Presidential Assassination

The “Trauma Team” Care of James A. Garfield

What Went Wrong?

John B. Hanks, MD, FACS
University of Virginia
Nothing to disclose.
James Garfield – Personal Background

Born in 1831 in rural Ohio

1851: Western Reserve Eclectic Institute

1854: Entered Williams College

1856: Graduated, offered teaching position at WREI

1857: Appointed President of WREI
James Garfield – Politics & War

1859: Won a seat in Ohio State Senate
1860: Lt Col US Army, 42nd Ohio Regiment
1862: US Congress
    Served 9 terms
    Chair of Appropriations Committee
1880: Republican Convention in Chicago
James Garfield – A Reluctant Candidate

1880: Republican Convention

President Hayes had decided not to run

“Stalwarts” back Grant

“Half Breeds” backed Blaine and Sherman

Garfield’s eloquent support of Sherman

Garfield nominated after 36 ballots

Defeated General Winfield Scott Hancock

Inaugurated 20th President on March 4, 1881
Chester Arthur 1829-1886

Rose through Republican Party as member of Stalwart faction
Protégé of Roscoe Conkling
Appointed Collector of Port of New York
Fired by President Hayes under cloud of corruption
Garfield Administration

- Committed to equal rights for Black Americans
- Appointed able men to his Cabinet, resistance to Conkling
- Refinanced US debt; decreased interest rate on public debt by 40%; $10 million savings
- First administration to adopt Atlantic and Pacific Ocean policies; Hawaii
- “Star Route” scandal, campaign manager
President Garfield

- Devoted family man, 7 children
- Voracious reader and scholar
- Physically energetic and “people person”
- Capable and effective administrator
Charles Guiteau

b 1841 - briefly attended University of Michigan

- studied and passed the bar in Illinois

- wildly erratic behavior; strong family history of “insanity”

- 1880 believed he deserved a position in gov’t

- had petitioned Blaine and the White House for jobs

- “divinely ordained” to kill the President

- purchased a .44 Bulldog revolver for $14
James Garfield – The Shooting
July 2, 1881 at Baltimore and Potomac Station
Garfield planning to attend 25th Reunion at Williams
President Garfield – The Shooting

2 shots: 1st - superficial, 2nd - right lumbar area

President conscious, vomited, pain in legs
President Garfield – The Doctors

Dr. Smith Townsend - first to arrive
  Health Officer for District
  Inserted finger into wound

9 more physicians

Dr. Charles Purvis - Freedman’s Hospital
  1 of 8 black MDs in Union Army
President Garfield – Dr. Bliss

D. Willard Bliss – summoned by Robert T. Lincoln
DC practice for 30 years
Briefly expelled from DC Medical Society
“Very little respect” for Lister’s teachings
Probed the wound again with probe and finger
Garfield transported back to the White House
Dr. D Willard Bliss 1825-1889

Studied at Cleveland Medical College

US Army Surgeon with 3rd Michigan infantry

Strong believer in “allopathic medicine” & use of “harsh medicines”
American Medical Practice – 1880s

1847: American Medical Association

   Very little regulatory role

1876: Joseph Lister – toured

   America, lectured on his 10 year experience with antisepsis & “germ theory”

   -American surgeons, including Samuel Gross, largely dismissed Lister’s work
American Medical Practice – 1880s

Allopathy – “heroic” doses, bleeding, purging
   Bliss: a firm advocate

Homeopathy – “minimal,” diluted doses
   Edson: Civil War battlefield experience
   Boynton: probable WH “leak”
President Garfield – The Doctors

Bliss wanted complete control

Dismissed Dr. Jedediah Baxter, Garfield’s personal physician

Mrs. Garfield insisted on Dr. Susan Edson & Dr. Silas Boynton

Bliss relegated them to nursing roles
President Garfield – The Doctors

Dr. David Hayes Agnew, Chief of Surgery at U Penn
Dr. Franklin Hamilton, Bellevue Medical College, NYC

Neither advocated Lister’s teachings
Bliss: “If I can’t save him, no one can.”
THE HON. WARNER MILLER.

The Hon. Warner Miller, who was on Saturday last chosen to succeed ex-Senator Thomas C. Platt, was born in Oswego County, New York, August 12, 1836, and graduated at Union College in 1860. On leaving college he began teaching in the Fort Edward Collegiate Institute, but when the war broke out he enlisted as a private in the Fifth New York Cavalry. He served in the Shenandoah Valley with distinction, and was promoted to Sergeant-Major and Lieutenant. At the battle of Winchester he was taken prisoner, and remained in captivity till the close of the war. Mr. Miller then made a trip to Europe, but soon returned, and established himself in the paper-manufacturing business in Herkimer County, and a few years ago he erected a mill at Lyonsdale, Lewis County, for the manufacture of pulp and paper.

Mr. Miller made his first appearance in public life in 1873, when he was elected to the Assembly as a Republican from Herkimer County. He was re-elected in 1874. During his two years in the Assembly he was an influential member. In 1878 he was elected to the Forty-sixth Congress from the Twenty-second District, and in 1880 he was elected to the Forty-seventh Congress.

IN CHARGE OF THE PRESIDENT.

Our readers will be interested in the portraits of the medical gentlemen who have had charge of the President's case from the hour when he was shot to the present time. Drs. Bliss, Woodward, Barnes, and Reverburn have been in constant attendance at the White House, with Drs. Agnew and Hamilton as consulting physicians. That they have managed the case with great skill is admitted by the highest medical and surgical authorities in the country; and their watchful fidelity and untiring care have earned them the gratitude of the whole nation. Mention should also be made of the services of Dr. Susan Eason, whose portrait appears in our double-page picture. She has been from the first a most sympathetic and efficient nurse, supplementing the medical and surgical treatment in a manner of which only a woman is capable. The country has every reason to be satisfied with the services it has been able to call to its assistance in the present crisis.
President Garfield – Clinical Course

July 2 to Sept 6, 1881 at the White House

- Bliss inflexible control
- Multiple probings of wound, no sterile precautions
- Alimentation regimens varied
- Isolation from friends, family physicians
- Continued optimistic reports despite clinical course
President Garfield – Clinical Course, 7/2-9/6

The wound

- Emphasis on locating the bullet
- Multiple probing and 3 incision/drainage procedures
- AG Bell, induction coil location attempt
- Progressive septic picture
  
  Fever, parotid abscess, subcutaneous abscess
  
  Right lower quadrant pain
President Garfield – Clinical Course, 7/2-9/6

Alimentation

- Garfield’s past history of dysentery
- Bliss ordered “heavy” diet of meat, bacon, pork chops
- Continued vomiting
- Later, “rectal feeding,” severe emaciation, weight loss
President Garfield – Clinical Course, 7/2-9/6

Isolation

- White House location, adjacent to marsh
  fear of malaria, rat infestation
  hot and humid weather
- Bliss, control of visitor flow and clinical practice
- Resultant psychological, nutritional, and physical deprivation
President Garfield – Clinical Course, 7/2-9/6

9 weeks post GSW

- Bliss reports cc is “stable”
- President has recurring fever, draining wound, subcutaneous abscess, pain in abdomen & legs
- Severe malnutrition
- Garfield demands transfer to sea cottage, Elberon, NJ
REMOVING THE PRESIDENT FROM THE EXPRESS WAGON TO THE RAILWAY CAR.—FROM A SKETCH BY THEO. R. DAVIS.

FROM WASHINGTON TO FULTON, NOVEMBER 5, 1881.
REMOVING THE PRESIDENT FROM THE CAR TO FRANCKLYN COTTAGE— FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL.

FROM WASHINGTON TO FRANCKLYN COTTAGE.
President Garfield – Clinical Course, 9/7-9/19

- Maintained good spirits, Bliss reports “improvement”
- Bliss dismissed all doctors except Agnew & Hamilton
- Several subq pustules left axilla & back drained
- Continued attempts at nutrition, rectal feeding
- Sept 19th, acute chest pain, unconscious
- Pulseless at 10pm
PRESIDENT JAMES A. GARFIELD AFTER DEATH.

BORN IN ORANGE, OHIO, NOVEMBER 19, 1831. DIED IN ELBERON, NEW JERSEY, SEPTEMBER 19, 1881.
President Garfield – Autopsy

- Dr. Lamb, prosector
- DW Bliss
- JK Barnes
- F Hamilton
- J Stanley Brown
- JJ Woodward
- R Reyburn
- DH Agnew
Record of the post mortem examination of the body of President J. R. Harford, made September 29, 1881, commencing at 12:30 p.m., eighteen hours after death, at Franklin Cottage, Ellerson, New Jersey.

Present and assisting: Dr. H. Bliss; Surgeon-General J. F. Barnes, U.S. Army; Surgeon J. F. Woodward, U.S. Army; Dr. Robert Rayburn, Dr. Frank H. Hamilton, Dr. D. Page, Agent; Dr. Andrew H. Stull of Ellerson (and New York) and Acting Assistant Surgeon J. S. Lamb, of the Army Medical Museum, Washington, D.C.

Before commencing the examination a consultation was held by these physicians in a room adjoining that in which the body lay and it was unanimously agreed that the dissection should be made by Dr. Lamb, and that Surgeon Woodward should record the observations made. It was further unanimously agreed that the cranium should not be opened; Surgeon Woodward then proposed that the examination should be conducted as follows:

That the body should be viewed externally and any morbid appearances existing recorded. That a catheter should then be passed into the wound, as was done during life to wash it out for the purpose of assisting to find the position of the bullet. That a long incision should be made from the superior extremity of the sterno to the pubis and this crossed
President Garfield – Autopsy

External Examination

- Emaciation, loss of muscle mass
- Multiple subcutaneous abscesses
- Indurated wound, placed 14 inch “flexible catheter”
- Draining sinus tract below right ear & left axilla
President Garfield – Autopsy

Internal Examination

- Bullet to left midline having passed through L1
  Found behind the pancreas
- No damage to abdominal organs
- Splenic artery laceration, laminated clot
- Large retroperitoneal abscess extending to right iliac fossa (where catheter was found)
- Large perihepatic abscess
BULLET—lodged behind pancreas (in contact with splenic artery)

PATH OF BULLET
1. The point at which the splenic artery gave way. 2, 2. The splenic artery. 3. The celiac axis. 4. The superior mesenteric artery. 5, 5. The splenic vein. 6. The cyst in which the ball was found. 7, 7. A portion of the mass of extravasated blood. 8, 8. The pancreas. 9, 9. Adipose tissue behind the transverse meso-colon.
President Garfield – Clinical Management

- Survivable wound, even in the 1880s
- Management of care
  
  Emphasis on location of bullet
  
  Little regard for emerging practice of antisepsis
President Garfield – Autopsy

Dr. Bliss and Team Management

- Multiple probing and unsterile attempts at drainage
- Alimentation
- Isolation

- “Fake news” about President’s clinical course
President Garfield – Guiteau’s Defense

“The doctors who mistreated him (Garfield) ought to bear the odium of his death, and not his assailant. They ought to be indicted for murdering James A. Garfield and not me.”

“I admit the shooting. I deny the killing.”

Charles Guiteau
Statement at trial
Charles Guiteau

- Imprisoned in DC, maintained his innocence
- Intense arguments over plea of insanity
- Trial from Nov 1881 to Jan 1882
- Found guilty and hanged on June 30, 1882
- Autopsy: question of neurosyphilis
“The care given to the President was not only adequate, but exemplary.”

Sent Congress bill for $25,000
Received $6,500
Chester Arthur 1829-1886

Became 21st President on Sept 19, 1881

Did much to advance civil service reform, Pendleton Act

Gained a great deal of respect for his reforms
Aphorismi

“Ars longa, vita brevis.”

“The art of medicine is long and life is short; opportunity fleeting; the experiment perilous; judgment flawed.”

Hippocrates
Thank you