luther. Luther, neighbors would later remark, was practical in matters of business and politics, but fanatical on the subject of religion. Even for a country in the grips of an evangelical revival, Luther’s Christian beliefs seemed extreme to those around him.

Like his father, Charles Guiteau was zealous in his faith. At 18, Guiteau dropped out of the University of Michigan to join a religious commune called the Oneida Community in upstate New York. He quickly alienated his fellow members thanks to his laziness and egotism. The commune was infamous for its policies of free love and nonmonogamy – but Guiteau also found himself disappointed romantically. The women of Oneida were

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<sup>8</sup> “The story of the balloting,” New York Times, June 9, 1880.

<sup>9</sup> Garfield, in a speech to Williams College alumni, March 3, 1881.

<https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/james-a-garfield-and-a-black-washingtonian-part-ii.htm>

so annoyed by Guiteau that they nicknamed him “Charles Gitout.”<sup>10</sup> After six years, Guiteau left Oneida to found a Christian newspaper called *The Theocrat*, believing that he had been called by God to do so, but quit after four months, having realized he had no knowledge of the newspaper business. After another year at Oneida, Guiteau snuck out in the middle of the night, tired of the rejection of the community.

At loose ends, Guiteau decided to become a lawyer. Law school wasn’t required in those days, and Guiteau, with only a few months experience as a law clerk - managed to pass the bar, in large part thanks to a sympathetic examiner.<sup>11</sup> Guiteau was an awful lawyer – those who saw him in the courtroom remembered instances where he threatened to assault jurors, rambled about theology, and failed to even address the charges his clients faced.<sup>12</sup>

Soon abandoning the law, Guiteau became a traveling preacher. Nearly penniless, he snuck onto trains without tickets, and, when confronted by conductors, would simply tell them he was, quote “doing God’s work and had no money for train fare.”<sup>13</sup> He also had no money for lodging, but that didn’t stop him from staying in the most opulent boarding houses available – and then disappearing in the night without paying his bill. With most of his time occupied by sneaking onto trains and out of boarding houses, he didn’t have much time to preach – and, when he did get the chance, not much aptitude for it either. After he gave a lecture called “Is There a Hell?” in Newark, New Jersey, the *Newark Daily Journal* ran a review of it headlined, “Is there a hell? Fifty deceived people are of the opinion there ought to be.”<sup>14</sup>

People who met Guiteau found him erratic, egotistical, and excitable. He could sound rational, but only if you didn’t listen too closely – as a psychiatrist who later examined him would say of Guiteau’s speaking style: “All the links in the chain are there, but they are not joined...each one good and strong of itself, but without relation to any other.”<sup>15</sup> He couldn’t hold down a job or stay in one place for long. He alienated everyone he knew with his constant demands for money. He even lost almost all of his family support – his father Luther, in an 1875 letter to Guiteau’s older brother John, wrote that Guiteau was, quote, “capable of any folly, stupidity, or rascality. The only possible excuse I can render for him is that he is absolutely insane and is hardly responsible for his acts.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Millard, 89 from John H. Noyes, “Guiteau vs. Oneida Community,” 3.

<sup>11</sup> Millard, 91.

<sup>12</sup> Millard, 91-92, from George M. Beard, “The Case of Guiteau—A Psychological Study,” *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 9 (January 1882), 32; and *United States v. Guiteau*, 392.

<sup>13</sup> Millard 94 from *United States v. Guiteau*, 569-570.

<sup>14</sup> Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Trial of the Assassin Guiteau: Psychiatry and Law in the Gilded Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 33, and Millard, 94 from *United States v. Guiteau*, 570

<sup>15</sup> Millard, 398, from Beard, “The Case of Guiteau,” 22.

<sup>16</sup> Rosenberg, 30.

The only person still willing to put up with Guiteau was his older sister, Frances Scoville, but her support nearly had deadly consequences. In the summer of 1875, when Guiteau was staying with Frances and her husband George in Wisconsin, he threatened to attack his sister with an ax. Terrified, Frances asked her physician to examine Guiteau and determine if he should be institutionalized. After speaking with Guiteau, the doctor told Frances to get her brother to an asylum without delay. Before she could, though, Guiteau ran away and resumed his itinerant lifestyle.<sup>17</sup>

It wasn't long before a new obsession began to shape Guiteau's life: politics. He was a staunch Republican and a particular fan of President Grant and Senator Conkling, two members of the Stalwart faction. As the election of 1880 approached, Guiteau began thinking of ways he could get close to Republican politicians and secure himself a place in the next administration. Ignoring the fact that he had no relevant experience, Guiteau was convinced that the Republicans would be lucky to have him. During the election, Guiteau became a familiar figure around the Republican Party headquarters in New York. A slight, shabbily dressed figure with the unnerving ability to walk so quietly that you didn't know he was there until he stood right next to you, his presence was tolerated, if not appreciated, by party officials. Chester Arthur even let Guiteau make a speech once. This, like all of his other public speaking attempts, was a complete disaster: as Candice Millard describes it in her book on Garfield and Guiteau, *Destiny of the Republic*, quote, "Guiteau had spoken for only a few minutes, explaining later that it was too hot, he didn't like the torch lights, and there were plenty of other speakers waiting to talk." Despite his objectively abysmal performance, Guiteau was, Millard writes, "convinced that the speech he gave that night had played a pivotal role in putting Garfield in the White House, and that it should certainly guarantee him a position of prominence in the administration."<sup>18</sup>

After Garfield's inauguration in March, 1881, Guiteau moved to Washington D.C. to join the ranks of office seekers. In those days, anyone hoping for a federal appointment would simply show up to their prospective employers' headquarters – be it a post office or the White House – and wait in line for a chance to speak with the boss. This was an exhausting process for candidate and employer alike; Garfield complained that almost all of his time was taken up by speaking with office seekers, most of whom were completely unqualified.

Including the completely unqualified Charles Guiteau, who told everyone he met that he wanted to be assigned to the American consulate in Paris. No, he did not speak French, but that didn't deter him. His loyalty to the Republican Party and what he saw as the

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<sup>17</sup> Millard, 99.

<sup>18</sup> Millard, 163-164.

crucial role he had played in the election - should be enough to secure him the job, he thought. Not everyone agreed. The Secretary of State, James Blaine, got so sick of Guiteau appearing in his office that he eventually snapped, telling Guiteau he had quote, “no prospect whatever of receiving” the job and to, quote, “Never speak to me about the Paris consulship again.”<sup>19</sup>

Garfield was similarly dismissive of Guiteau’s prospects – he described a letter of Guiteau’s as a quote, “illustration of unparalleled audacity and impudence,” but Guiteau did not know that.<sup>20</sup> He thought that he had a champion in the president.

But that all changed in May, 1881, when a dramatic chain of events took the Republican intra-party war to the next level. Senator Roscoe Conkling, the leader of the Stalwarts, had been making Garfield’s life in office difficult, and the two men were engaged in a ferocious public battle over the New York Customs House. As the principal port of entry for the United States, the New York Customs House managed enormous sums of money in customs duties, and the appointment to run the Customs House was considered one of the most prestigious – and lucrative – positions in the country. For years, Conkling, as the Senator for New York, had essentially controlled who got the post. But Garfield wanted Conkling to know that those days were over, and so he nominated Judge William Robertson, a political enemy of Conkling’s, to the post. Conkling was enraged. He and fellow New York Senator Thomas Platt concocted an audacious plan in response to Garfield’s move. They would resign from the Senate right before the vote to confirm Robinson. Then, having avoided the vote, and rebuked Garfield, they would return to the Senate. How? Well, in those days, state legislatures chose senators, and Conkling was confident that the New York state legislature would stand with him. On May 16th, Conkling and Platt resigned. But in his fury, Conkling had made a deadly political miscalculation: the New York State Legislature, sick of Conkling’s antics, did not reinstate him or Platt. Conkling was finished.

Besides Conkling, no man was more deeply hurt by this turn of events than Charles Guiteau. He had long idolized Conkling, and he was baffled and distraught at what he saw as Garfield’s betrayal of the Republican party. Not to mention the personal betrayal – after months of petitioning, Guiteau still hadn’t received a posting to the consulate in Paris. For days after Conkling’s resignation, Guiteau stewed. He had come to Washington confident in both his own prospects and the prospects of the country. But everything was falling apart. His clothes were fraying, he could barely afford to eat, and his creditors were hounding him. What could he do? How could he fix this?

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<sup>19</sup> Millard, 163, from *United States v. Guiteau*, 647, 117.

<sup>20</sup> Millard, 161.



On the night of May 18th, inspiration struck - divine inspiration, Guiteau would say, a message straight from God: quote, "If the President was out of the way every thing would be better."<sup>21</sup> With Garfield gone, Vice President Chester Arthur, an acolyte of Conkling, would take control. And the new President Arthur would not be able to deny who had gotten him there - none other than the brave Charles Guiteau. But could he really kill the president? The idea horrified him, Guiteau recalled, but, quote, "It kept growing upon me, pressing me, goading me."<sup>22</sup> For the rest of May, he fought a ceaseless internal battle, but on June 1st, he came to a resolution: James Garfield must die.

With his mind made up, Guiteau set to work. He borrowed money from a friend, saying it was to cover his housing bill, but instead using the \$15 to buy an ivory handled revolver.<sup>23</sup> He went to look at the facilities at the Washington, D.C. jail, to make sure he could tolerate a confinement there – seven years earlier, Guiteau had spent a month in the Tombs, the notoriously filthy Manhattan jail, for non-payment of rent, and felt he could not survive another experience like that. But he found the D.C. jail to be much more to his liking. He began to follow the president around town, hoping to determine the best place to make his move. Garfield, like all the presidents before him, traveled through the country unaccompanied by security.

Guiteau also prepared for the celebrity he believed the assassination would guarantee him. Years earlier, Guiteau had written a book called *The Truth: A Companion to the Bible*, which had failed to find a publisher – in large part because it was a blatant, sloppily-executed plagiarism of a book by the founder of the Oneida Community. But Guiteau felt confident that his soon-to-be fame would have publishers knocking at his door, so he re-edited the manuscript. Getting *The Truth* published was not just a side-effect of the assassination – in Guiteau's view, it was one of the main motivations. "Two points will be accomplished [by the assassination]," Guiteau wrote. "It will save the Republic, and create a demand for my book, *The Truth*...this book was not written for money. It was written to save souls. In order to attract public attention the book needs the notice the President's removal will give it."<sup>24</sup>

With everything in order, Guiteau made his final preparations. On June 12th, he went to Garfield's church, and thought about shooting him there - but he ended up getting distracted by the sermon and missed his opportunity. On June 18th, he trailed the president and the first lady to the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad station where they planned to board a train to New Jersey. Lucretia Garfield was recovering from a weeks-long illness, and doctors hoped the sea air would strengthen her. It was only the

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<sup>21</sup> Millard, 194, from H.G Hayes and C.J Hayes, *A Complete History of the Trial of Guiteau, Assassin of President Garfield* (Philadelphia: Hubbard Bros., 1882), 428.

<sup>22</sup> Millard, 194, from *United States v. Guiteau*, 593.

<sup>23</sup> Millard 201, from *United States v. Guiteau*, 224-225.

<sup>24</sup> Millard, 198, from *United States v. Guiteau*, 219.

sight of her frail form that stopped Guiteau from shooting Garfield that day. “She clung so tenderly to the President’s arm, that I did not have the heart to fire on him,” Guiteau said.<sup>25</sup>

Garfield returned from New Jersey on June 27th to meet with his cabinet. Guiteau lurked in the park across from the White House to keep an eye on his quarry. But he would not make his move for five more days. On July 2nd, when Garfield returned to the railroad station, Guiteau was finally ready. He wrapped up a copy of his book and addressed several letters to leading politicians that explained his motivations. “The President’s tragic death was a sad necessity,” read one letter, “but it will unite the Republican party and save the Republic. Life is a fleeting dream, and it matters little when one goes. I presume the President was a Christian and that he will be happier in Paradise than here.”<sup>26</sup> Guiteau dressed in his finest clothes, traveled to the station early, and deposited his letters and book with the newsstand clerk. It was time to complete his mission. An hour later, two shots rang out, and Garfield fell to the floor.

Garfield’s wounds were not immediately fatal. Doctors treated him on the second floor of the railway station before moving him to the White House so he could recover at home. His doctors posted medical updates regularly, which were transmitted across the country and displayed on public billboards. Crowds gathered beneath them to learn news of the president’s condition. The horrifying act of the attempted assassination gave the country something to unite around - North and South, Republican and Democrat – everyone hoped for gentle James Garfield’s swift recovery.

For some time, it seemed like the president would pull through. His strength seemed to be increasing, his color was better, his attitude – though always courageous and hopeful – seemed improved. But by early August, a month after the shooting, it became clear that something was very wrong. Garfield was feverish and exhausted, losing weight at an untenable rate. His wounds were leaking pus. By September, those around him could not avoid the truth: he was dying. Realizing this, Garfield requested one last trip to see the ocean, a sight which had always soothed him. On September 5th, thousands of people came out to see the president travel by a special train to New Jersey, where citizens had laid down thousands of feet of track overnight to allow Garfield to travel straight to the front door of a seaside cottage. When the train got to the cottage, though, an unforeseen obstacle arose: the engine was not strong enough to travel up the hill that the cottage sat atop. Grasping the problem, two hundred local men ran forward and silently pushed the huge train to the front door.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Millard, Ch. 10, from *United States v. Guiteau*, 216.

<sup>26</sup> Millard, Ch. 10, from *United States v. Guiteau*, 215-216.

<sup>27</sup> Millard, 373, from D.W. Bliss, “The Story of President Garfield’s Illness,” *Century Magazine* 25 (1881), 303.

James Garfield got his wish to see the ocean before he died. He lived for nearly two weeks in that cottage by the sea, attended by two of his lifelong best friends, his doctors, and his wife and daughter. But his body was failing. Late on the night of September 19th, he cried out in pain, summoning his loved ones to his bedside. Within half an hour, he was dead.

All across America, a great cloud of mourning descended. Black bunting draped the White House, and a crowd of more than one hundred thousand mourners gathered at the Capitol to see the President's body lie in state.

Beneath the sadness, a beating heart of anger lay churning. Their president was dead, the American people said. When would his assassin pay?

### ***ACT III***

Ever since the shooting, most people had assumed that Charles Guiteau would have to be insane to have done what he'd done. Even James Garfield, upon learning the identity of his assailant, had said that the man must be mad, since he had no understandable motive.<sup>28</sup> To many, however, Guiteau's mental state had no bearing on the punishment he deserved: in the words of one reporter from the *New York Times*, quote, "While it seems incredible that a sane man could have done so desperate and utterly inexcusable a deed, the feeling is quite general that it would be best to execute him first and try the question of his sanity afterward."<sup>29</sup>

But the lawyers tasked with running Guiteau's trial could not afford such a cavalier attitude. While there was immense public skepticism about insanity pleas, in which a defendant pleads not guilty by reason of insanity, the strategy had been successfully used in a number of high-profile cases. The prosecutors were terrified that Guiteau would escape the noose. Government authorities were too – Attorney General Wayne MacVeagh, concerned that Washington's District Attorney, George Corkhill, was too inexperienced to lead the prosecution alone, recruited several prominent lawyers in private practice to join the team, including Walter Davidge, a highly regarded Washington lawyer, and former Judge John K. Porter, who had worked on Henry Ward Beecher's defense team, which you can hear all about in Episode 2 of *History on Trial*. Porter recommended to Corkhill that they employ Dr. John Gray, superintendent of the Utica Asylum, and one of the country's foremost mental illness experts, to help guide the prosecution. Gray agreed to come on, and spent more than a week working with Porter on identifying and recruiting the best witnesses money could buy.

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<sup>28</sup> Rosenberg, 57.

<sup>29</sup> Millard, 275, from "A Cloud upon the Holiday," *New York Times*, July 3, 1881.

The defense had no such luxury of resources or talent. The only lawyer in the country willing to take on Guiteau's defense was his brother-in-law, George Scoville, and even then, Scoville was not enthusiastic about the case, announcing, "If I didn't think the unfortunate man was insane, I would not defend him at all."<sup>30</sup> Scoville was barely qualified for the role; though he had practiced law for thirty years, he was a patent lawyer, and had only defended two prior criminal cases. At Guiteau's arraignment on October 14th, Scoville asked Judge Walter Cox to appoint additional counsel, as well as authorize subpoenas for witnesses, which he thought was the only way could get people to come testify on Guiteau's behalf. Cox agreed to both requests, and on October 26th local lawyer Leigh Robinson joined the defense team. Robinson was never happy with his role, though, and ended up resigning from the defense a week into the trial. Two months later, Charles Reed, the Illinois State's Attorney and a good friend of George Scoville's, joined the defense. But for most of the trial, Scoville worked alone.

The defense also had a shadow lawyer, of sorts: Guiteau, a lawyer, was technically qualified to represent himself. And he insisted on controlling every aspect of his defense. He made it clear to Scoville that while he accepted the use of the insanity defense, he did not want Scoville to, quote, "waste time" proving that he was generally insane, only that he had been insane during the commission of the crime. Scoville knew that Guiteau's request was impossible to comply with; Scoville's only chance of proving that Guiteau was not responsible for the assassination was by proving that Guiteau had a compelling history of mental illness. On October 19th, Scoville released a public letter asking people who had witnessed Guiteau behaving erratically to come forward and testify in, he wrote, quote "the interests of patriotism, justice, humanity, and mercy."<sup>31</sup>

Despite Scoville's pushback, Guiteau continued to try to run his own defense. Throughout the first weeks of October, he tried to get Judge Cox to accept a plea that he had written. When Cox refused, Guiteau handed the plea over to the papers, who of course published it right away. In the document, Guiteau declared himself not guilty, because, quote "The Divine pressure on me to remove the president was so enormous that it destroyed my free agency, and therefore I am not legally responsible for my act."<sup>32</sup> He also claimed that he was *literally* not responsible for Garfield's death: it was not his bullets, he argued, but Garfield's bumbling doctors who had killed the president.<sup>33</sup> Finally, Guiteau argued that Washington D.C. was the wrong venue for the trial, since Garfield had died in New Jersey.

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<sup>30</sup> Millard, 394, from James C. Clark, *The Murder of James A. Garfield: The President's Last Days and the Trial and Execution of His Assassin* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1993), 117.

<sup>31</sup> Rosenberg, 87.

<sup>32</sup> Millard, 392, from Clark, *The Murder of James A. Garfield*, 116.

<sup>33</sup> Rosenberg, 87.

This third claim was baseless – the shooting had taken place in D.C., after all. Scoville decided to abandon the medical malpractice argument, too – but keep it in mind, because we'll return to this surprising claim later. The only focus of the defense, in Scoville's mind, was proving Guiteau not guilty by reason of insanity. In that task, the defense certainly had their work cut out for them.

The uphill battle the defense faced became apparent as early as jury selection, which began on November 14th. It was almost impossible to find jurors who had not already made up their mind on Guiteau's guilt. One prospective juror, the aptly named John Lynch, summed up the feelings of many in the jury pool when he said: "I think he ought to be hung or burnt or something else...I don't think there is any evidence in the United States to convince me any other way."<sup>34</sup> Over the course of three days, 175 men were questioned on matters of religion, capital punishment, and insanity. Eventually, a suitable jury was found.

On Thursday, November 17th, the prosecution began its case. Before DA George Corkhill could begin his opening statement, however, Guiteau stood up and objected to the presence of Leigh Robinson, the court appointed defense lawyer. Robinson was unnecessary, Guiteau said, because he would be his own counsel. "I intend to be heard in this case," he announced "and I will make a noise about it." Guiteau would certainly be making a lot of noise in the coming months. Judge Cox, afraid of giving the defense any possible grounds for an appeal, treated Guiteau with kid gloves throughout the trial, never silencing him despite his numerous outbursts, which both horrified and entertained observers. In this instance, Guiteau eventually sat down, but not before further insulting his lawyers and reasserting his own role as a quote, "agent of the Deity."<sup>35</sup>

Finally, Corkhill could deliver his opening statement, which was a standard recital of the facts and an appeal for sympathy for Garfield's bereaved family. The prosecution followed their opening with a steady procession of witnesses who laid out the facts of Guiteau's planning for the murder, the details of the shooting, and Garfield's treatment and death. On Saturday the 19th, the defense introduced Garfield's doctor, who helpfully provided the jury with a five-inch segment of Garfield's spine, so they could observe the injuries for themselves.

After this first round of prosecution witnesses, George Scoville delivered the defense opening. A main component of his argument was the question of how exactly the jury should determine Guiteau's level of sanity, and subsequently, his level of responsibility.

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<sup>34</sup> Rosenberg, 114.

<sup>35</sup> Rosenberg, 118.

At this time, most U.S. states used the M’Naghten Rule to determine the validity of an insanity plea. Named after a British man, Daniel McNaughton, who had attempted to murder British Prime Minister Robert Peel in 1843 and who had been acquitted on the basis of his insanity, the rule was a result of a review by the British courts into whether it was too easy for defendants to claim insanity. Under the M’Naghten Rule, a defendant now had to prove that, quote, “at the time of the committing of the act, the party accused was labouring under such a defect of reason, from a disease of the mind, as not to know the nature and quality of the act he was doing; or, if he did know it, that he did not know [it] was wrong.”<sup>36</sup> It’s a strict standard, and by the 1880s, criticism for the rule’s rigidity was growing.

In his book *The Trial of the Assassin Guiteau: Psychiatry and Law in the Gilded Age*, Charles E. Rosenberg discusses some of the commonly raised objections to the M’Naghten Rule, which Rosenberg notes is, quote, “not a medical test for sanity, but a legal test for responsibility.”<sup>37</sup> First, the test did not allow for any nuance in the question of responsibility. As John Bucknill, an English authority on insanity and the law argued, quote, “the law did not provide in theory for degrees of responsibility; one was either sane and responsible or insane and absolutely irresponsible. Yet clinical observation, even common sense experience, attested to the existence of every conceivable gradation of mental power and control.”<sup>38</sup> The question of control was another big one – someone might know that an act was wrong, but were they truly responsible for their actions if their mental illness compelled them to act?

By the time of Guiteau’s trial, two new legal standards which hoped to address the deficiencies in the M’Naghten Rule had appeared. The first was the “irresistible impulse test,” which is just what it sounds like: could a mentally ill defendant control their actions, or was the impulse to commit the crime irresistible? Several states had adopted the irresistible impulse test beginning in the mid-19th century. The second test originated in New Hampshire, and thus became known as “The New Hampshire Rule.” This was the most lenient test, asking only if the defendant’s actions were a product of their mental illness. If so, they could not be held responsible.

In 1881, Washington D.C. courts only subscribed to the M’Naghten Rule. Guiteau’s many public statements before the trial had made it clear that he both knew the shooting to be a crime and also that he had planned his actions, not acted on impulse. In order for Guiteau’s defense team to have even a chance at acquittal, they would need to convince the court to adopt a new test of insanity and responsibility.

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<sup>36</sup> Samuel Strom, “The M’Naghten Rule,” November 30, 2023.  
<https://www.findlaw.com/criminal/criminal-procedure/the-m-naghten-rule.html>

<sup>37</sup> Rosenberg, 55.

<sup>38</sup> Rosenberg, 56, citing John Bucknill, *Unsoundness of Mind in Relation to Criminal Acts* (London: Samuel Kingley, 1854).

In his opening statement, Scoville urged the court to adopt a standard closer to the New Hampshire rule, telling the jurors, quote, “it will be for you to say, taking all the facts in this case [...], whether this crime would have been committed by the accused[..]if he had been of sound mind, judgment, and reason.”<sup>39</sup> He reminded the jury that society’s understanding of mental illness, and its treatment of mentally ill people, had progressively improved over the past centuries, and argued that the legal consideration of mental illness should follow the same trend.<sup>40</sup>

After Scoville wrapped up, the defense introduced witnesses from Guiteau’s past, all of whom testified to his mental instability. These witnesses included the Scoville family physician, who had assessed Guiteau in 1875 after his attempted attack on his sister, as well as a neighbor of Guiteau’s at a boarding house who described the defendant as “abnormal.”<sup>41</sup>

The only defense witness most observers cared about, though, was the defendant himself. On November 28th, Charles Guiteau took the stand in his own defense. It was a characteristic performance; for example, when Scoville asked him to identify some of his letters, Guiteau could not stop himself from commenting on how nice his own handwriting was. His rational way of speaking about seemingly irrational topics was also on full display. In measured tones, he laid out his belief that if Garfield had stayed in office, the Republican party would have inevitably collapsed, leading to a government takeover by the Democrats, and, eventually, complete national financial collapse.<sup>42</sup> As Scoville led him through his reasoning for killing Garfield, Guiteau began to get frustrated that no one seemed to understand that his actions had been not a crime against the nation but a gift to America. “Some of these days,” he exclaimed, “instead of saying “Guiteau the assassin,” they will say “Guiteau the patriot.”<sup>43</sup>

For the prosecution, John Porter conducted the cross examination of Guiteau, working to draw a line between Guiteau’s claims of divine inspiration and the actual actions he had taken.

Q: “Who bought the pistol, the Deity or you?”

A: “I say the Deity inspired the act, and the Deity will take care of it.”

Q: “Were you inspired to buy that British bull-dog pistol?”

A: “I do not claim that I was to do that specific act; but I do claim that the Deity inspired me to remove the President, and I had to use my ordinary judgment as to the ways and means to accomplish the Deity’s will.”

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<sup>39</sup> Rosenberg, 124.

<sup>40</sup> Rosenberg, 123.

<sup>41</sup> Rosenberg, 127-139.

<sup>42</sup> Rosenberg, 138.

<sup>43</sup> Rosenberg, 139.

Q: “Did it occur to you that there was a commandment, “Thou shalt not kill”?”

A: “If it did, the divine authority overcame the written law.”<sup>44</sup>

Porter’s cross-examination also highlighted another prosecution theme. Scoville had brought forward witnesses who testified to Guiteau’s inability to hold down a job or stay in one place for long as evidence of his mental illness, but Porter and the prosecution interpreted this pattern of behavior as evidence, not of mental illness, but of moral failing. In the words of George Corkhill, the prosecution was trying to show that, quote “what the defense calls insanity is nothing more than devilish depravity.”<sup>45</sup>

The direct and cross examinations of Guiteau took a combined six days, and by the end, lawyers and witness alike were all exhausted. But the trial had to continue. The following Monday, December 5th, the expert witnesses arrived. In total, thirty-six men were called by both sides to testify to Guiteau’s sanity or lack thereof. George Scoville’s inexperience with criminal law showed itself clearly during this phase of the trial: while prosecutors walked their expert witnesses through carefully constructed lines of questioning, Scoville asked most of his experts only one question: first, delivering a long hypothetical in which he described a man who sounded a lot like Guiteau, and then asking the expert if, given these facts, he would describe such a man as insane. This did not make for compelling testimony.

Despite the more convincing performance of the prosecution’s experts, some observers wondered whether they were protesting just a little *too* hard about Guiteau’s sanity. Could it be that the public hatred of Guiteau and the desire for a conviction was swaying these experts’ judgment?<sup>46</sup>

Finally, after more than two months of testimony, closing arguments began on January 12th, 1882. Walter Davidge, the Washington criminal lawyer, began for the prosecution. He held nothing back, saying of Guiteau, “I grant his egotism; I grant his unprecedented love of notoriety; but I think it will be difficult for counsel on the other side to convince you, that because a man is egotistical, he ought to have the privilege of slaying another.”<sup>47</sup> Further, Davidge discussed the potential danger of an acquittal on the basis of insanity, saying it would be, quote, “tantamount to inviting every crack-brained, ill-balanced man, with or without motive, to resort to the knife or to the pistol, and to slay a man for party purposes, or, it may be, without any purposes whatever.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Rosenberg, 140.

<sup>45</sup> Rosenberg, 153.

<sup>46</sup> Rosenberg, 183.

<sup>47</sup> Rosenberg, 205.

<sup>48</sup> Rosenberg, 203.



Charles Reed delivered the first defense closing. In plain language, he asked the jury to consider Guiteau's actions, both during the crime and during the trial, and decide if they were really the actions of a sane man. Would a sane man believe that the country would thank him for killing the president? Would a sane man describe himself as an agent of God on a mission of murder? Reed told the jurors that they ought to judge Guiteau's culpability themselves, using common sense, instead of relying on expert witnesses. "Will you[...]send a man to the gallows on the opinion of doctors?" he asked.<sup>49</sup>

George Scoville also went after the doctors in his defense closing, pointing out that the prosecution's experts had all agreed that Guiteau had no brain disease, while also acknowledging that no brain disease could be diagnosed until autopsy. It was an absurd contradiction, Scoville argued. Guiteau, inspired by this point, shouted out, "Those experts hang a man and examine his brain afterward!" And Scoville disputed Davidge's point about the dangerous precedent a not guilty verdict could have on the legal system in the country. On the contrary, he said, executing a clearly insane man would, quote, "constitute a permanent discredit to American courts."<sup>50</sup>

After Scoville concluded, Guiteau asked to deliver a closing of his own. Judge Cox denied his request at first, but after the prosecution said they had no objection, allowed Guiteau to proceed. Guiteau prefaced his speech by saying, with no apparent humor, "[...]I am not afraid of any one shooting me. This shooting business is declining."<sup>51</sup> In the rambling speech that followed, Guiteau compared himself to a number of American heroes, including George Washington, Ulysses S. Grant, and John Brown – here, he stopped and performed a verse from the popular Civil War song "John Brown's Body," in an odd chanting voice. "I suffer in bonds as a patriot," he continued, "because I had the inspiration and nerve to unite a great political party, to the end that the nation might be saved another desolating war."<sup>52</sup> Guiteau ended with a threat: "If a hair of my head is harmed this nation will go down in desolation...all you can do is put my body in the ground, but this nation will pay for it as sure as you are alive."<sup>53</sup>

Nothing could appropriately follow this performance, so the court adjourned for the day. After taking Sunday off, the trial resumed on Monday with the final prosecution closing argument, to be delivered by John Porter. Porter was exhausted and infuriated by the long, slow trial, and he laid into not just Guiteau but also the defense lawyers in his venomous closing. In one striking moment, he evoked Lincoln's assassin, John Wilkes Booth, and said Guiteau was worse, because at least Wilkes Booth was brave. Guiteau, Porter said, should be "regarded as the most cold-blooded and selfish murderer of the

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<sup>49</sup> Rosenberg, 208.

<sup>50</sup> Rosenberg, 211.

<sup>51</sup> Rosenberg, 212.

<sup>52</sup> Rosenberg, 214.

<sup>53</sup> Rosenberg, 215.

last sixty centuries.” He ended with an appeal to the jury: “Gentlemen, you must now do your part in making assassination reprehensible.”<sup>54</sup>

With that, it was time for Judge Cox to instruct the jury. Though the defense had argued strenuously for the court to consider the New Hampshire rule in its legal framework for the case, Cox denied their requests. The only rule that the jury could rely on in determining the validity of the insanity plea, he made it known, was the M’Naghten Rule. Guiteau’s mental state was only relevant if it had caused him to not know that his actions were wrong. “Indifference to what is right is not ignorance of it, and depravity is not insanity, and we must be careful not to mistake moral perversion for mental disease,” Cox told jurors.<sup>55</sup> After concluding his instructions, he sent the jury to deliberate. It was 4:35 PM on January 25th, 1882. The jury returned at 5:40. It was dark outside already, and the old courtroom, which did not yet have gaslights, was illuminated only by candles. In the shadowy, flickering candlelight, the jury foreman rose and told Judge Cox that they had reached a conclusion. For the charge of murdering President James Garfield, they had found the defendant, Charles J. Guiteau, GUILTY.

#### *ACT IV*

On February 3rd, Judge Cox sentenced Charles Guiteau to be hanged on June 30th, 1882. The defense filed several appeals, all of which were rejected. Guiteau’s siblings, John and Frances, petitioned President Arthur to stay the execution, and a group of neurologists asked the president to appoint an independent commission to assess Guiteau’s mental competency. Arthur seriously considered both requests, but ultimately did not grant either.

In his cell, Guiteau remained calm, certain that one of his imagined high-powered allies would save him from the noose. But by the end of June, he had become reconciled to his fate. On June 29th, he paid a prison worker to wash and press his black suit. On June 30th, he had his shoes shined. Just as he had on the day of the assassination, Guiteau wanted to look his best.

Outside, a crowd of more than a thousand people milled around the gallows, anxiously awaiting the prisoner. Their number included 250 members of the public who had gotten tickets to the execution; more than twenty thousand people had requested a spot.

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<sup>54</sup> Rosenberg, 219.

<sup>55</sup> Rosenberg, 221.

Guiteau was escorted onto the scaffold shortly after noon. He appeared calm, holding a poem that he had written that morning and had been given permission to read. He began by paraphrasing a verse from Matthew: “Except ye become as a little child ye cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven.” The following lines were, quote, “intended to indicate my feelings at the moment of leaving this world. If set to music they may be rendered very effective. The idea is that of a child babbling to his mamma and his papa.”<sup>56</sup> Running for 26 lines, the poem reveals Guiteau’s continuing belief in the righteousness of his crime. He read it aloud, in keeping with his introduction, in a falsetto, child-like voice. “I saved my party and my land,/ Glory hallelujah!/ But they have murdered me for it,/ And that is the reason I am going to the Lordy, / Glory hallelujah! Glory hallelujah!/ I am going to the Lordy!”<sup>57</sup> When he finished, his legs were bound together, a black hood was placed over his head, and a noose slung round his neck. At his own signal – dropping the piece of paper his poem was written on – the trap door was sprung, and Charles Guiteau plummeted down, dead in an instant.

Guiteau was buried in the jail courtyard, but his body would not rest for long. A few days later, it was exhumed and taken to the Army Medical Museum, where Dr. D.S. Lamb, the same doctor who performed the autopsy of Garfield, dissected the assassin. Sections of his brain were sent to neurologists across the country. The physical evidence of any brain damage or disease was inconclusive – and we now know that mental illness often does not manifest in observable physical differences in the brain. Today, parts of his preserved corpse are still stored in the National Museum of Health and Medicine.

Lucretia Garfield took her children back to Ohio, and set to work organizing her husband’s papers, eventually creating the first presidential library in the couple’s home of Lawnfield, in Mentor, Ohio. For many people, Garfield’s memory started to fade within years of his assassination. He became more of a symbol than a man. It was a transformation that had begun during the trial, where Garfield was held up as an emblem of everything right with America – a hard-working, self-made, morally upright leader– while Guiteau represented everything wrong with the country – fame-obsessed, narcissistic, and selfish.

But before long, Guiteau came to symbolize something else entirely: a failure of the American legal system. As Charles Rosenberg puts it, “Within a dozen years of Guiteau’s execution, few interested physicians doubted that he had been insane...Those harshest in their judgment did not hesitate to call the trial a miscarriage of justice, disgraceful to the legal and medical professions alike.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Rosenberg, 237.

<sup>57</sup> Rosenberg, 237.

<sup>58</sup> Rosenberg, 243.

Part of this shift in opinion was due to Guiteau's execution itself. His death had allowed for a release of, quote, "emotional energies that made impossible any real debate while the assassin still lived," per Rosenberg. And the strange manner in which Guiteau had gone to the gallows - the poetry, the playacting, the seemingly implacable conviction that he had done no wrong - made many who had believed that he had faked his insanity for the trial reconsider. What benefit could there be in behaving this way when the end was both near and inescapable?

This reckoning with the truth of Guiteau's mental competency prompted a reconsideration of the ethics of trying and executing him. But the reckoning wasn't entirely new, either - recall this quote from the *New York Times*, "the feeling is quite general that it would be best to execute him first and try the question of his sanity afterward." Many Americans - including some of the lawyers who worked on Guiteau's trial - had serious questions about his mental competency even as the trial progressed. But at the same time, the predominant feeling was that such a crime must be punished. How to balance those two beliefs?

The true questions at the heart of Charles Guiteau's trial are about the role of the legal system. Is it purely retributive? Whose rights are prioritized? Who do we care most about protecting? We can see two different approaches to these questions in the arguments of the lawyers: the prosecutor Davidge argued that Guiteau must be convicted, in order to serve as a deterrent, while the defense attorney Scoville argued that the legal system needed to model progressive treatment of the mentally ill.

Guiteau's execution also helped put the assassination - a deeply bewildering event - into a familiar framework. Commit a murder, go on trial, be found guilty, be executed. It was a pattern that the American public could follow. It allowed them to contextualize and make sense of the unthinkable. It allowed them to believe that Guiteau was an evil man with simple, selfish motives. This narrative allowed the public to ignore the more complex reality of the situation: sometimes, for reasons that are beyond our control, bad things happen.

The historian Henry Graff has described society's treatment of Guiteau as a "defense mechanism," a way of protecting our own understanding of the world's order. Graff notes that historians have continued to perpetuate this "defense mechanism," even up to the present, by referring to Guiteau not as a mentally ill man but as a, quote, "disappointed office seeker."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Henry F. Graff, "Forgotten Tragedy," in the *New York Times*, September 8, 1968, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1968/09/08/issue.html>.

Guiteau's execution promised a kind of emotional catharsis, a feeling of evening the scales. When something terrible has been done, it's natural to want someone to pay. But what if that someone has diminished capacity? This is still a question we struggle with, particularly in death penalty cases, where the stakes of answering that question incorrectly are so high.

But there is one thing we know about Charles Guiteau's sentence: it did not serve as the kind of deterrent Davidge had envisioned. No account of the trial can make this point better than Charles Rosenberg's book, which has served as an invaluable resource for this episode: halfway through drafting his manuscript on the assassination of President Garfield, news arrived from Dallas: President John F. Kennedy had just been shot and killed.

That's the story of the *United States v. Charles Guiteau*. Stay with me after the break for a look into the surprising truth behind Guiteau's shocking claim that medical malpractice was truly responsible for President Garfield's death.

## ***EPILOGUE***

Throughout his trial, Charles Guiteau blamed Garfield's doctors for the president's death. "General Garfield," he said, "died from malpractice. According to his own physicians, he was not fatally shot. The doctors who mistreated him ought to bear the odium of his death, and not his assailant."<sup>60</sup>

Unlike many of Guiteau's outlandish claims, his idea about medical malpractice has more than a grain of truth to it. President Garfield's death was a tragedy for many reasons, but perhaps most of all because of how preventable it was. The wounds that he sustained on July 2nd should not, and in most cases, would not have been fatal. Unless the patient was heavily weakened by a blood infection, which Garfield was. And what caused that blood infection? Most likely, the unsterile practices of his doctors. Though Garfield had access to the best physicians in America, prevailing scientific prejudices and the ego of one man conspired to doom him.

Nearly twenty years before Garfield's shooting, the British surgeon Dr. Joseph Lister had drawn a connection between Louis Pasteur's work on microorganisms and the post-surgical infections his own patients suffered. Lister theorized that Pasteur's microorganisms were the cause of wound infection, and became convinced that a sterilized medical environment was the best way to prevent such infections. Today, these conclusions seem obvious, but in the mid-19th century, they were revolutionary, and like any revolutionary idea, they took some getting used to. By the 1880s, most

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<sup>60</sup> Rosenberg, 395.

European doctors subscribed to Lister's practice of sterilizing tools and environments, and they had noticed a corresponding decrease in infection rates. But most American doctors were still skeptical and questioned the usefulness of Lister's admittedly tedious sterilization procedures. Unfortunately, one such skeptic would end up managing Garfield's medical care.

As soon as Garfield was shot, doctors began to flock to the president. After all, there was no more prestigious patient in the country. A large number of doctors, however, did not translate to better care. The first doctor by Garfield's side, the health officer for DC, stuck his unclean finger directly into Garfield's bullet wound. And this would not be the last time an unsterile instrument was introduced into the president's body.

Dr. Doctor Willard Bliss - not a mistake, his given first name was Doctor - assumed control of Garfield's medical care once the president was back in the White House. Bliss became convinced that he was the only one who could save the president, and refused to listen to any other medical professional, going so far as to ban them from Garfield's presence.

This was bad news for Garfield. Though Bliss was a friend of Garfield's, and cared deeply for the president, he was also an opponent of Lister's sterilization methods, and a proponent of a number of unorthodox cures. Bliss fed the wounded president an unhealthy diet of alcohol and rich foods, kept the president's friends and family away when their emotional support was most needed, and, worst of all, regularly inspected Garfield's wounds with unsterilized probes.

When Garfield's autopsy was conducted, the attending physicians were horrified. Running through Garfield's right side was a long wound. Bliss was convinced that this was the path the bullet had traveled, but the bullet had actually traveled into Garfield's left side. The so-called bullet wound had, in reality, been created by Bliss's blind probing. The overall condition of the president's body was also shocking. He was filled with abscesses and pus, clear signs of a system-wide infection.

"Had Garfield been shot just fifteen years later," writes Candice Millard, expressing the view of many historians and modern medical professionals, "the bullet in his back would have been quickly found by X-ray images, and the wound treated with antiseptic surgery. He might have been back on his feet within weeks. Had he been able to receive modern medical care, he likely would have spent no more than a few nights in the hospital. Even had Garfield simply been left alone, he almost certainly would have survived."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Millard, 255-256.

It's not just the benefit of hindsight that allows us to see what Bliss did wrong. Doctors in Garfield's day were highly critical of Bliss. Bliss refused to acknowledge any wrongdoing, declaring in a statement that, quote "[I] should receive, as [I] merit, the sympathy and goodwill (as well as the lasting confidence) of every patriotic citizen."<sup>62</sup> This kind of Guiteau-esque hubris certainly did nothing to endear Bliss to his medical critics, one of whom wrote, in a brilliant turn of phrase, that, quote, "Garfield's death proved with certainty that, as the poet Thomas Gray had written more than a century earlier, "ignorance is Bliss."<sup>63</sup>

Thank you for listening to History on Trial. The main sources for this episode were Candice Millard's book *Destiny of the Republic: A Tale of Madness, Medicine, and the Murder of a President* and Charles E. Rosenberg's book *The Trial of the Assassin Guiteau: Psychiatry and Law in the Gilded Age*. For a full bibliography as well as a transcript of this episode with citations, please visit our website, [historyontrialpodcast.com](http://historyontrialpodcast.com).

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<sup>62</sup> Millard, 442.

<sup>63</sup> Millard, 442, from Arpad Gerster, *Recollections of a New York Surgeon* (New York: Paul B. Hoeber, 1917) via Harry W. Herr "Ignorance is Bliss: The Listerian Revolution and Education of American Surgeons," *Journal of Urology* 177 (February 2007), 457-60.