

This Day in History... October 5, 1829

Happy Birthday Chester A. Arthur

Chester Alan Arthur was born October 5, 1829, in Fairfield, Vermont.

When Arthur, known as “Chet” to his friends, was 15 years old, he entered Union College. He graduated in 1848 and began teaching school. Arthur studied law on his own, then moved to New York City and was admitted to the bar in 1854. He became known for cases involving the civil rights of African Americans.

In 1860, Arthur was appointed to the quartermaster department of the New York State Militia. The position was a reward for supporting the Republican governor’s campaign. When the Civil War began, the minor position gained importance as recruits had to be outfitted and housed. Arthur proved capable and was promoted to state inspector general and given the rank of brigadier general. When a Democratic governor was elected in 1863, Arthur lost his position. By then, there were about 200,000 soldiers from New York outfitted for battle.

Arthur returned to his law office and became more involved in politics. He helped raise money for Abraham Lincoln’s 1864 election and attended his inauguration. Roscoe Conkling from Utica, New York, was becoming a prominent Republican, and he was impressed with Arthur’s work for the party.

Ulysses S. Grant’s successful presidential campaign was due in part to Arthur’s fundraising efforts. As a reward, Grant appointed Arthur to the lucrative and powerful position of Collector of the Port of New York. About 70% of the country’s taxes collected on imported goods came through the New York Custom House. Almost 1,000 jobs were given to friends of party leaders. There was not enough work for all the employees, so time was spent working on party causes.



Arthur’s fundraising efforts on Grant’s campaign helped him rise to prominence.

Though the patronage system of rewarding jobs to party supporters was legal, it was not popular with the American public. Rutherford B. Hayes promised Civil Service reform during his campaign for the presidency in 1876. Soon after Hayes took office, he assembled a commission to investigate the Custom House. The resulting report recommended cutting the staff by 20%; Arthur made the reductions under protest. A third report urged reorganizing the Custom House.

At the 1880 Republican National Convention, the party was divided over civil service reform. After 36 ballots, James Garfield became the compromise nominee. To gain support from the Stalwarts, Chester A. Arthur was chosen as the Vice Presidential candidate. At the time, he said, “The office of the Vice-President is a greater honor than I ever dreamed of attaining.” The election drew a record turnout of 78.4%, and Garfield and Arthur were victorious in the close race.

On July 2, 1881, Garfield was waiting to board a train when Charles J. Guiteau rushed up to him and shot him. Guiteau was a Republican supporter who had not received a patronage job he thought he deserved. He shouted, “I am a Stalwart, and Arthur will be President!”

Though Garfield was unable to fulfill any of his duties, he remained President while he tried to recover from his wounds. There were no clear guidelines for Arthur to follow about assuming the role of President, so he remained in New York. On September 19, he received word that Garfield had died from the gunshot wounds. Arthur’s reaction was “I hope... my God, I do hope it’s a mistake.” He had never held an elected position and did not feel qualified to be President of the United States. Arthur took the oath of office at 2:00 a.m. the next morning and boarded the train for Washington, DC, two days later.

Chester A. Arthur was used to living in luxury. When he saw the White House for the first



Arthur stamp from the Presidential Series



In Arthur’s first presidential address to Congress, he asked for civil service reform legislation, going against his former political allies.

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time, he said it looked like “a badly kept barracks” and refused to move in. After extensive redecorating by famed interior designer Louis Comfort Tiffany, the President took up residence in his temporary home.

Critics who knew Arthur’s allegiance to Conkling and the Stalwarts thought the new President would not continue the civil service reforms Hayes and Garfield had begun. Because of the assassination of Garfield, Arthur realized the flaws of the patronage system and continued to push for change.

The first test was the Star Route Fraud case. The case involved Postal officials in remote Western regions working with stagecoach operators to over-charge the government for their services. The men involved were acquitted of all charges, but the fraud stopped. The case highlighted the corruption in government jobs, and Americans wanted reforms within the civil service.

Arthur backed the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act, which he signed into law on January 16, 1883. The law called for jobs to be awarded based on merit, not political reward. The Civil Service Commission was implemented to oversee appointments and ensure political activities did not take place at the work site. Arthur appointed three reformers to the commission, who published their first set of rules in May 1883.

As President, Arthur had less success convincing Congress to address the country’s surplus. Even after the Civil War ended, revenue taxes used to fund the war continued to be collected. Because of these taxes, combined with tariffs for imported goods, the Federal government obtained more money than it spent. Arthur proposed eliminating the revenue taxes and simplifying tariff regulations. The resulting law reduced the tariffs by a mere 1.47%.

Louis Tiffany created decorative windows and glass fixtures as well as a 55-foot stained glass screen picturing eagles and flags.



In 1882, the Rivers and Harbors Act was introduced in Congress. It was designed to improve transportation throughout the country, but Arthur argued it did not “promote commerce among the states,” but was focused on “particular localities.” The \$19 million price tag was the largest ever allocated at that time. Arthur vetoed the bill, but Congress overrode it.

Arthur opposed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which put an end to new immigrants coming from China and prohibited citizenship for 20 years to those who were already here. Arthur vetoed the bill saying it was a breach of a treaty the US had with China. A revised bill lowered the waiting period to 10 years, and Arthur signed it into law. The same year, a more general immigration law was passed. A 50¢ tax was to be collected from each new immigrant and those who could not support themselves or were criminals were not allowed to remain in the country.

President Arthur tried to improve the treatment of Native Americans in the West. He supported increases in educational funding, which Congress provided in 1884. Arthur also endorsed an allotment system where individuals would own land, rather than the tribe. The Dawes Act, which passed during the following administration, adopted that system. It proved harmful to the Indians because their land was sold to white settlers, which further reduced their territory and worsened living conditions.

Arthur had an elevator and plumbing installed in 1881.



Because of Chester A. Arthur’s support of Civil Service reform, his party did not renominate him in 1884. When his term in office ended, Arthur returned to his New York law practice. His health was failing because of a kidney disorder called “Bright’s disease,” which limited his ability to work. On November 18, 1886, he died as a result of a brain hemorrhage. After his funeral, publisher Alexander K. McClure wrote, “No man ever entered the Presidency so profoundly and widely distrusted, and no one ever retired... more generally respected.”



Garfield’s term in office was just 200 days, the second fewest of all US presidents.



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