Chester A. Arthur Essay, Research Paper

Chester Alan Arthur was born on October 5, 1830 in Fairfield, Vermont. The son of Malvina Arthur and the Reverend William Arthur, a passionate abolitionist, young Chester and his family migrated from one Baptist parish to another in Vermont and New York. The fifth of eight children, Chester had six sisters and one older brother. Before beginning school in Union Village (now Greenwich), New York, he studied the fundamentals of reading and writing at home.

In 1845, young Arthur entered Union College in Schenectady as a sophomore. There he studied classical languages, arts, and the sciences. He supplemented his tuition by teaching during winter vacations at various schools in the area. During the school year, Arthur spent a lot of time in campus extracurricular activities. He enjoyed participating in student political demonstrations on issues ranging from abolitionism to school elections, and playing school pranks. Hence, it is understandable that Arthur wasn’t an outstanding student. Nevertheless, he graduated in the top third of his class in 1848.

After college, Arthur spent several years teaching school and reading law, but he was clear about what he wanted to do with his life. He would be a lawyer, a public servant, a resident of Manhattan, a gentleman, and rich. After passing his bar exam in 1854 he used his father’s influence to gain a clerkship in a New York legal firm headed by the prominent Erastus C. Culver.

Culver’s firm had achieved fame in 1852 when it supported a plea by a group of free blacks to liberate seven slaves. In transport from Virginia to Texas, these slaves had been brought to New York by their master. Known as the Lemmon Case, Erastus D. Culver successfully argued for a writ of habeas corpus, freeing the slaves from incarceration in the city jail—where their owner had placed them for safe-keeping—and thus bondage. This court ruling allegedly violated the provisions of the Fugitive Slave Law and called into question the agreements made in the Compromise of 1850. Arthur spent much of his time as clerk in Culver’s firm handling details of the appeal. He made numerous trips to the state capital to assist in arguments before the New York Supreme Court. The final court decision in 1860 upheld the initial ruling, and Arthur’s work put him in touch with the leading legal minds in the state, as well as most of the prominent New York politicians of the day.

In a second case, also instrumental in advancing Arthur’s public profile, the firm defended a black woman, Lizzie Jennings, who had been forced out of the white section of a Brooklyn street car when she refused to give her seat to a white passenger. Jennings’ case predated Rosa Parks’ case in the 1950s by over one hundred years. The case forced the streetcar company to accept and seat black passengers without prejudice on their streetcars.

As was common in those days, young unmarried men frequently lived in boarding houses, where they took meals in family-style settings, socialized with fellow boarders, and tried to establish the appearance of a home life. Arthur lived in such a family hotel on Broadway. While there he befriended a young medical student from Virginia, Dabney Herndon, who frequently visited with relatives living nearby in Manhattan. Arthur occasionally accompanied his friend on these family visits, and Herndon’s cousin, the young Ellen Lewis Herndon, soon caught Arthur’s eye. The two, aged twenty-two and thirty, fell in love and were married on October 25, 1859.

When the Civil War broke out, Arthur, who had joined the state militia in 1858 principally out of a desire for companionship and political connections, stood primed for duty. In a rush to staff key positions, the Republican governor appointed Arthur to be quartermaster general for the New York Volunteers. He served in that post with great efficiency, obtaining the rank of brigadier general before his retirement in 1863. Responsible for provisioning and housing the several hundred thousand soldiers supplied by the state to the federal cause, as well as for the defenses of New York, Arthur dealt with hundreds of private contractors and military personnel. The military service played to his advantage; he gained a reputation for efficiency, administrative genius, and reliability.

Although eager to serve in a battlefield position, Arthur never pressed his case. His wife, a Virginian with family members in the Confederacy, could not tolerate the thought of her husband taking up arms against them.

Upon his retirement from duty, Arthur threw himself into his law practice, representing clients in suing for war-related damages and reimbursements. His practice thrived, making him a wealthy man by the end of the war. He also worked actively for Roscoe Conkling, a New York Republican Party Boss and U.S. senator who used patronage and party discipline to advance his power in the New York. By 1867, Arthur had become one of Conkling’s top lieutenants, serving as the chief counsel to the New York City Tax Commission from 1869 to 1870, at an annual salary of $10,000, a significant sum of money in those days. By comparison the wages of a skilled worker ranged from $400 to $650 annually in 1870.

In 1871 President Ulysses S. Grant appointed Arthur to the position of Collector of the Port of New York. Arthur served in this capacity until 1878, supervising nearly 1,300 agents responsible for the collecting about 75 percent of the nation’s import duties. His domain included the entire coast of New York State, the Hudson River, and parts of New Jersey. Paid a salary of $12,000 annually, Arthur augmented his income by sharing in a portion of all fines collected on undervalued imports. While customs office agents frequently accepted bribes from importers, warehouse owners, and ship companies, there is no evidence of Arthur ever partaking in such graft. Arthur routinely collected, however, kickbacks of salary from customs house employees to support Boss Conkling’s political machine in New York.

A major confrontation between Conkling and President Rutherford B. Hayes occurred shortly after Hayes’s inauguration. Hayes, eager to distance himself from the Grant administration’s reputation for scandal, decided to reform the New York customs office as an example of his reform-minded agenda. He established a special commission to investigate corruption in the New York Customs House. The commission determined that political favoritism and blatant patronage had governed appointments, exposed the practice of salary kickbacks, and charged the port authority with being criminally over-staffed.

Using the commission’s findings, Hayes moved to remove Arthur by appointing him consul to Paris. Conkling and Arthur viewed Hayes’s assertion of authority as an open declaration of war, that they fought in the Senate. To counter Conkling’s opposition, Hayes bided his time, finally suspending Arthur after Congress had adjourned for the summer. Arthur and Conkling, determined to reassert their control of the Port, moved to draft former President Grant as Hayes’ successor in the election of 1880.

Since President Rutherford B. Hayes had declared that he was only going to serve one there was no incumbent and the 1880 election was a wide open race. Chester Arthur and party boss Roscoe Conkling’s candidate, former President Ulysses S. Grant, and Senator James G. Blaine were the leading rivals at the 1880 Republican nominating convention. Blaine led the one Republican faction that struggled against Conkling’s faction for control of the party. On the thirty-sixth ballot, a compromise deal was made and the Republicans rallied behind a political moderate, James Garfield of Ohio. Garfield was leader of the Republican minority in the House of Representatives and just prior to the convention, was elected by the Ohio legislature to the United States Senate.

Conkling’s faction then threatened to withhold support unless Garfield struck a deal. In response, Garfield agreed to consult with Conkling regarding federal patronage, in addition to backing Arthur’s nomination for vice president, and going out of his way to court Arthur’s support. Surprisingly, Conkling urged Arthur to reject the nomination only to find his trusted lieutenant both tempted and pleased by the prospect. In spite of Conkling’s urgings, Arthur accepted.

Arthur actively campaigned during the election to bring New York into the Republican column. His efforts helped Garfield win the presidency, and there was much talk in the air—although never proved—that he had schemed to buy votes for Garfield in the crucial swing state of Indiana.

After the election, Arthur, often portrayed as under the Conkling’s control, openly broke with Garfield when the President moved to destroy Conkling’s power once and for all by appointing an independent collector of the Port of New York. In the days before Garfield’s assassination, Garfield and Arthur were very unfriendly toward one another. Conkling had resigned from the Senate in protest, and it looked as though Arthur would become a powerless figurehead in the Garfield administration. However, Garfield’s assassination left Arthur far from powerless as he became the twenty-first President of the United States.

Arthur made it clear that no one controlled him as President. Although he professed skepticism about civil service reform—the major reform issue of the day—he supported the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act in 1883. Arthur made this decision despite Republican mid-term defeats in the congressional elections of 1882. The Pendleton Act, written by Ohio Senator George Pendleton established a bipartisan commission to prepare and administer competitive examinations for government office. The law banned salary kickbacks, apportioned federal appointments among the states, and ruled that new employees must begin their service at the bottom of the career ladder—advancing only by merit exams.

He also exhibited a measure of independence and vision not expected by either his opponents or his supporters. Arthur was convinced that tariff rates had to be systematically evaluated and lowered to provide relief for indebted farmers and middle-class consumers. These individuals were adversely affected by artificially high prices on manufactured goods. Consequently, Arthur lobbied Congress for a 20 to 25 percent rate reduction across the board. Although Congress instead passed the famous Mongrel Tariff law of 1883, which dropped rates on a varied list of items by less than 2 percent, Arthur had placed rate reductions on the front burner. Since then Republicans generally support high tariff rates by contrast to Democrats. On this measure, as on his attempts to limit patronage, Arthur marched out of step with Republican machine politicians and eastern manufacturers.

He also stepped out of line when he vetoed the notorious pork-barrel Rivers and Harbors Act of 1882. The bill, which passed over his veto, enraged Arthur. He thereafter forcefully argued at every opportunity that the growing surplus of federal funds should be reduced by tax and rate reductions rather than by government pork-barrel type expenditures. His position surprised many of his contemporaries who had expected Arthur to use the federal surplus to support party patronage, the mother’s milk of party politics in the Gilded Age.

More in line with public opinion, Arthur supported the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which banned all Chinese immigration into the U.S. for ten years.

Most dear to Arthur’s heart as President, however, were his efforts to renovate the White House. Always known as a man of elegant taste (he is reputed to have owned eighty pairs of trousers), Arthur came to the presidency as the “Gentleman Boss” of New York. He greatly enjoyed his reputation for throwing elegant parties, for having an exquisite taste for fine food, and for socializing with the most suave and cultivated associates. Disgusted with the shabby look of the White House, he hired Louis Comfort Tiffany, the most fashionable designer in New York City, to completely refurbish the executive mansion into a showplace residence befitting the office. The price tag, funded by Congress, exceeded $30,000, $2 million in today’s value.

Although domestic affairs dominated the Arthur administration, his presidency is remembered for having taken the crucial first steps in building a modern navy. Known as the “Father of the Steel Navy,” Arthur supported the construction of steam-powered steel cruisers, steel rams, and steel-clad gun boats. He also moved decisively to curb corruption and incompetency in the naval shipyards.

His secretary of state, James G. Blaine, a holdover from the Garfield administration, pushed for more direct U.S. involvement in Latin America. Blaine advocated the construction of a canal across the Isthmus of Panama and negotiated a treaty with Nicaragua ceding a stretch of land to the U.S. for construction of the waterway. However, Congress refused to ratify this treaty with Nicaragua because the agreement violated an existing treaty with Great Britain; President Grover Cleveland, Arthur’s successor, later withdrew the treaty. Most importantly, Arthur, after Blaine’s departure from his cabinet, negotiated a reciprocal treaties with Mexico, Spain and the British West Indies which met significant opposition from special interest Republicans as well as Democrats in the Senate. These treaties placed Arthur at odds with protectionist interests in the Republican Party, and were among the reasons why he failed to gain the support of party leaders for a second term.

As Arthur’s term in office came to a close, he made little effort to seek the nomination for a second term because he knew that he was seriously ill with Bright’s disease. However he did not oppose efforts on his behalf. Feeling betrayed by Arthur’s sudden conversion to governmental reform as President, his former supporters among the conservative Stalwarts, including former President Grant, opposed his nomination. Arthur was trusted neither by his natural base of support among the conservative Stalwarts nor by the reformers in the party. Hence, at the 1884 Republican nominating convention in Chicago, Arthur lost his bid for his party’s nomination to James G. Blaine on the fourth ballot.

Arthur tried to resume the practice of law after leaving the presidency, but his ill health prevented him from doing much work. The disease had seriously weakened his heart and he became too frail even to go fishing, which was the great love of his life. His death came at home with his children and sisters near at hand. He was buried with full ceremonies in Albany, New York. His successor, President Grover Cleveland, was in attendance.

Chester A. Arthur died on November 18, 1886 of Bright’s disease, a then-fatal kidney ailment. He was first diagnosed with the disease in 1882, and kept it secret. Knowing that his condition was fatal, Arthur made little effort to seek nomination for a second term, but he did not oppose efforts by others on his behalf. On the fourth ballot at the convention, he lost the Republican nomination to his former secretary of state James G. Blaine.

Chester A. Arthur served as President at a time when the nation’s population reached 50 million. Men voted and were expected to exhibit stern loyalty to a political party. Boss politics dominated the day. Women, who could not vote, were expected to stand outside the party system, attentive to the so-called domestic sphere of life. African Americans, enfranchised by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, still voted in most southern states and everywhere else in the nation. Even many recent immigrants also voted regardless of their residency or citizenship status, especially those who avoided legal scrutiny by having big-city political machine protection.

These electoral characteristics of the American political scene, although commonly accepted, were not set in concrete. Historians see the era as one of transition, especially in the weakening of the walls separating the domestic sphere of the private household and the public sphere of politics. For some historians, the era witnessed the beginnings of the so-called “feminization” of American politics—a time when women began to press strongly for reform on several levels. Critical issues of the day included women’s suffrage and temperance. Equally important were social justice causes related to poverty, child labor abuses, government regulation, and immigration. The cry for civil service reform, aimed at breaking the hold of ethnic politics and party bosses on government, brought on a wave of reform efforts. Reformers were intent on forcing both structural change and policy change. In time, these reform efforts would bring significant political power to progressive women and their male supporters while weakening the grip of traditional ethnic and party loyalties.

It was also a time of transition for African American voters, especially in the South. With white Democrats back in power because of the Compromise of 1877 which gave Hayes the presidency, southern whites began to formulate a series of laws known as Jim Crow laws that effectively disfranchised southern blacks for the next seventy years. At that time, Southern newspapers began to demonize African American men as a threat to the safety of white women, thus setting the stage for the lynchings that were to come in the 1890s and early 1900s. In 1895, the Supreme Court reinforced these Jim Crow laws by allowing for segregation by race in public places as well as race-focused registration laws that all but eliminated the black vote by 1895.

Historians view the Chester Arthur presidency as an important surprise, one that no one would have expected. Put simply, he performed well in office, defying his state-based reputation as a slick machine politician. His experience in running the largest federal office in the country, the New York Customs House, had equipped him well for the Presidency. His performance set a high standard of measurement for later executives in the White House.

Although Arthur preferred efficient partisan government service to one selected by competitive examinations, he nevertheless showed tremendous flexibility and a willingness to embrace reform. By struggling with the tariff issue and supporting the modernization of the American navy, Arthur stands as an important transition figure in the reunification of the nation after the bitter turmoil of Civil War and Reconstruction. Arthur demonstrated how the office of President could bring out the very best in its occupants.

Bibliography

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