



THE ASSASSINATION OF JAMES A. GARFIELD

by Eric J. Cardinal

Washington, D.C., July 2, 1881. The day broke typically in the nation's capitol at mid-summer-hot-hazy, humid and sultry. But for the President of the United States, it was a day with a difference. Later in the morning, he would board a train for Williamstown, Massachusetts, to participate in commencement exercises at his alma mater, Williams College, and to enroll his eldest sons in the school. The trip to Williams was to be the first leg of a journey that would take the presidential family through New England, to the New Jersey shore and, ultimately, back home to their beloved Mentor, Ohio, farm. The trip would be the President's first respite from the cares of office since his inauguration nearly four months earlier.

It had been a hectic, tiring four months in office for James A. Garfield. Before his inauguration, Garfield had looked upon the presidency as "the bleak mountain," and little had happened during his first hundred-odd days in office to revise his opinion. His major task had been to fill the vast number of Federal offices that came open with a change of administrations in that day of the "Spoils System." The system had its origin during the administration of Andrew Jackson, who believed that public servants should spring from, and ultimately return to, the people, in turn to be replaced by other citizens who would, for a time, carry on the business of government. Imbued with the theoretically laudable principle of "rotation of office," in practice the system was a powerful engine generating political patronage. For political power brokers, the spoils system was a means of generating vast partisan leverage. For the army of office seekers that materialized at every change of administration, it was an invitation to the public payroll. But for Garfield, the importunities of the "office seeker who pursues his prey with the grip of death," made it difficult for him to "keep from despising the office seeker."

One of the most persistent of the seekers was one Charles Julius Guiteau. Guiteau arrived in Washington on March 6, desiring an audience with the President. His ambitions were lofty; he sought a position in the foreign service, either head of the mission to Austria-Hungary or the Consul-Generalship to Paris. His ambitions far outstripped his capabilities. By

all accounts, Guiteau was a fringe player. He had read law and been accepted to the bar, but had failed as an attorney. For a time, he had joined the Oneida Community in upstate New York; later he frequented the revival meetings of evangelist Dwight Moody; subsequently, he referred to himself as "lawyer and theologian." He wrote and privately published a disjointed religious treatise, *Truth, A Companion to the Bible*. In 1880, Guiteau supported Garfield for the presidency. He was a Republican "Stalwart," and had initially favored a third term for Ulysses S. Grant, but after the Chicago Convention, he worked in the Garfield-Arthur campaign. He wrote a speech, had it printed and tried to deliver it. He drifted to New York and began to hang out at the Republican National Committee headquarters. He tried to obtain speaking assignments to deliver his speech but none were forthcoming. No one was interested and no one took Guiteau seriously. His role in the campaign of 1880, in short, was less than negligible, but when Garfield was elected, Guiteau confidently believed that his work would be rewarded with a government post. He began to frequent the White House waiting room, pressing for the opportunity to see the President, leaving copies of his speech as calling cards. At the State Department he won several audiences with Secretary of State James G. Blaine, who coldly rebuffed his pretentious requests. The rejection stung Guiteau: here was a strange and uncaring Republican administration indeed that so rewarded its loyal supporters. The germ of an idea began to grow in Guiteau's mind.

Of apparently more importance to Garfield's young presidency than the wild claims of a single office seeker, however, was the growing rift between the administration and Roscoe Conkling, senior Senator and powerful Republican boss from New York. Conkling, too, had favored a third term for General Grant, but had not accepted as gracefully as Guiteau Garfield's nomination. For Conkling, the stakes were much higher: with the malleable Grant once more in the White House, Conkling confidently expected to be the real power behind the throne. But Garfield was outside the New Yorker's sphere of influence. Without some assurances that he would have free rein so far as patronage in the state of New York was concerned, there was little likelihood that Conkling would support the ticket. Fin-

