

Articles

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Presidents, Civil Religion, and Public Memory: A Book Review Essay

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The President is a Sick Man, by Matthew Algeo. Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, 2011. 255 pp. \$24.95 cloth. ISBN: 9781569763506

Destiny of the Republic: A Tale of Madness, Medicine, and the Murder of a President, by Candice Millard. New York, NY: Doubleday, 2011. 339 pp. \$28.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780385526265

On August 29, 1893, the following headline appeared on the front page of the *Philadelphia Press*: “THE PRESIDENT A VERY SICK MAN.” Approximately two months later the carefully guarded secret of President Cleveland’s operation while aboard a yacht en route to the chief executive’s summer home in Massachusetts was exposed by E.J Edwards, a highly respected reporter whose column was widely read throughout the country. Writing under his penname, “Holland,” Edwards shares his startling revelation in the second paragraph:

It is useless longer to conceal the fact that Mr. Cleveland is a sick man, perhaps a very sick man, and that the physicians have fear that mortal disease is lurking in his system, notwithstanding heroic efforts of surgery to remove it during the Summer... (Algeo, 2011:146).

Matthew Algeo, the author of the lively and well written book, *The President is a Sick Man*, describes Edwards’ story as “one of the greatest scoops in the history of American journalism, and it is still the most detailed account of a medical procedure on a sitting president without authorization” (Algeo, 2011:144). Algeo draws upon previous research and elaborate detail to substantiate the clandestine operation, the cover-up, the eventual scoop, and the intense vilification and lies from the President’s doctors and friends that severely damaged Edward’s good reputation. Cleveland participated in the ruse by attending carefully stage-crafted public events to exhibit his health and robustness after what Algeo calls his “extraordinary” recovery. The cover-up was so well conceived and executed that even Vice President Adlai Stevenson, the grandfather of the future two-time presidential candidate by the

same name, didn't know anything about it.

Cleveland survived the surgery, did get well, and the controversy soon dissipated. He lived to serve out the second of his two non-consecutive terms, the only president in U.S. history with such a tenure, and lived cancer free until his death in 1908. Edwards went on to write for the *Wall Street Journal* and was eventually vindicated in 1917 when one of Cleveland's surgeons published an expose in a popular magazine.

Although there is nothing really new about American presidents hiding medical maladies (Woodrow Wilson's stroke, Franklin Delano Roosevelt's polio, and John Kennedy's numerous ailments immediately come to mind), few, if any, know anything about Cleveland's bout with mouth cancer. Algeo does an excellent job describing an era when a politician could easily deny accurate reporting and be given the social margin necessary to garner the benefit of the doubt. However, for a sociologist it is inherently interesting that such a story is absent from our history books. How does such a startling story not become part of our public memory? As previously mentioned, Grover Cleveland is chiefly remembered as the only man to be elected President to two non-consecutive terms. So, if President Cleveland is remembered, he is remembered as an answer to a trivia question.

On the morning of July 2, 1881, twelve years before Cleveland's successful battle with cancer, President James Garfield, accompanied by Secretary of State James Blaine, Secretary of War Robert Todd Lincoln² and his two sons, were walking through the Sixth Street Train Station of the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad in Washington at 9:30 a.m. when he was shot twice by an assassin, Charles J. Guiteau, an angry and insane federal office-seeker armed with a .44 caliber pistol.

Garfield was shot less than four months after taking office and died eleven weeks later on September 19, 1881. In *Destiny of the Republic*, Candice Millard tells a captivating and truly mesmerizing story of Garfield's assassination and the misguided medical efforts to save his life. She concludes that the best thing his doctors could have done for him was to simply leave him alone. If they had done so Garfield would have likely been just like many of his fellow Civil War veterans who walked around with bullets lodged inside of them. In short, Guiteau may have shot him, but it was his doctors' incompetence and ignorance that killed him. His assassin would have undoubtedly concurred with Millard's assessment. Charles Guiteau was denied the opportunity to give an opening statement at his trial, so he handed a reporter a copy. Millard tells us, "It was not a defense of his actions, or even an argument for insanity, but an indictment of the men who were, he argued, the president's true murderers—his doctors" (Millard, 2011:239). Guiteau wrote:

General Garfield died from malpractice. According to his own physicians, he was not fatally shot. The doctors who mistreated him ought to bear the odium of his death, and not his assailant. They ought to be indicted for murdering

James A. Garfield, and not me (Millard, 2011:239).

Just a few days later Guiteau managed to offer this defense by interrupting an eyewitness to the shooting, proclaiming vociferously, "I deny the killing, if your honor please. We admit the shooting" (Millard, 2011:239). Standard medical practice at the time dictated that priority be given to locating the path of the bullet. After Garfield was shot at the train station, doctors egregiously probed Garfield with fingers and instruments, none sterilized. The president's fever, vomiting, and signs of infection were taken as evidence that his body was trying to heal. American doctors, including Garfield's senior presiding physician, D. Willard Bliss (his first name was actually Doctor) rejected Joseph Lister's claims that antisepsis was paramount in warding off infection. Although Lister achieved dramatic results using his sterilization methods and his work was adopted throughout Europe, the most experienced American doctors, including Garfield's physicians, complained Lister's methods were too time-consuming and ridiculous (Millard, 2011:117). His doctors even explored the wrong side of Garfield's body and under orders from Dr. Bliss were denied the opportunity to search the other side of his torso to locate and remove the foreign object. In one of the many stunning moments Millard describes, Alexander Graham Bell was allowed to use his method of metal detection on only the bullet-free side of the president and was completely baffled by the faint and inconclusive noises that his numerous tests produced. It would be discovered much too late that the sounds he heard emanated from the metal bedsprings in the mattress on Garfield's death bed. Millard rightfully argues that if Garfield had survived to serve more than 200 days in office, he might have been much more familiar than he currently is to students of presidential history. Alas, he did not and like Cleveland, he has been marginalized in our public memory. The assassination of James A. Garfield had little historical significance. In contrast, Abraham Lincoln's murder 16 years earlier was perceived as the loss of a martyred saint. As the historian Thomas Goodrich argues:

By the time of his burial, the memory of Abraham Lincoln--his life, his death--had become for many almost a state religion. In their rush to deify, Lincoln the man was all but lost. Rather than accept that in him which was simply good and decent and that which each and every one of them shared to some degree, well-meaning men and women chose instead to gild the common and created an impossible paragon: Lincoln-the Great Emancipator, Lincoln-the Martyr, Lincoln-"the greatest man that ever lived," Lincoln-the American Christ (Goodrich, 2005:244).

Both of these recent books represent the very best of the idiographic perspective. They are well written, descriptive, and fascinating accounts of two American presidents. However, as a sociologist, I am prone to the more nomothetic approach. Why would these important and engaging stories of two

American presidents be so unknown? Why aren't these inherently interesting and captivating stories not part of our public memory? I believe the answers to these inquiries rest in what the sociologist Robert Bellah has called "Civil Religion in America." As Bellah explains:

While some have argued that Christianity is the national faith, and others that church and synagogue celebrate only the generalized religion of "the American Way of Life, few have realized that there actually exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America (1967:1).

Religion has historically been a conspicuous feature of American life. Americans have regarded religion as a "good thing," important for national well-being. Because of a strong tradition of the separation of church and state, there has never been an established national church in the United States. The common thread uniting Americans of diverse denominational affiliations is what Bellah has characterized as its underlying "culture religion"—a secular, nonsectarian religion that unifies Americans around a cluster of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that legitimate American civil and political life. These beliefs, symbols, and rituals are a prominent part of what Bellah (1967) has called America's civil religion, a public religious expression that reflects America's secular religiosity and serves as a source of cultural and social cohesion.

This civil religion is an important part of almost all American political events. God is mentioned in the pledge of allegiance to the flag; the motto "In God We Trust" is engraved on the nation's currency and in Indiana on the license plates of automobiles. Political events of all kinds, from political party conventions to sessions of Congress begin with invocations. The existence of and blessings of God have been explicitly invoked in the Inaugural Address of nearly every president.

Civil religion in America is more than belief in a nonsectarian God who is deemed to have a particular interest in the destiny of the United States. Its pantheon of saints includes George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, the revered "Founding Fathers." Some readers of the *South Shore Journal* may recall the "parable" of how a young George Washington could not lie to his father about the cherry tree he had felled. Among its martyred saints are Abraham Lincoln, John Kennedy, and even a non-president, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Neither Garfield nor Cleveland qualify as members of this illustrious group and although Garfield is one of four of our martyred presidents he is not in the same class as Lincoln and Kennedy. William McKinley was also murdered by an assassin and was so popular during his presidency that he has a mountain named after him. However, he didn't make it on to Mt. Rushmore. To understand the difference visit Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C. You just might experience what the historian Thomas Goodrich describes in his excellent book on the Lincoln assassination, *The Darkest Dawn*. In the preface he tells us how he and his wife react at the end of a play at Ford's Theatre:

...toward the end, the theater had quieted and dimmed and the spotlight had cut through the darkness upward to the box – *the box*.... Since childhood, we had seen the paintings, sketches, and movies of that box and imagined that box until *that box* had become a part of ourselves as much as anything else in our history (2005:9)



In the photo, of the three martyred presidents above, only Lincoln is a member of the pantheon of saints in America's civil religion. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

If you do not want to travel that far then just take a trip to Springfield, Illinois, and watch how people will stand in line to get into the office of Lincoln and Herndon just to walk on the original wood floor the martyred saint walked on in life. In the “making of a saint,” the anthropologist, James Hopgood (2005), tells us that one must have a “place.” This is a geographical location that is associated with the dead saint. It must be a place that one can go and visit and see and hear what the departed icon saw and heard in life. It must be a place where one can walk where the dead saint walked and touch what

the dead saint touched in life. These places are what the French sociologist Emile Durkheim called in his classic *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* the sacred as opposed to the profane. The former demands a sense of awe, reverence, even fear and suggests the extraordinary. The latter focuses on the ordinary every day elements of life.

Like other religious systems, American civil religion has developed elaborate rituals, sacred symbols, and a sacred literature. The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Gettysburg Address are examples of America's sacred scriptures. The first was written by Thomas Jefferson, the second is credited to James Madison, and Abraham Lincoln authored an address that remains a memorization assignment for America's elementary school students. Its holy days include the Fourth of July, Memorial Day, Veterans Day, President's Day, (a celebration of Washington's and Lincoln's birthdays) and, especially, Thanksgiving, each of which involves ritual celebrations that invoke the name and support of God for the nation.

During its religious ceremonies sacred hymns such as the "Star-Spangled Banner," "America the Beautiful," "God Bless America," "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," and I would include Woody Guthrie's, "This Land is Your Land," are played and sung. Finally, among the religion's sacred symbols are the American flag, the Liberty Bell, and monuments such as the Statue of Liberty, the Lincoln Memorial, the Jefferson Memorial, the Washington Monument, the Vietnam Memorial, Arlington National Cemetery, where President Kennedy has an eternal flame, and sacred places like Mt. Vernon, Monticello, and Springfield, each of which has acquired a sacred quality that is perceived to embody the nation's basic values.

It will be interesting to observe which of our more contemporary presidents will achieve sainthood. It is possible Ronald Reagan will enter the pantheon since he has already been canonized by the Republican Party and is often quoted by Democrats as well. President Barack Obama may also reach this pinnacle since his election as the nation's first African American President is already historically significant. In fact, one could argue that his speech, "A More Perfect Union" may become part of our sacred literature.^[3] He delivered his address in 2008 while a presidential candidate in Philadelphia across the street from Independence Hall, a sacred place where the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776, and then eleven years later, in the summer of 1787, the Constitution of the United States was written. At least one scholar has compared President Obama's speech to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" and Robert Kennedy's address, "On the Mindless Menace of Violence" given in Cleveland the day after Dr. King's assassination (Travis, 2008:6-7). Although neither of these icons were former presidents they both qualify as martyred saints in the civil religion of America.

As Algeo and Millard remind us in their fine books, interesting and important stories are seemingly inherent to the office and the men who have held it. However, since the authors are showcasing interesting stories that have failed to capture the public imagination, the authors reveal inadvertently,

that not all American presidents are created equal—or at least, remembered equally. Who will join the honored ranks of the remembered is difficult to say since each generation has the opportunity to reassess former presidents as the case of President Harry Truman demonstrates.

Upon the publication of David McCullough's biography, *Truman* (1992), the former president went through a bit of a civil religious revival, which continues to affect our political culture. From declaring "The Buck Stops Here" to recent presidential candidates participating in "whistle stop tours" to recalling the famous headline "Dewey Defeats Truman" as a reminder to pundits that elections are not always predictable, Truman is emerging as a prospective saint in the American civil religion.

However, becoming a member of the inner sanctum still requires a sacred ritual like the one Jason Emerson shares in his new book, *Giant in the Shadows*. On a warm and sunny day in 1922, fifty thousand men and women witnessed the dedication of one of our most sacred symbols, the Lincoln Memorial. Among the scores of visitors that day was an elderly man with a white beard, carrying a cane, and sporting a black stovepipe hat. The old man was seventy-nine year old Robert T. Lincoln^[4], the only surviving son of the martyred saint. Emerson tells us, "After sixty years of protecting and preserving his father's memory, Robert had lived to see his father become a national secular godhead, to become the worldwide avatar of liberty and democracy (2012:407)."

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[1] I wish to thank Christopher Young, the editor, and the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful and helpful comments on previous versions of this essay.

[2] In her wonderful book, *Assassination Vacation*, Sarah Vowell labels Lincoln's eldest son, "Jinxy McDeath," since he was present at his father's death bed, witnessed the assassination of Garfield, and arrived at the train station in Buffalo mere moments before President McKinley was assassinated.

[3] I recently reviewed two sociology anthologies and both editors include President Obama's speech in sections on race and ethnic relations in their manuscripts.

[4] Robert T. Lincoln was buried in Arlington National Cemetery, another of our most sacred symbols. Ironically, as mentioned before, Robert Lincoln witnessed or was present during the assassinations of our first three murdered presidents and in death he lies within sight of the grave of our fourth martyred chief executive, John F. Kennedy (Emerson, 2012:417).