



Chester Alan Arthur

Zachary Karabell , Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. (Editor)

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The Gilded Age bon vivant who became America's unlikeliest chief executive-and who presided over a sweeping reform of the system that nurtured him

Chester Alan Arthur never dreamed that one day he would be president of the United States. A successful lawyer, Arthur had been forced out as the head of the Custom House of the Port of New York in 1877 in a power struggle between the two wings of the Republican Party. He became such a celebrity that he was nominated for vice president in 1880-despite his never having run for office before.

Elected alongside James A. Garfield, Arthur found his life transformed just four months into his term, when an assassin shot and killed Garfield, catapulting Arthur into the presidency. The assassin was a deranged man who thought he deserved a federal job through the increasingly corrupt "spoils system." To the surprise of many, Arthur, a longtime beneficiary of that system, saw that the time had come for reform. His opportunity came in the winter of 1882-83, when he pushed through the Pendleton Act, which created a professional civil service and set America on a course toward greater reforms in the decades to come.

Chester Arthur may be largely forgotten today, but Zachary Karabell eloquently shows how this unexpected president-of whom so little was expected-rose to the occasion when fate placed him in the White House.

Chester Alan Arthur Details

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From Reader Review Chester Alan Arthur for online ebook

David R. says

One of the better entries in the series. Like the others, it is a fairly sympathetic portrait. Karabell successfully creates a cogent and deep picture of the subject from a paucity of documentary evidence.

Robin Friedman says

An Accidental President

Chester Arthur (1829 --- 1886) served from 1881 -- 1885 as the 21st president. He became the president upon the assassination of President James Garfield by a deranged individual, Charles Guiteau. Upon his death, Arthur and his presidency were all but forgotten. In his short biography, "Chester Alan Arthur" (2004), Zachary Karabell offers an assessment of Arthur's presidency. Karabell is a widely published author on American history with books on the 1948 presidential campaign and the Suez Canal, among other subjects. His book on Chester Arthur is part of the "American Presidents" series edited by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and by Sean Wilentz, following Schlesinger's death.

The series aims to offer readers brief introductions to all the American presidents beyond the handful of famous names. The books can be read quickly. The series may indeed be more effective for obscure presidents such as Chester Arthur than for more familiar leaders. Besides introducing the presidents and offering overviews of their history, the series has another goal: to study the qualities of leadership in its various forms. It is valuable to read these books and to think about the qualities that may make for effective leadership at a particular time.

Karabell's book on Chester Arthur fulfills admirably the aim of the series. It is a biography and a history that can be read easily. More importantly Karabell offers his own perspective on his subject. Rather than seeing Arthur as a nonentity, Karabell finds much to admire in his administration. Arthur became president at a difficult time following an assassination and held the country together in a crisis situation. Instead of proving the political hack both his friends and detractors anticipated, Arthur quietly rose to the office. In an era known for corruption, Arthur served honestly and worked to reduce the power of cronyism. He vetoed the first Chinese Exclusion Act (although he yielded and reluctantly signed a more modest second version) as well as pork-barrel appropriations legislation. He signed the Pendleton Act which still provides the fundamentals for the Federal Civil Service, taking Federal employment out of the spoils system. He approved the prosecution for corruption of close political associates, approved funding for the revitalization of the Navy, and spoke out against the Supreme Court's 1883 decision ruling unconstitutional Reconstruction-era civil rights legislation.

Karabell shows that Arthur was an unlikely source for these accomplishments. Before he became Vice-president, Arthur had never held political office. He owed his place on the ticket to convention-floor brokering. Arthur had become a wealthy lawyer and customs-house official who loved to eat and to live opulently and in style. He was affable and sociable and owed much of his success to his ability to get along with people in addition to his boss, Roscoe Conkling. Conkling was the leader of one of the factions of the Republican Party of the day and a rival to the other faction leader James Blaine. Although he was a full product of the system, Arthur proved able to rise above it when he needed to do so. Besides offering a

portrayal of Arthur, Karabell's book is effective in presenting the state of American politics during the Gilded Age of the 1870's and 1880's.

Karabell makes no exaggerated effort to inflate Arthur's reputation. Rather, he shows Arthur as a fundamentally decent if passive president who did more than might have been expected under trying circumstances. In assessing Arthur, Karabell writes:

"Physically stretched and emotionally drained, he strove to do what was right for the country. Given his close association with faction, spoils, and party, that itself was a surprise. The office of the presidency ... seems to alter the way its primary inhabitant views the world. The president may make wise decisions or dumb decisions, but to a man, presidents have confessed to a sense that suddenly partisan pettiness is inappropriate to the office. Some have been able to transcend partisan politics more than others, and on that score Arthur is certainly among the most honorable chief executives the country has seen. He tried to serve the general good rather than the interests of his faction."

"Arthur managed to be a decent man and a decent president in an era in which decency was in short supply."

There are no shortcuts to learning history and no substitutes for wide reading and the development of judgment. Karabell's book is a good summary and perhaps an invitation to read and think further. The book offers a good overview of a neglected president and his era. It is also a thoughtful meditation on the varied forms of leadership.

Robin Friedman

Jim says

This quick read is an excellent way to learn the essentials of Chester A. Arthur's Presidency. The early part of the book describes the political culture that enabled a person, well respected, who had never held an elected office to become the Vice Presidential nominee. He distinguished himself by his cabinet selection and by operating a responsible office of the Presidency when the country was in a period of calm. During his presidency notable legislation that was passed included Tariff legislation and the creation of the Federal Civil Service Act. He also began the revitalization of the depleted Navy by constructing iron clad ships. To his credit President Arthur vetoed a Rivers and Harbors Bill (too much pork barrel) and an anti-Chinese immigration act. During his administration the effort to build the Panama Canal was started.

He did not seek the Presidency and rose to the occasion as was necessary when placed in the position.

Steven Peterson says

Chester Alan Arthur was a surprise president. He was selected to run for VEEP from pure political reasons. However, he fell into the presidency and, against many fears, did not mess up in that office. As the author states (Page 143): ". . . some men are neither born great, nor achieve greatness, nor have it thrust upon them. Some people just do the best they can in a difficult situation, and sometimes that turns out just fine."

Chester Arthur was one of the United States' "accidental presidents," thrust into office because of the

assassination of James Garfield. This book, as others in the series, provides a thumbnail sketch of Arthur (text is 143 pages long). Born in Vermont, his family moved to New York when he was ten years old. He began his political work as a bureaucrat and patronage administrator. While he was enmeshed in the "spoils system," he was not corrupt and was generally pretty well liked. In 1871, he received a coveted position--collector of the New York customhouse. He earned plenty in that role.

Comes the 1880 presidential race. Garfield, a "dark horse," won the nomination and Arthur was selected as his V-P partner, as a result of torturous Republican politics. And he had never been elected to any office prior to that!

The Republicans won, Garfield was assassinated, and Arthur became president. One comment says a great deal, when someone said (Page 61): "Chet Arthur? President of the United States? Good God!" Against the expectations of many, he served without any great errors, and with some positive contributions. (1) While he did not take an active role, he did sign the Pendleton Law, providing Civil Service reform. (2) He did take steps to modernize the embarrassing United States Navy. (3) He was involved with reducing the tariff. (4) Etc. Perhaps more important, he made no major blunders (as many had expected).

He was diagnosed with a dreadful disease, Bright's Disease, which made the last part of his stint as President miserable. While he would have liked another term, such was not to be. He left the presidency with dignity, but with a disease that doomed him.

All in all, a nice biography of a little known and not very great president--but one who did not make things worse than when he entered office.

Jc says

Chet was not the most memorable of Presidents. And, I don't know if one needs to have much more in depth a study of him than this 150 pager affords. However, Mr. Karabell does squeeze a lot of information into this short book. One does come away with an appreciation for Pres. Arthur as a good man for his time, if not altogether that exciting a one.

Steve says

<http://bestpresidentialbios.com/2014/...>

"Chester Alan Arthur" is Zachary Karabell's 2004 biography of the twenty-first president. Karabell is a historian, asset manager and economist. He is also the author of several books including "The Last Campaign: How Harry Truman Won the 1948 Election" and "Parting the Desert: The Creation of the Suez Canal."

As a member of The American Presidents Series, Karabell's biography is concise and fast-paced. With just 143 pages, this book can be read in a single sitting and is both articulate and straightforward. And, typical for books in this series, key themes are clearly presented and unnecessary details are kept to a minimum.

Many readers believe that a crisp, economical biography is perfect for an obscure president like Chester Arthur. But while the concept is appealing, Arthur's personality is too multifaceted to really merit such a concise study. A lengthier and more penetrating review of his life would reveal layers of color and complexity that a relatively rushed biography simply cannot capture.

But Chester Arthur's personality is not boundless and Karabell successfully captures much of what makes this former president unique. He finds time, for instance, to reveal traits such as Arthur's affinity for fashion and food, his fondness for late evenings "out with the boys" (much to the chagrin of Mrs. Arthur) and even his decorating taste...revealed during a renovation of the White House.

What is less thoroughly explored in the rush through his life is the full dichotomy between Arthur the "spoilsman" of New York politics and Arthur the "reform president." But while Karabell takes care to investigate this dramatic evolution in Arthur's approach to public policy, he is unable to fully examine its nuances because the book's pace begs for a binary, not shaded, answer.

And I cannot recall any mention of Julia Sand, the bedridden but intellectually spirited woman who offered a stream of unsolicited advice to the new president through the mail – and eventually received a surprise visit from him.

Most readers, however, are likely to find Karabell's efficient style quite appealing. While a slower pace would reveal more of Arthur's character, this biography provides significant payback for a very modest investment of time. And there is no need for readers to carefully decode hidden messages in the text – key themes pertaining to Arthur's personality and politics are well-revealed.

Overall, "Chester Alan Arthur" is a successful, if brief, biography of the twenty-first president. Although this study uncovers little that is new of Arthur's life or legacy, it proves comprehensive and extremely efficient. While not the definitive biography of Chester Arthur, Karabell's book is successful in its mission to provide much about this lesser-known president in a potent, punchy format.

Overall rating: 3¾ stars

Joe says

Book Forty of my Presidential Challenge.

"For those who want presidents to be heroes, and, failing that, villains, for those who expect them to be larger-than-life figures, Arthur's tenure in office isn't satisfying. The nature of our expectations would have to change dramatically for Arthur to be reevaluated as one of this country's best presidents. An yet, in spite of what Shakespeare wrote, some men are neither great, nor achieve greatness, nor have it thrust upon them. Some people just do the best they can in a difficult situation, and sometimes that turns out just fine."

What did I know about Chester A. Arthur going into this book?

1. He was President Garfield's Vice-President and took over after the assassination.
2. He had some bitchin' Stachburns.
3. He was the answer to one of Simon's riddles in "Die Hard with a Vengeance."

After reading this book, I kind of like ol' Chet Arthur. Undoubtedly, no one ever wanted to be President less

and enjoyed it less after he got there. Arthur's forte was working behind the scenes. He was a glad hander, a fundraiser. He wasn't a leader. He wasn't a policy wonk. He simply enjoyed being in powerful positions because of the spoils that accompanied it.

We shouldn't look down on him for this. Most people don't want to be President, I think wanting to be President (especially in this day and age) is practically a sign of mental illness.

Once in office, he didn't do much. He'd never made waves in his life and he wasn't going to start doing so just because he was President now. However, he can be credited with a few things.

1. Most important, he signed into law the Pendleton Act. This Act was the first (admittedly small) step towards reforming the spoils system which had been plaguing politics for over 100 years. Without this reform, each time an elected official took office, every single employee under them would be fired, no matter how small the job. That lack of continuity is bad for government and the country. Especially with how complicated some of these jobs were becoming. We needed people doing government work with a bare minimum of professionalism.

2. He didn't appoint only his faction of the Republican party to power. This was before the Pendleton Act and shows that he was a fair guy (or was just really good at understanding public perception). Probably both.

Arthur wasn't corrupt but he did tolerate some corruption. He knew that Stephen Dorsey committed electoral fraud to help Garfield get elected and (during at least one drunken night) thought that fact was hilarious. But hey, Arthur was always a go along to get along kind of guy.

Ultimately, he didn't mess anything up, and the country was slightly better off in the long run after his four years in office. I doubt that 50% of Presidents can say that.

Shawn Thrasher says

A mostly milquetoast presidency is made far more interesting by the sometimes witty and urbane and interestingly historical stylings of Zachary Karabell. Arthur was doomed to serve (if doomed is indeed the right word) in not-so-interesting times, but Karabell concludes that Arthur was still a decent, honorable gentleman. Regardless of how much you actually learn about Arthur, you'll be entertained by this light, short biography.

Doreen Petersen says

A delightful biography of the 21st US president. Arthur was known as a Gentleman Boss but as a president he was lukewarm. Taking into account his preference to remain in the world of business politics was not his strong point. It is however a very interesting read that I would suggest to all.

Michael Austin says

This is both the first biography of Chester A Arthur I have ever read and the first volume in Henry Holt's "The American Presidents" series that I have read. I intend to read more of both.

This was a short book--about 150 pages--and could be read in a single evening. It is not a heavily footnoted doorstop like, say, Ron Chernow's recent biography of Grant. It gives a brief overview of Arthur and his times and then gets out of the way. That is what the books in this series were designed to do, and this one, at least, does it very well. It does not convey the information of the standard 900 page presidential biography, but also, it does not require the investment of time. I have already downloaded Robert Remini's volume on John Quincy Adams and Gary Hart's (yes THAT Gary Hart) volume on James Monroe.

Karabell's writing in this volume is clear and lively. He has a good grasp of the important threads that were winding through American culture at the time. And he genuinely seems to like Chester Arthur, perhaps the least qualified human being to actually become president until, well, now.

And he does a good job of explaining Arthur's signature accomplishment: the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act. This is one of the most consequential pieces of legislation in American history. It deprived a corrupt political system of its driving power--patronage appointments. Between the Jackson and Arthur administrations, pretty much all government employment was political: postal workers, customs officials, BIA agents--the works. Whoever controlled the presidency (and often a seat in the Senate) could direct thousands of jobs to supporters, who were then required to contribute a portion of their salary to the political party/political official/political party that controlled the patronage. This was all perfectly legal, and most politicians wanted to keep it because it kept them in power.

Patronage was then what Congressional Redistricting and unlimited campaign contributions are today--the way that incumbents stacked the deck in their favor. This made it a bipartisan issue, because both parties had incumbents who wanted to use patronage to hold on to their jobs. And the poster child of patronage was New York Republican Senator Roscoe Conkling, who controlled patronage in the New York Port Custom House, which controlled about one-third of the entire US Government's revenue by collecting tariffs on foreign goods.

This means that the head collector for the New York Port was the richest and most powerful patronage position in the country, and for much of the 1870s, this position belonged to Chester A. Arthur, Conkling's protege. Arthur never held any other political position when he was selected to be James Garfield's running mate. He was chosen to placate Conkling and other pro-patronage Republicans--to put the main symbol and top beneficiary of patronage in the White House.

He wasn't just pro-patronage or anti-reform. If Patronage was Dr. Frankenstein, Chester A. Arthur was the dang Monster.

Four months later, Garfield who had begun to make some moves towards civil service reform was killed by a man who fancied himself an officer seeker. Arthur was president, and that meant that patronage was safe.

Except that it wasn't. In one of the most dramatic examples we have of a president rising to the stature required by the office, Arthur did not exactly become a champion of civil service reform, but he did shepherd it through when it became politically feasible. And he didn't stand in its way. As Karabell assesses it, "Arthur did for civil service reform what he had done for most things in his life: he added a note of grace and honor, and the result was a balanced piece of legislation at a time when that was rare."

Arthur is a fascinating study. Not a great president, perhaps, but one who came into office with extremely low expectations and exceeded them by every measure. Karabell's parting assessment of Arthur captures something, not just about the man, but about the world.

For those who want presidents to be heroes, and, failing that, villains, for those who expect them to be larger-than-life figures, Arthur's tenure in office isn't satisfying. The nature of our expectations would have to change dramatically for Arthur to be reevaluated as one of this country's best presidents. And yet, in spite of what Shakespeare wrote, some men are neither great, nor achieve greatness, nor have it thrust upon them. Some people just do the best they can in a difficult situation, and sometimes that turns out just fine.

I hope that some day someone will say the same about me.

Jim says

A very good short biography of a mostly forgotten but actually pretty decent US President. Just as interesting to me as Arthur himself were the stories of what big city party politics were like in the late 19th century, before the formation of the modern civil service (which was one of the major initiatives of Arthur's presidency). If we think today's politicians are corrupt, they look like saints compared to some of their predecessors!

David Bales says

This is a short biography of President Chester A. Arthur, who succeeded James Garfield after Garfield's death in 1881. Arthur has been called one of the "forgotten presidents" because so few Americans have ever heard of him or know anything about him. Born in Vermont, Arthur was raised in Upstate New York and ended up becoming a lawyer that hitched his cart to the new emerging Republican party in the 1850s. He ended up becoming prominent as a Manhattan attorney, with close ties to the GOP in New York State, a "stalwart" or regular party supporter who became close to politico and later U.S. Senator, Roscoe Conkling. Arthur was a promoter of the spoils system or patronage system and ended up being appointed by President Grant to be the president of New York City's custom house, an endless source of patronage jobs and big salaries. Although Arthur was himself not corrupt, the customs house was a thorn in the side of reformers who wanted the system to adopt a fair civil service and not rely on political affiliations. Pressure from reformers ultimately prompted President Hayes to relieve Arthur of his position in 1878, exacerbating the war between the reformers and the old guard. The GOP was very divided at this time, and in 1880 the party bypassed better known candidates on either sides of the division to nominate James Garfield who stood neutral between them. As a sop to the stalwarts, Arthur was nominated to his astonishment, (he had never sought or wanted elected office and was comfortable in his role as attorney to the powerful.) At any rate, Arthur assumed he would serve out his term uneventfully as another forgotten vice president. All this changed when Garfield was shot by a "disgruntled office seeker" in July, 1881. His assassin was probably mentally ill, but had pestered Garfield and others for months for a patronage job. Garfield died in September, and Chester Arthur was suddenly president of the United States, to the horror of the reformers.

Arthur, however, surprised everyone with his competent and objective administration. He refused to give favors to the stalwarts or favor any one faction, garnering the anger of all of them. He put together a professional cabinet and later signed the bill creating the U.S. Civil Service exam, which began to end the old spoils system. Bedeviled by Bright's disease while in office, (his kidneys didn't work very well) Arthur was a better than average president, but burned most of his private papers and correspondence after he left

office, shrouding his private thoughts in mystery and enshrining his status as a "forgotten president." He served until 1885, passed over by the convention in 1884.

Rory says

Zachary Karabell starts his examination of the life and sudden presidency of Chester Alan Arthur from the perspective of an author who seems like he still hasn't grasped his subject, like he's mulling over everything he's read just to make sure he's got it right. But then, once that frustration wears off as to Karabell's method (and it disappears quickly), it becomes clear that Karabell is not only exactly the right person to write about Arthur, but he loves the subject and he loves the time and all that was contained within. He gives context to every movement of Congress in that time, explaining clearly tariffs and the spoils system and patronage. His bio says that he taught at Harvard and Dartmouth. It feels like this book is hopefully what it feels like to attend one of his lectures.

I especially treasure the final paragraph in his epilogue, which is generally rare among presidential biographies:

"For those who want presidents to be heroes, and, failing that, villains, for those who expect them to be larger-than-life figures, Arthur's tenure in office isn't satisfying. The nature of our expectations would have to change dramatically for Arthur to be reevaluated as one of this country's best presidents. And yet, in spite of what Shakespeare wrote, some men are neither born great, nor achieve greatness, nor have it thrust upon them. Some people just do the best they can in a difficult situation and sometimes that turns out just fine."

Emily says

If I were a president, I would be Chester A. Arthur. He is hands down my favorite, and here's why:

- 1) He had 82 pairs of pants.
- 2) He worked from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. --that's all!
- 3) He snubbed the political machine that brought him notoriety and proved that he had a moral backbone.

It's a short book, and a good little read on a president you probably know nothing about.

Matt says

Karabell illuminates his subject with an unembellished history. A wonderful portrait.
