

BOOK REVIEW

James A. Garfield: Leading America from Frontier to Empire

Author: Barbara Bennett Peterson (University of Hawaii, Tigard, Oregon, USA)

If it had not been for William Henry Harrison, whose thirty-days in office has marked the briefest presidential term in American history, James A. Garfield would be the holder of this dubious distinction. Taking the oath of office in March 1881, Garfield was gunned down by a psychotic and disappointed office-seeker in a Washington, D.C. railway station, only to linger until September when he expired. Presidential biographers then are greatly challenged in handling a presidency of one like Garfield's. Yet this is exactly what Professor Barbara Bennett Peterson has ably accomplished in *James A. Garfield: Leading America from Frontier to Empire*.

In an engaging, informative and well-written biography, Peterson has deftly and admirably risen to the challenge. What sets her study of Garfield apart from others is that she contextually weaves elements of Garfield's life with the broader picture of events transpiring in the United States and abroad. This is not to suggest that Garfield's limited accomplishments are either minimized or trivialized. In 1880 Garfield formed the bridge that kept the two political factions within the Republican Party [Stalwarts & Half-Breeds] from rupturing into disintegration. His untimely death at the hands of a rabidly self-professed Stalwart served only to mend the political fences that had afflicted the previous administrations of Grant and Hayes. It also gave impetus to the passage of the first genuine Civil Service reform legislation under his successor Chester A. Arthur.

As Peterson astutely suggests Garfield's presidency marked a transitional moment in American history; a transition that the president understood and in which he was proactive in promoting. For better or worse, the wounds of America's Civil War were healed and the centuries-old continental frontier was closing. Garfield appreciated the fact that the nation was on the threshold of a new era of projecting power and influence throughout the world. In order to meet this challenge Garfield encouraged both a diplomatic and naval resurgence that Peterson suggests would come to place America in a global context.

Well-researched and plainly written, Peterson's *James A. Garfield: Leading America from Frontier to Empire* may very well be the best synthesis and analysis of the significance of Garfield's brief tenure as President of the United States.

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