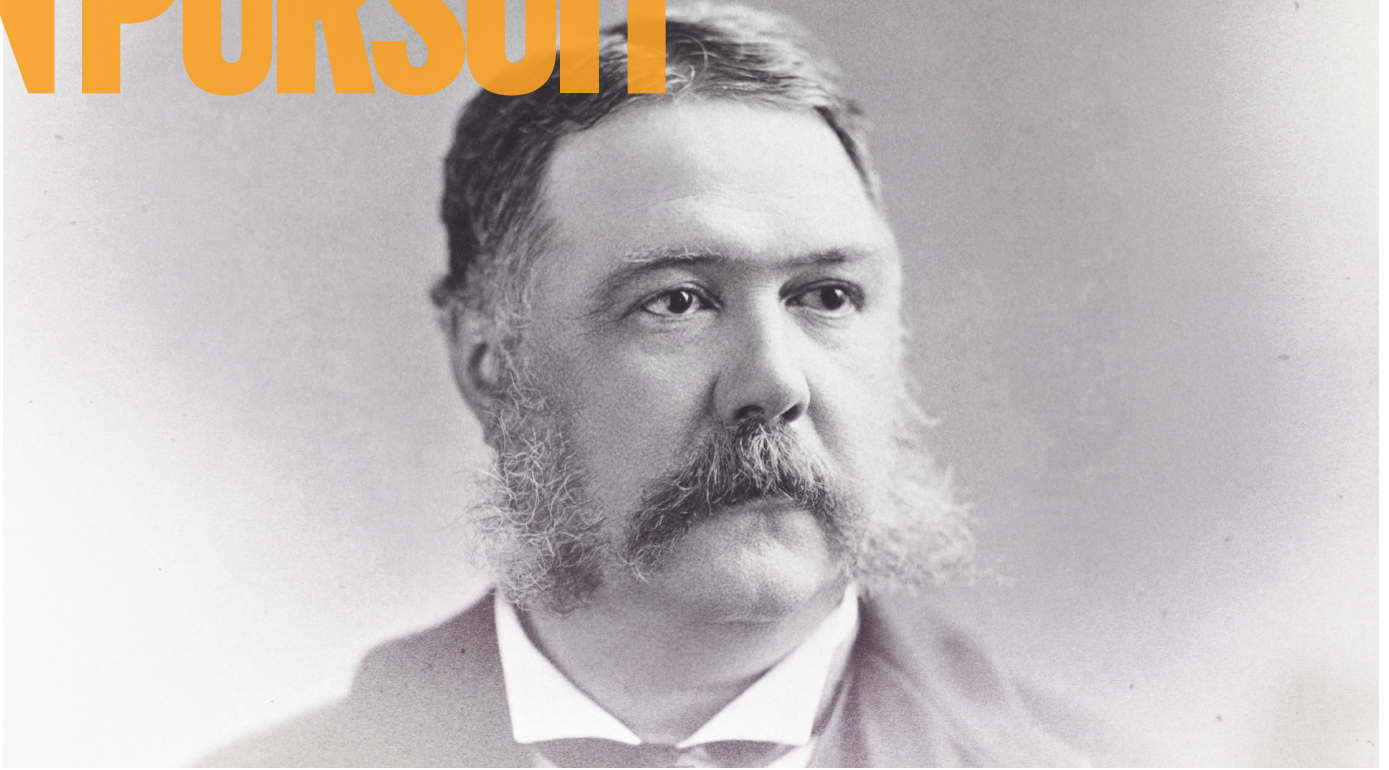


IN PURSUIT



LESSON #29 • FROM CHESTER A. ARTHUR

EVEN ACCIDENTAL LEADERS CAN GROW INTO THEIR POSITIONS



by H.W. Brands

During the nineteenth century, the vice presidency was not perceived as a proving ground for future presidents. Rather it served as a balancer of sections within the country and a consolation prize for defeated factions within parties. The nomination of Chester Arthur for vice president served both purposes for the Republicans in 1880. Arthur had been born in Vermont but grew up in New York, where he made a name in the practice of law and in the party of Abraham Lincoln. During the Civil War he became quartermaster general of the New York militia.

After the war, and after Lincoln's assassination, the Republicans split into factions. Senator Roscoe Conkling of New York built a political machine around himself and the riches of New York, including the port of New York. Arthur attached himself to Conkling and was rewarded with the post of customs collector for the port, courtesy of President Ulysses Grant, who valued Conkling's good will.

Several years in this position earned Arthur a reputation as an ardent dispenser of political spoils, the jobs and other favors party bigwigs used to reward supporters and ensure loyalty. Arthur's devotion to Conkling appeared stronger than ever. Thus, when Conkling failed to gain the Republican nomination for president in 1880, the nomination of Arthur to be vice president, on a ticket with James Garfield, seemed an appropriate

sop to the Conklingites.

No one intended that Arthur would become president. But the shooting of Garfield by Charles Guiteau in the summer of 1881, and Garfield's death eleven weeks later, vaulted Arthur into the president's chair.



Chester A. Arthur, President of the United States
Library of Congress

Few expected much of one best known as a spoilsman and a creature of Conkling. Indeed, many assumed that Arthur would dispense spoils on behalf of Conkling, who would rule from behind the throne. It didn't help Arthur's credibility that the assassin Guiteau had shouted, at the time of the shooting, "I am a Stalwart," referring to Conkling's faction. "Arthur will be president!"

Perhaps Arthur had been hiding his light all along. Perhaps the responsibilities of the presidency brought out traits that had been dormant. Perhaps he simply grew into the job. Whatever the cause, his performance as president surprised nearly everyone. In party affairs, he became simply a Republican, not a factionalist. In his duties as president, he tried to govern on behalf of all the people of America.

In Arthur's first address as president, he applauded Garfield and lamented his untimely demise. He praised the composure of the American

people. "Men may die, but the fabrics of our free institutions remain unshaken," he said. He cited Garfield's unfinished agenda: "to correct abuses, to enforce economy, to advance prosperity and to promote the general welfare, to ensure domestic security and maintain friendly and honorable relations with the nations of the earth." His predecessor's program now became his own. "It will be my earnest endeavor to profit and to see that the nation shall profit by his example and experience."

Guiteau was, among other things, a disappointed office seeker. Garfield had been attempting to reform the system of federal employment, and now Arthur made such reform a priority, though it threatened the means by which he had risen to power. He cast what became

the Civil Service Act of 1883 — also called the Pendleton Act, for Senator George Pendleton of Ohio — as a fitting memorial to the slain president.

Congress approved and Arthur signed the law, which mandated competitive examinations for government jobs and forbade firing for political reasons. The law originally applied to only a small portion of the federal workforce, but its scope expanded until most positions were included. Government workers who had expected to be dismissed whenever their party failed at the polls could now anticipate holding their jobs until retirement.

Arthur also addressed immigration, long a contentious issue in American politics. Native-born Americans often complained that immigrants drove down wages and eroded American culture. Until the 1870s, advocates of immigration, notably including employers who appreciated low wages for workers, had kept restrictive legislation at bay.



The only one barred out Enlightened American statesman - "We must draw the line somewhere, you know." | Illustrated in Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, vol. 54 (1882 April 1)

But in the 1880s demands from California reached critical mass. California workers, organized into the Workingmen's Party, asserted that laborers from China made it impossible for native-born workers to earn a decent living. They called for a ban.

The fact that immigration from China was concentrated on the West Coast made it possible for members of Congress from other parts of the country to display sensitivity toward workers' demands, by voting for the exclusion of Chinese workers, without alienating employers in their states, who had few if any Chinese workers and would be unaffected.

Arthur vetoed a first version of Chinese exclusion, which would have banned Chinese laborers for twenty years and denied citizenship to Chinese already in the United States. This seemed excessive to Arthur and in violation of an existing treaty with China, which allowed only "reasonable" limits on Chinese immigration. Congress took Arthur's point, replacing the vetoed measure with one of ten-years' duration. Arthur declared the new limit reasonable and signed the compromise into law. Both sides recognized the possibility that the shorter ban might be renewed after ten years, as in fact it was.

In other areas too, Arthur showed more independence than had been expected of him. The federal budget was running surpluses on account of large tariff revenues. Some in his party were happy to spend the money, but Arthur risked the wrath of protected manufacturers by appointing a commission to examine tariff reduction.

Arthur broke new ground for recent presidents by persuading Congress to appropriate money for the expansion and improvement of the United States Navy, which had been largely forgotten since the end of the Civil War. America's maritime trade wouldn't defend itself, Arthur argued. Congress agreed.

Arthur didn't campaign seriously for election in his own right in 1884. He was ill and knew it. Moreover, the Republican infighting hadn't ended, and in his weakened condition he preferred to leave it to others. He died in 1886 at the age of 57.

The American presidency has brought out the worst in some of its occupants. Andrew Johnson grew more belligerent and often more drunk. Richard Nixon's inner demons transformed tremendous electoral success into ignominious resignation. But the presidency has brought out the best in others. Abraham Lincoln entered office as a prairie lawyer and emerged as the greatest of all chief executives.

Chester Arthur will never be confused with Abraham Lincoln. Yet he serves as a good example of something essential for the success of republican self-government: an ordinary person who rises to unexpected political responsibilities.

Alexander McClure was a longtime editor and sometime politician who knew several presidents, including Arthur. "No man ever entered the presidency so profoundly and widely

distrusted as Chester Alan Arthur," McClure recalled. "And no one ever retired from that highest civil trust of the world more generally respected, alike by political friend and foe."