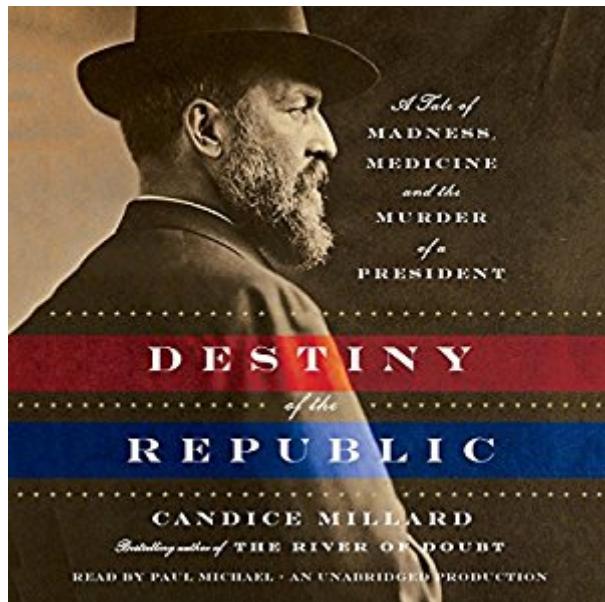


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# Destiny Of The Republic: A Tale Of Madness, Medicine And The Murder Of A President



## Synopsis

James A. Garfield may have been the most extraordinary man ever elected president. Born into abject poverty, he rose to become a wunderkind scholar, a Civil War hero, and a renowned and admired reformist congressman. Nominated for president against his will, he engaged in a fierce battle with the corrupt political establishment. But four months after his inauguration, a deranged office seeker tracked Garfield down and shot him in the back. But the shot didn't kill Garfield. The drama of what happened subsequently is a powerful story of a nation in turmoil. The unhinged assassin's half-delivered strike shattered the fragile national mood of a country so recently fractured by civil war, and left the wounded president as the object of a bitter behind-the-scenes struggle for power-over his administration, over the nation's future, and, hauntingly, over his medical care. A team of physicians administered shockingly archaic treatments, to disastrous effect. As his condition worsened, Garfield received help: Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, worked around the clock to invent a new device capable of finding the bullet. Meticulously researched, epic in scope, and pulsating with an intimate human focus and high-velocity narrative drive, *The Destiny of the Republic* will stand alongside *The Devil in the White City* and *The Professor and the Madman* as a classic of narrative history. From the Hardcover edition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

James Garfield is most often remembered, if at all, as the president who was assassinated shortly

after taking office. *Destiny of the Republic* brings the dead president back to life. This is not, however, a biography of Garfield. Rather, it is a stirring account of American life and politics during the time of the Garfield presidency, not long after the conclusion of the Civil War, and of a presidential murder. Garfield's early years are sketched out in cursory fashion, his (sometimes troubled) relationship with and eventual devotion to his wife Lucretia is covered in only a few pages, and the death of his youngest child receives little more than a mention. Rather than focusing on Garfield's personal life, Candice Millard devotes her attention to political divisions within the Republican Party (particularly Garfield's battles with New York Senator Roscoe Conkling and the vice president he controlled), as well as Garfield's frustration with the obligations of the office that he had little desire to hold. The president's assassin is given nearly as much attention as the president. There are times when the book has the feel of a thriller, as the ominous Charles Guiteau weaves in and out of the text, inching himself closer to the president. Millard depicts Guiteau as a con man with delusions of grandeur whose madness was characterized by a growing belief that his plan to assassinate Garfield was divinely inspired. The assassination occurs at the book's midway point. Millard then treats us to a different kind of political battle, a medical drama about doctors who vie for the opportunity to treat the president and who, ironically, become responsible for his death. Arrogant in their refusal to believe in the existence of germs, American doctors rejected evidence that antiseptic surgical conditions increase a patient's chance of survival. The dirty finger and unwashed probes inserted into Garfield's wound in search of a bullet sealed the president's fate, infecting an injury that Garfield would likely have survived if left untreated. The book concludes with an account of Garfield's autopsy and Guiteau's trial. *Destiny of the Republic* succeeds on two levels. First, it is informative. Millard fills the text with interesting facts culled from a variety of primary and secondary source materials, including frequent quotations from contemporaneous news stories and Garfield's diary, to set the scene for Garfield's presidency. We learn enough about the man to understand that he would have made an admirable president. It's interesting to note that Garfield, despite his love of farming, was a scholar, a professor of literature and ancient languages, well versed in mathematics and keenly interested in science, the sort of man who, if running for office today, would likely be branded an "elitist." Garfield's speeches condemning slavery and the unequal treatment of black Americans are eloquent and moving; the book is worth reading for those passages alone. Second, the book is entertaining. Millard's prose is lively. She captures personalities as if she were writing a novel. She seasons the narrative with humor and creates tension as the events leading to Garfield's encounter with Guiteau unfold. Despite its attention to detail, the narrative moves at a brisk pace. My sole complaint concerns the attention that Millard gives to Alexander Graham Bell. Granted that

Bell's life intersected with Garfield's more than once, and that Bell worked diligently to invent a device that would pinpoint the location of the bullet lodged in Garfield's body, the full chapter and parts of several others devoted to Bell's life seem out of place, as if Millard felt the need to pad her relatively short book with filler. I would have preferred a more thorough discussion of the political aftermath of the shooting. Millard tells us of its unifying effect on a nation that emerged from the Civil War still deeply divided, but provides few facts to support that proposition. A more extensive look at the impact of the assassination on the country would have been more germane than the pages devoted to Bell's life before and after his invention of the telephone. That criticism aside, *Destiny of the Republic* is perfect for readers (like me) who want to know about a key moment in American history without being subjected to mind-numbing detail or leaden prose. Millard's book is enlightening and enjoyable. Garfield is a dead president I'm happy to have met.

If the 20th U. S. President, James A. Garfield, had not been so well attended by doctors, he very well might have survived being shot by an assassin. If his doctors, especially the controlling and pompous Dr. Doctor Bliss (no, Dr. Doctor is not a mistype), had been willing to practice Lister's antisepsis techniques, Garfield might have lived. And if the assassin, Guiteau, hadn't been a megalomaniac who thought he was supposed to kill the president, the medical care would never have been needed. As it was, Garfield died slowly and very painfully, and we never were able to benefit from the president he could have been. As sad as the story is, I loved the telling of it in this book. Author Candice Millard did a wonderful job of tying together the different people most important in this tragedy, and the mood of the times. I would never have known otherwise that Alexander Graham Bell invented a metal detector so that he could try to locate the bullet still in Garfield's body. I needed a bit stronger stomach than I have to read about Garfield's treatment and the progression of his illness. And, 130 years after his death, I am sorry that he did not get the chance to live his full potential as president. I highly recommend this excellent book. Thank you to the publisher for giving me an advance reader's edition of the book.

I didn't know that much about our twentieth president prior to this book. What I did know: that he was Republican, in office for a short amount of time, and was shot and lingered for months afterwards. Turns out, after reading Candice Miller's wonderful new book, "Destiny of the Republic", there was much more to President James Garfield than I first knew. I ended up with a single question after reading the book: Who was the real killer? The first mention of Garfield that intrigued me recently came in *1861: The Civil War Awakening* by Adam Goodhart. There, a chapter

featured a youngish Garfield, empowered, on the verge of his war greatness, yet somehow innocent and compelling. Had I not read that chapter in 1861, I may have completely skipped over this book. Fortunately I didn't, because Candice Millard's book on his assassination poses many questions, and is incredibly intriguing. Millard's prose is quick, creating a true page turner. Not overly dwelling in minute details, Millard raises the president from boyhood to presidency quickly, from his hardscrabble existence to his later glories on the battlefield and in the political arena. Garfield, the man who never wanted to become president, found himself the candidate to break a deadlock in the election. Stepping up to the office, Garfield, saddled with a running mate from a political machine, Chester Arthur, wins and embraces the role of president he would have for a few short months. We also track the life of the crazed assassin Charles Guiteau, deranged office seeker who was convinced he put Garfield in office with a singular weak speech and then showed up to claim his rightful spot in the administration. Millard doesn't swing Guiteau into a dark maniac, but someone with mental health issues that was loved by his family despite them. Millard's true villain of the story is the doctor who took over his care (a medical coup, so to speak), Dr. D. W. Bliss, who poo-poohed the pioneering antiseptic work of George Lister, and probed the bullet wound with unwashed hands repeatedly, causing Garfield, who would have likely survived the shot, to transform into an infected being. Millard spares no detail into Garfield's suffering and condition. While Guiteau fired the shot that would lead to Garfield's death, clearly Bliss, unwilling to listen to anyone but himself, led the president to death with his "care". Other characters in the book include a young Alexander Graham Bell, who created an invention to find the bullet, and Chester Arthur, who recognized his weakness in leadership and was completely horrified at becoming president. All in all, this was a book that, despite knowing the ending, was a complete and true page turner. If you are into historical fiction, and looking for a great plane/train read, this is your book!

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