

Vice Presidents of the United States Chester A. Arthur (1881)

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Introduction by Mark O. Hatfield.



Such an honor and opportunity comes to very few of the millions of Americans, and to that man but once. No man can refuse it, and I will not.

—Chester A. Arthur

Following the Civil War and Reconstruction, "boss rule" and "machine politics" flourished in the United States, and nowhere more intensely than in New York, the most populated state in the Union. The Tweed Ring ran the Democratic party's Tammany Hall apparatus in New York, and an equally powerful machine operated within the state's Republican party. Throughout the 1870s, that party's "stalwart" faction, led by Senator Roscoe Conkling, dominated New York politics until it reached both its apex and nadir within the space of a few months in 1881. Although responsible for some of the most tawdry politics in American history, Conkling's machine also produced two vice presidents, Chester Alan Arthur and Levi P. Morton, one of whom—Arthur—became president of the United States under tragic circumstances and turned against the machine and its spoilsmen.

A spellbinding orator with a commanding presence, Senator Roscoe Conkling was the uncrowned leader of the Senate in an era before majority and minority leaders were formally designated. One woman newspaper correspondent described him as the most alluring politician of his time and "the Apollo of the Senate." New York's other senator, Thomas C. Platt, similarly considered Conkling one of the handsomest men he had ever met. He was over six feet tall, of slender build, and stood straight as an arrow. . . . A curl, described as Hyperion, rolled over his forehead. An imperial [air] added much to the beauty of his Apollo-like appearance. His noble figure, flashing eye and majestic voice made one forget that he was somewhat foppish in his dress.

A physical fitness fanatic, Conkling boxed to keep in shape for his political battles, and a journalist noted that Conkling also "loved to use words as a prize-fighter loves to use his fists." No one admired Conkling's talents and abilities more than he himself. A vain and haughty man with a monumental ego, he believed himself unfettered by

the rules that governed lesser mortals. These impulses led him to carry on a scandalous affair with Kate Chase Sprague, the wife of his Senate colleague William Sprague, and to challenge openly two presidents—Rutherford B. Hayes and James A. Garfield—for power and patronage.¹

Conkling built his political machine on a rich source of patronage, the New York customhouse, headed by the collector of the port of New York. Before income taxes, the chief sources of federal revenue were the duties charged on imported goods. The busy port of New York served as the point of deposit for many imports, and its customhouse became the largest federal office in the government, taking in more revenue and handing out more jobs than any other. Since the days of Andrew Jackson, the "spoils system" had prevailed in the hiring and retention of federal employees. Each new administration cleaned house, regardless of the ability of individual civil servants, making room for its own appointees. As was the case at the city and state level, these federal jobs provided the glue that united political party organizations. Yet increasingly in the post-Civil War era, federal offices like the New York customhouse became symbols of waste, fraud, and incompetence that cost the government millions of dollars.²

Political Lieutenant in the Conkling Machine

From 1871 to 1877, the head of the New York customhouse was Roscoe Conkling's close ally, Chester Alan Arthur. Born in North Fairfield, Vermont, on October 5, 1829, Arthur was the son of a Baptist minister who held a succession of pastorates throughout Vermont and upstate New York. When his father finally settled at a church in Schenectady, young Arthur was able to attend Union College, from which he graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1848. For a few years he taught school and was a principal. He then studied law and gained admission to the bar in New York City in 1854. During the Civil War, he became a judge advocate general and later the quartermaster general of the New York militia. Although he never saw combat, these posts enabled him to campaign as "General Arthur" in his later political career.

Arthur married Virginia-born Ellen Lewis Herndon in 1859 and established his family in a handsome brownstone on Lexington Avenue near Gramercy Park. His law practice enabled him to live in a conspicuously stylish fashion. At first, Arthur was identified with the conservative wing of his party, led by former Governor William H. Seward and Albany boss Thurlow Weed. But at the state convention in 1867, he entered the orbit of the rising political star Roscoe Conkling. An upstate Republican, Conkling needed alliances with New York City men and recruited Arthur into his organization. Conkling's biographer David Jordan assessed Arthur as "a shrewd, imaginative, and meticulous political manager; he was a master organizer, a necessity for Conkling's new organization." The popular "Chet" Arthur rose quickly within the ranks of the machine. In 1871, President Ulysses S. Grant rewarded Conkling's loyalty to his administration by appointing Arthur to the highly lucrative post of collector of the port of New York.³

Numerous scandals within the administration of President Ulysses S. Grant led Republicans to seek a less-tarnished candidate for the 1876 contest. Chet Arthur supported Conkling's bid for the Republican presidential nomination, but when the nomination went instead to the reform-conscious governor of Ohio, Rutherford B. Hayes, Arthur threw the support of his office behind Hayes, raising funds and getting out voters to help Hayes carry New York and win the election. Rather than showing his gratitude, however, President Hayes appointed a commission to investigate the New York customhouse. When the group's report exposed inefficiency, graft, and a bloated payroll, Hayes issued an order forbidding federal officeholders to take part in political activities, so that the customhouse could be run under a merit system. Conkling's lieutenants, Arthur as collector and Alonzo Cornell as naval officer of the port—both members of the Republican State Committee—should have resigned under this order, but they refused. Hayes then fired both men and nominated Theodore Roosevelt, Sr. (father of the future president) and L. Bradford Prince to replace them. An outraged Conkling persuaded the Senate to reject both nominations.⁴

The Stalwarts and the Half-Breeds

As the election of 1880 approached, Hayes chose not to seek a second term. Rather than become a candidate himself, Conkling threw his support behind former president U.S. Grant. Conkling particularly wanted to block the nomination of his longtime rival, Senator and former House Speaker James G. Blaine of Maine. Back in 1866, when

they were both members of the House, Blaine had delivered a sarcastic speech that mocked Conkling's "turkey-gobbler strut" and "Hyperion curl." Delighted political cartoonists had seized on these characteristics to mock Conkling. Although Blaine and Conkling served together in the House and Senate for another fourteen years, they never spoke to one another again. Each dedicated himself to blocking the other from becoming president.⁵ At the national convention in June, Conkling proposed a unit rule to force the entire New York delegation to support Grant, but William H. Robertson, a Blaine supporter, led a minority of the delegation to rebel against the stalwarts. Robertson's faction, known dismissively as "half-breeds," joined with other independent delegates to defeat the unit rule. The result was an extended deadlock that was broken only when the Blaine forces swung their support to a darkhorse candidate, Ohio Representative James A. Garfield. Garfield's supporters realized that they needed a New Yorker on the ticket, not only for the state's large potential harvest of electoral votes but also to mollify Conkling. Garfield at first wanted Levi P. Morton, his friend from the House of Representatives, but Morton felt he could not accept without Conkling's approval. When Conkling made it clear that no friend of his should join the ticket, Morton declined. The Garfield forces next turned to Chet Arthur, who showed no such reluctance. "Such an honor and opportunity comes to very few of the millions of Americans, and to that man but once," Arthur told Conkling. "No man can refuse it, and I will not."⁶

The selection of Chet Arthur for vice president did not pacify Conkling, whom Garfield knew was a man "inspired more by his hates than his loves." In August 1880, Garfield went to New York to make peace with Conkling's machine. In the Fifth Avenue Hotel rooms of Levi Morton, Garfield met with Arthur, Platt, and other machine leaders—but not with Conkling, who stayed away. The Conkling men sought an understanding about patronage in a Garfield administration. In return for assurances that he would take their wishes into consideration for New York appointments, they agreed to raise funds for his campaign. According to Platt, Garfield also disavowed any close relations with Hayes' civil service proposals. With these guarantees, the Conkling machine threw its weight behind Garfield, enabling him to win a very narrow victory in November. It was said that, while Garfield owed his nomination to Blaine, he owed his election to Conkling.⁷

Party reformers were chagrined at the choice of Chet Arthur, the recently deposed collector of the port of New York and a symbol of corrupt machine politics, as Garfield's running mate. Most Republican newspapers held the vice-presidential candidate in low esteem. One campaign biography devoted 533 pages to Garfield and only 21 pages—almost as an embarrassed aside—to Arthur. Enumerating his "good" qualities, the campaign tract observed that his face was "full, fat and fair," that he did not talk with "offensive accents," that he dressed "in perfect good taste," and that he was "fairly corpulent as his pictures very well suggest."⁸ Arthur probably gained some public sympathy for his wife's death in 1880, which left him to raise a son and young daughter.

An Evenly Balanced Senate

Once elected, Vice President Arthur proved crucial to his party's fortunes in the Senate. At the beginning of the Forty-seventh Congress, the party balance in the Senate was exactly equal, a situation in which the vice president's vote might be needed to give the Republicans a majority to organize the body and chair its committees. When the Senate met on March 4, 1881, there were 37 Republicans, 37 Democrats, and 2 Independents. One of the Independents, former Supreme Court Justice David Davis, announced that he planned to vote with the Democrats to organize the chamber. If the other Independent, William Mahone of Virginia, could also be persuaded to join them, the Democrats would take the majority. Rumors spread that the White House was plying Mahone with "champagne and satisfaction," or promises of patronage, to win him for the Republicans. With a noisy mob watching from the galleries, Vice President Arthur directed the clerk to call the roll. When Mahone's name was reached, the Virginia senator, sitting on the Democratic side of the aisle, voted with the Republicans, giving Arthur the deciding vote. For his vote, Mahone received a basket of flowers from the White House, the chairmanship of the Agriculture Committee, and control of federal patronage in Virginia. Democrats, however, intended to fight the administration at every turn, making every vote—especially the vice president's—critical.⁹

At this juncture, a fissure disrupted Republican ranks. Much to Roscoe Conkling's chagrin, President Garfield had named James G. Blaine as secretary of state, and from that post Blaine plotted against his longtime rival. While a number of offices went to Conkling men, they were excluded from the cabinet seats they desired—especially the

secretary of the treasury, which had jurisdiction over the collector of the Port of New York. On the day before their inauguration, Arthur had visited Garfield, along with Senators Conkling and Platt, to plead for their candidate for treasury secretary. As Garfield noted in his diary, Conkling seemed "full of apprehension that he had been or was to be cheated."¹⁰

"A Square Blow at Conkling"

Conkling had good reason for apprehension. On March 23, Vice President Arthur, while presiding over the Senate, received a list of presidential nominations. His eye fell on the name of New York state senator William H. Robertson for collector of the port of New York, which, as one reporter described it, represented "a square blow at Conkling." Arthur folded the document so that Robertson's name appeared uppermost and had a page deliver it to Senator Conkling. From the press gallery, reporters watched Conkling walk rapidly to his colleague Platt and hold a "whispered conference." Conkling made it known that he considered the nomination personally offensive, and Vice President Arthur joined with Senators Conkling and Platt in a letter asking the president to withdraw Robertson's name. At the Republican caucus, Conkling delivered a long, eloquent, and bitter attack on the president for his breach of senatorial courtesy. He persuaded Senate Republicans to postpone the customs collectors' nominations and take up less controversial posts. President Garfield retaliated by withdrawing the nominations of five of Conkling's men. When it began to look as if Senate Democrats would contribute enough votes to confirm Robertson, Conkling and his colleague Tom Platt decided to resign from the Senate and return to New York, where they expected the state legislature to reelect them as a sign of endorsement in their power struggle with the president.¹¹

Vice President Arthur had no trouble deciding which side to take in this epic struggle between his president and his party boss. After the Senate adjourned, Arthur also journeyed to Albany, where he lobbied for Conkling's reelection. J. L. Connery, the editor of the New York *Herald*, which the Conkling machine courted, recalled Arthur telling him in confidence that Garfield had been neither honorable nor truthful. "It is a hard thing to say of a President of the United States, but it is, unfortunately, only the truth," said Arthur. "Garfield—spurred by Blaine, by whom he is easily led—has broken every pledge made to us; not only that, but he seems to have wished to do it in a most offensive way." Garfield's supporters, however, never forgave Arthur for his betrayal of the president.¹²

A Presidential Assassination

The strategy of the Conkling forces unraveled when the New York legislature reacted negatively to the "childish" resignations of its two senators. Led by state senate president pro tempore William Robertson (the customs collector nominee), the half-breeds called on legislators to "stand by the administration," and the legislature entered a month-long deadlock over the senatorial elections. On July 2, Platt withdrew from the race in a last-ditch attempt to improve Conkling's chances of reelection. That same day, on the brink of victory, President Garfield walked arm in arm with Secretary of State Blaine through Washington's Baltimore and Ohio railroad station. A crazed assassin shot the president in the back and then identified himself with Conkling's stalwarts. After lingering throughout the summer, the mortally wounded Garfield died on September 19. By then the New York legislature had rejected Conkling's bid for reelection. "How can I speak into a grave?" Conkling complained. "How can I battle with a shroud. Silence is a duty and a doom."¹³

Garfield's death elevated to the presidency a man who had shared an apartment in Washington with Conkling and who had sided with Conkling against Garfield. Political observers naturally assumed that Conkling would dominate Chet Arthur's administration. Newspaper correspondent Theron Crawford later noted that Conkling "had been in the habit of patronizing Mr. Arthur, and had given him political orders for so many years that he could not imagine this pleasure-loving, easy-going man capable of rebellion." Arthur was in New York when Garfield died, and it was Roscoe Conkling who carried the new president's bag to the station when he left for Washington. Less than a month later, Conkling arrived in Washington and held a private meeting with Arthur. Reporters speculated that the two had chosen a new cabinet, yet no announcement was made to the press. Neither man would publicly acknowledge what had transpired, but their associates described a stormy session. Conkling presented his patronage demands: he wanted William Robertson dismissed as collector and he himself was willing to accept a cabinet portfolio. But Conkling underestimated how deeply the assassination had shocked and sobered Chester

Arthur. Senator Platt described Arthur as "overcome with grief," particularly after newspapers quoted the assassin saying "I am a Stalwart, and I want Arthur for President." Feeling the weight of his new office and calculating that public opinion would never tolerate Robertson's removal, the president rejected Conkling's advice. A New York Republican leader told a friend in the press that President Arthur felt very bitter over the demands Conkling had made on him. "You can put it down for a fact that `Conk' wanted `Chet' to remove Robertson and appoint one of our fellows collector." When Arthur refused, Conkling stormed out, swearing that all of his friends had turned traitor to him.¹⁴

Conkling's mistress, Kate Chase Sprague, tried to intercede with the president, reminding him of "the vital importance of placing a robust, courageous, clear-headed man at the head of the Treasury," and arguing that Conkling would be a "tower of strength" in the cabinet. But Arthur offered neither a cabinet appointment nor the removal of Robertson as collector. Instead, Conkling went into permanent political exile. Although Arthur later named Conkling to the Supreme Court, his former leader declined. At the same time, Arthur accepted Blaine's resignation as secretary of state, feeling that by doing so he had neutralized the heads of both warring factions and could steer a course between them. Senator Chauncey Depew later judged that, while Arthur tried to govern fairly, "he was not big enough, nor strong enough, to contend with the powerful men who were antagonized."¹⁵

Support for Civil Service Reform

Since the martyred President Garfield was regarded as a "victim of that accursed greed for spoils of office," his death rallied public support behind civil service reform legislation. In Arthur's first annual message to Congress in December 1881, he pledged his willingness to enforce any reform legislation that Congress might enact modeled on the British civil service system. Democratic Senator George H. Pendleton of Ohio sponsored a measure that became known as the Pendleton Act, which President Arthur signed in January 1883. The Pendleton Act established a bipartisan Civil Service Commission to set rules by which federal jobs would be filled. The act placed about 14,000 jobs, about one-tenth of the total federal employment at the time, under civil service. Although by no means a complete reversal of the spoils system, it took a large step in that direction. As the journalist Henry Stoddard mused, it was a strange turn of events that a spoilsman like Chester Arthur should sign the first effective civil service law and also be the first president to veto a river and harbor appropriations bill as excessive "—the bill that had come to be known as the `pork barrel' bill into which both parties dug deep."¹⁶

The initial reaction to Vice President Arthur's elevation to the presidency had been one of universal dismay: "Chet Arthur in the White House!" But, as chief executive, Chester Alan Arthur replaced Chet Arthur. The new president acted in a dignified manner, made strong appointments, and won approval for the "elevated tone" of his administration. He redecorated the White House and entertained regally. He became famous for his fourteen-course dinners that often kept his guests at the table until after midnight, consuming fine wines and rich foods. Overeating and underexercising did not help Arthur's health, and during his presidency he suffered from kidney disease that slowly sapped his strength. In 1884, he made himself available for renomination. "Arthur has given us a good administration, but it has been negatively rather than positively good," wrote one dubious journalist. "He has done well, in other words, by not doing anything bad. This kind of goodness does not count for much in presidential campaigns."¹⁷ Arthur's attempt to steer a course between the stalwarts and half-breeds succeeded only in alienating both sides. At the Republican convention, the remnants of the stalwart wing (led by Tom Platt) supported James G. Blaine, on the grounds that Arthur had deserted them. When they tried to persuade Conkling, now a highly successful New York attorney, to emerge from his political retirement and endorse Blaine's presidential candidacy, Conkling acidly replied, "No thank you, I don't engage in criminal practice." Blaine lost New York by a whisker—and with it the election. Grover Cleveland, who had owed his election as governor of New York to the split between the stalwarts and the half-breeds, now became the first Democratic president since the Civil War. Chester Arthur returned to his New York law office. Rapidly declining in health, he died on November 17, 1886, less than two years after leaving the White House. He had been chosen as vice president without much expectation but, when thrust into the presidency, he rose to the occasion and conducted the office with style.¹⁸

Notes:

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2. Ari Hoogenboom, *Outlawing the Spoils: A History of the Civil Service Reform Movement, 1865-1883* (Urbana, IL, 1961), pp. 1-32.
3. David M. Jordan, *Roscoe Conkling of New York: Voice in the Senate* (Ithaca, NY, 1971), pp. 146-48.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 155-78; Chester L. Barrows, *William M. Evarts: Lawyer, Diplomat, Statesman* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1941), p. 326.
5. Ritchie, pp. 136-37.
6. Jordan, p. 341; Stoddard, pp. 118-19; Chauncey M. Depew, *My Memories of Eighty Years* (New York, 1924), pp. 122-23.
7. Justus D. Doenecke, *The Presidencies of James A. Garfield & Chester A. Arthur* (Lawrence, KS, 1981), pp. 26-27; Jordan, p. 439; Lang, ed., pp. 128-32; Alfred R. Conkling, *The Life and Letters of Roscoe Conkling, Orator, Statesman, Advocate* (New York, 1889), p. 614. See also Chapter 22 of this volume, "Levi P. Morton," pp. 6-7.
8. James S. Brisbin, *From The Tow-Path to the White House: The Early Life and Public Career of James A. Garfield* (Philadelphia, 1880), pp. 546-47.
9. "The Great Senate Deadlock: 1881," *Senate History* 9 (July 1984): 1, 9-10.
10. Harry James Brown and Frederic D. Williams, eds., *The Diary of James A. Garfield* (East Lansing, MI, 1981), 4:552.
11. Ben: Perley Poore, *Perley's Reminiscences of Sixty Years in the National Metropolis* (Philadelphia, 1886), pp. 400-402; Conkling, p. 640; Doenecke, p. 45.
12. Theodore Clarke Smith, *The Life and Letters of James Abram Garfield* (New Haven, CT, 1925), 2:1128-29; T.B. Connery, "Secret History of the Garfield-Conkling Tragedy," *Cosmopolitan* 23 (June 1897): 145-62.
13. Jordan, pp. 379-409; Henry L. Stoddard, p. 114.
14. Theron C. Crawford, *James G. Blaine: A Study of His Life and Career, from the Standpoint of a Personal Witness of the Principal Events in his History* (Philadelphia, 1893), p. 525; Thomas C. Reeves, *Gentleman Boss: The Life of Chester A. Arthur* (New York, 1975), p. 256; William C. Hudson, *Random Recollections of an Old Political Reporter* (New York, 1911), p. 127; Lang, ed., pp. 162-63.
15. Katherine Chase Sprague to Chester A. Arthur, October 21, 1881, Chester A. Arthur Papers, Library of Congress; Crawford, pp. 508, 546; Depew, p. 118.
16. Hoogenboom, pp. 213-53; Stoddard, p. 122.
17. Poore, p. 431; Stoddard, pp. 117, 285; Francis Carpenter, ed., *Carp's Washington* (New York, 1960), p. 30; Doenecke, pp. 76-77, 80, 183-84.
18. Lang, ed., p. 181; Ritchie, p. 137.