

19TH CENTURY A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE JAMES A. GARFIELD (1831-1881)

“I cannot see what lies beyond. I may be going on an Arctic voyage but, be that as it may, I know that years ago I built upon this promontory a cairn from which, wherever my wanderings may lead me, I can draw some sustenance for life and strength. May the time never come when I cannot find some food for mind and heart on Hiram Hill.”

James A. Garfield

“A Promising Boy”: Intimations of Greatness in James A. Garfield

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In March, 1870, Eliza Ballou Garfield wrote a family history for her son in a blank Civil War Soldiers' Book Showing Soldiers' Rights and Ditties. Her account of the birth of her third son reveals the special role he played for the young couple whose young, second son, James, had suddenly, inexplicably died:

in the fall of 1831 November the 19th we were happy in the birth of another Son, we felt that our loss was partially made up, he was a promising boy, we named after our little James that was transplanted into the paradise of God to bloom forever [Garfield Papers, Library of Congress, Series 17, subseries D, Family History].

Indeed, James Abram Garfield proved to be a “promising boy,” noticed from his school boy days for his special characteristics. That the qualities admired in him would lead to his becoming the twentieth President of the United States in 1881 was intuited early on by the most intimate of his contemporaries.

After his untimely death from the assassin's bullet in the summer of 1881, it was easy through hindsight to recognize the greatness of the young Garfield. An outpouring of grief, equaled only by that for Lincoln just sixteen years before, contains the record of prophecy fulfilled. His classmate at Hiram, Francis Marion Green, for instance, echoed the sentiments of so many of those who had known him as a student and youthful principal of the relatively new Western Reserve Eclectic Institute:

It is now almost thirty years since I first saw Mr. Garfield; and from that eventful day in Hiram, in the winter of 1853-54, when he delivered his sermon-memorable to me on the “First and Second Comings of Christ,” down to the day when from the east portico of the Capitol at Washington, he spoke the words of his inaugural address, whose echoes have been louder than the roar of ten thousand cannon, I never watched so closely a living man or prayed so fervently for one that he might be “true and righteous altogether.” (Review by Francis Marion Green in the Christian Standard, April 7, 1883 of Garfield's Works. [Hiram College Archives, F.M. Green Papers, Scrapbook #151])

J. M. Atwater, another contemporary and a successor to Garfield as the head of the Eclectic, suggests many ways in which the youthful Garfield stood out from his contemporaries, while suggesting also that he was not in all ways the superior of his peers. Even as an adult “when he had reached the highest station, his manners could not be considered courtly, elegant, nor even, in the emphatic sense, polished” (237-8), but he regularly performed a feat as schoolboy that set him apart. Atwater describes Garfield's student job as college bell ringer and points out, “It was the common report in the days when he rang the bell that he often jumped from the floor and rapped his feet together three times before alighting. I never saw another who could do that” (240-41). He concludes, “Wherever he went and whatever he undertook he seemed always and everywhere a natural born leader, a prince and chieftain among men” (J.M. Atwater, *Jehovah's War Against False Gods and Other Addresses*. St. Louis: Christian Publishing Company, 1903:241). An-

other young student recalled nearly twenty years after Garfield's death that "he was the 'beau ideal' of young manhood-brave, large-brained, ambitious, hopeful, thirsting for knowledge, longing for conquest. He was our hero-to us, the teacher at Hiram was greater than the President at Washington" (C. C. Smith, "The Old Days at Hiram," Christian Standard, January 21, 1899).

Already as a young man, Garfield himself seemed to be aware of the stirrings of greatness within him. He wrote to Burke Hinsdale, who would eventually be Superintendent of the Cleveland Schools and who was an early student and eventual friend of his:

Tell me, Burke, do you not feel a spirit stirring within you that longs to know-to do and to dare-to hold converse with the great world of thought and hold before you some high and noble object to which the vigor of your mind and the strength of your arm may be given? Do you not have longings like these which you breathe to no one and which you feel must be heeded or you will pass through life unsatisfied and regretful? I am sure you have them, and they will forever cling round your heart till you obey their mandate. They are the voices of that nature which God has given you and which when obeyed, will bless you and your fellow men. [Garfield to Burke A. Hinsdale, January 15, 1857. (Garfield-Hinsdale Letters, ed. Mary L. Hinsdale. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1949.)]

Not long after assuming the post of principal at the Eclectic Institute in Hiram, Garfield decided on a political career which was interrupted by the Civil War. Here, more than anywhere, his potential as a Great Man was recognized. When Garfield's student soldiers defeated the rebels in Eastern Kentucky in January, 1862, the Cleveland Leader exclaimed that "he has added yet another laurel, to those which he has hitherto won and gracefully won." The editorial concludes, "As a self made Ohio man, we take pride in the hero of this federal victory. He has displayed the same courage, energy, and self-reliance in his military career that has served him so well in civil life, and his many friends may expect from him a yet more brilliant future" (Cleveland Leader January 13, 1862).

As a consequence of the military victory, Garfield was promoted; within weeks he received a glowing letter from Almeda Booth.. his former teacher and colleague at the Eclectic:

We were scarcely used to "Col" Garfield, and now it is "Gen" Garfield . . . Why James, it seems like a dream! Well, one thing is certain: if you come home and use the talents to advantage that God has given you, there is no place in the nation that need be withheld from you. (Garfield Papers, LOC, series 4B)

His military prowess served him well after the war; he represented his district with distinction in the House of Representatives (albeit with a few perilous missteps) until his election to the Presidency in November, 1880, just shy of his forty-ninth birthday: still a promising boy.