

Rescued from Oblivion: Three Historians on America's Forgotten Presidents

- The Forgotten Presidents: Their Untold Constitutional Legacy.* By Michael J. Gerhardt. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 313 pp.
- Citizen of a Wider Commonwealth: Ulysses S. Grant's Postpresidential Diplomacy.* By Edwina S. Campbell. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016. 257 pp.
- The Unexpected President: The Life and Times of Chester A. Arthur.* By Scott S. Greenberger. New York: Da Capo Press, 2017. 304 pp.

Scott Greenberger's book, *The Unexpected President: The Life and Times of Chester A. Arthur*, begins with a quotation from Thomas Wolfe: "Garfield, Arthur, Harrison, and Hayes . . . were the lost Americans: their gravely vacant and bewhiskered faces mixed, melted, swam together in the sea-depths of a past intangible, immeasurable, and unknowable" (xi). This is a quotation to which a historian may take exception but in a nonliteral sense aptly describes a Gilded Age era when the executive branch had minimal power. But while the general public may dismiss these forgotten presidents as insignificant actors in a misty past, the fact that they managed to achieve the office of the presidency and that they all left some impact on the history of the American government is a remarkable feat that requires some notice. Three authors took on this task of highlighting some of these lesser-known presidents, all taking different approaches but, nonetheless, agreeing on the simple thesis that all who occupied the White House are notable.

Michael Gerhardt explains the impact of these lesser-known presidents by using a wide scope in his succinct account, *The Forgotten Presidents: Their Untold Constitutional Legacy*. By investigating 12 forgotten presidents, he reveals how each head of the executive branch interpreted the president's constitutional powers and either expanded or restricted those authorities. When Oxford University Press published Gerhardt's book in 2013, 43 men had served as president. Many of their administrations (like the Roosevelts') had obvious constitutional ramifications, but some are not as well remembered in popular history. To understand who are the most forgotten of these presidents, Gerhardt uses metrics such as how often presidents have been mentioned in American history textbooks, how they rate in presidential rankings, and if they have a presidential library to preserve their

memory. Gerhardt's formula leads to some obvious additions, such as John Tyler and Millard Fillmore. But he does not follow his own formula without some prejudice. His most quizzical inclusion is Jimmy Carter. He argues that "most Americans alive today were not born until after Carter's presidency" (217). But he excludes Gerald Ford from his roster of forgotten presidents because "the story of Watergate cannot be told without him" (xix). While this might be a fair assessment, Ford preceded Carter as president and rates below him in Gerhardt's own statistics of "Presidential Presence in Textbooks and Libraries" and "Composite Index of Presidential Familiarity" (248–49), which suggests that, by Gerhardt's own formula, Ford should be included as forgotten. Carter is included among the forgotten because he was, arguably, the inspiration behind the book. Gerhardt notes that news outlets claimed Barack Obama was the first president to be confronted with the possibility that Congress might default on the government's debt, despite the fact that Carter faced this same issue twice during his time in office.

Although the chapter on Carter is not very compelling, many of the other presidents have had a deep constitutional impact that Gerhardt adeptly brings to our attention. The most interesting chapter is devoted to John Tyler. The first president to attain the office through the death of his predecessor, Tyler had to confront one major ambiguity in the Constitution immediately: was he an acting president or the actual president? His decision to claim that he was the rightful, genuine president set a standard for all other vice presidents who became chief executive through similar circumstances. But, according to Gerhardt, he utilized his term to expand the use of the veto. As a man who came to power as a Whig, his conception of presidential authority, if it aligned with his party, would mean that the executive should use the veto only if bills were unconstitutional. Instead, Tyler vetoed six bills directly and used the pocket veto four times. When he later attempted to deal directly with Congress for a compromise bill on the banking issue, he seemingly overstepped his role in dictating to Congress. While he appeared to push the boundaries of presidential authority in that regard, he curtailed presidential powers in other ways by "rejecting the president's inherent authority to exercise a line-item veto" (46).

Gerhardt's background in constitutional law is on full display in his book, but his grasp of history is more suspect. His work is plagued with minor historical errors. He claims that "no president after Fillmore pledged to serve a single term," despite Hayes' pledge in 1876 (93). He states that Van Buren was the first president who was not a "notable founder," despite being preceded by Andrew Jackson and John Quincy Adams (3). He argues that Cleveland "was the only Democratic president in the second half of the nineteenth century," which ignores Franklin Pierce (who is in this book), James Buchanan, and (for all practical purposes) Andrew Johnson (127). But for all of the errors and questionable decisions in this book, it makes a very compelling statement and leaves the reader with an understanding of the great impact of the presidency.

Edwina Campbell's look on Ulysses S. Grant's world tour after his presidency provides a unique perspective to an investigation into these forgotten presidents. First, Grant is probably not a typical candidate for this dubious designation. His presidency, perhaps not memorable for its accomplishments, is certainly infamous for the administration's corruption. Moreover, his fame as the most distinguished commanding general in the Civil War unquestionably keeps him from being forgettable. Second, he was not

president during the period covered by this book. Although Grant is the subject of the book, Rutherford B. Hayes was president during Grant's tour, and if we take Campbell's thesis that "the Hayes administration recognized that the former president had become what would be called, in later parlance, a special ambassador of the United States, and it acted to see that he was given the support necessary to fulfill this mission," then a study on Grant's "diplomatic" voyage takes on new meaning (3). In this case, Hayes is the forgettable president who had the foresight to see major changes in international affairs.

In the ensuing chapters, Campbell attempts to scrutinize Grant's voyage and how it evolved as he made his way into Asia. Here, Campbell's book is at its strongest. She does a wonderful job of detailing how Grant dealt with the portentous decorum of the British Empire, which worked to downplay his mission by providing him with all of the ceremony of an ex-sovereign but denying him that same dignity as he ventured into areas of the empire east of the Suez. However, as his two-year journey progressed, other nations began to see him less as an ex-sovereign and more as the possible future president when they noticed political developments in the United States promoting a third term for Grant. This became so prominent that when he reached China, he was dubbed "King of America" (129).

Looking at this book from the viewpoint of the forgettable Hayes, Campbell's work is not as convincing. Very rarely does she highlight how Hayes or his administration viewed Grant's voyage. She points to a telegram that Hayes sent to Grant wishing him a "prosperous voyage" and "a safe return" but nothing that would indicate that Hayes saw this as anything other than a retired president enjoying his postpresidency (13). But even if that is all this voyage was from Hayes' viewpoint, Campbell does a great job of showing how Grant used his travels to develop his thoughts on international relations and inform his bid for a third term. Although he would not be the Republican nominee in 1880, the change we see in Grant is interesting.

An equally compelling history of a forgotten, bewhiskered, Gilded Age president comes from Scott Greenberger's investigation into Chester Arthur, who made the task of evaluating his legacy difficult, thanks to his deathbed decision to destroy all of his private papers. His administration, moreover, was bereft of momentous legislation other than the regrettable Chinese Exclusion Act and the Pendleton Act, which started a process toward civil service reform. But even this action is forgettable, because civil service reform is not a topic that headlines modern political debates.

Despite what seems like a dreary topic, Greenberger's very engaging, easily accessible book, *The Unexpected President: The Life and Times of Chester A. Arthur*, is a wonderful, fun read about a president who was not well received by anyone in his own party, let alone the Democrats. A sidekick to the larger-than-life Roscoe Conkling, Arthur received the vice-presidential nomination only to appease the Stalwart faction of the Republican Party. By accepting the nomination, Arthur angered his political boss Conkling and set off to change his mission, partly due to letters received from regular citizen, Julia Sand. When he became president after the assassination of James Garfield, he decided to buck his old Stalwart faction and lead by his own conscience. This change of heart is most momentous when he signed the Pendleton Act and set the course to completely dismantle political patronage and the Stalwarts.

Although biographies of these forgotten presidents are not likely to become best sellers, their authors demonstrate that, even if they had “gravely vacant and bewhiskered faces,” they have contributed to our history and are worthy of our study.

—Dustin McLochlin
*Curator, Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential
Library & Museums*