Nonfiction review: 'Destiny of the Republic': The story behind the killing of President Garfield

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DESTINY OF THE REPUBLIC
Candice Millard
Doubleday
$28.95, 352 pages
GLENN C. ALTSCHULER

On July 2, 1881, in a waiting room at the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad Station on Sixth and B Street in Washington, D.C., Charles Guiteau, an insane office seeker, shot James A. Garfield. He did not kill the president. As Candice Millard suggests, had Garfield's physician, D.W. Bliss, left the patient alone, refrained from inserting unsterilized instruments into the wound in his back or used Joseph Lister's procedures for antiseptic surgery, Garfield almost certainly would have survived. No wonder a critic quipped that "ignorance is Bliss."

In "Destiny of the Republic: A Tale of Madness, Medicine, and the Murder of a President," Millard provides a splendidly written and suspenseful account of this fascinating episode in American history. She takes full advantage of her cast of characters. Guiteau, of course, is the featured player. By turns a lawyer, preacher, stump speaker and newspaper publisher, he criss-crosses the country, switching hotels whenever a bill comes due. Calm and confident when he is arrested, Guiteau promises to make a detective the chief of police if he is assigned a jail cell on the third floor, in the front, able to watch the Army ride to his rescue.
More surprisingly, Millard also features Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, who races against time to design a device to locate the bullet lodged in the president's body.

The star of the show, however, is Garfield. A self-made man, college president and military hero, Garfield, Millard indicates, was a principled politician, advocate of racial equality and an opponent of the spoils system. The only cause "for which he would not fight was his own political future," including nomination for the office of president.

Garfield did, indeed, exhibit almost superhuman stoicism as he endured weeks of agonizingly painful medical interventions. And he was thoughtful, competent and tolerant. But his public career was not nearly as distinguished as Millard (who tends to take self-serving sources of information at face value) wants it to be.

Lacking the courage of his convictions, Garfield avoided large goals. To please a friend or a foe, he often changed his mind, delayed, dithered, deferred or compromised. Millard does not mention, for example, that as a congressman Garfield opposed legislation to prevent the intimidation of black voters. Or that as president he did not forcefully support civil service reform, preferring to appoint partisan Republicans than institute competitive examinations.

As he mourned Garfield's death, an editor of The New York Times predicted that "his ultimate place in history will be far less exalted than that which he now holds in popular estimation." He was right. As "Destiny of the Republic" confirms, albeit ambivalently, nothing distinguished the life of James A. Garfield so much as the manner in which he left it.

*Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.*

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