



Chester A. Arthur

Chester A. Arthur, who surprised his contemporaries by supporting civil-service reform.

4 of 9

Chester A. Arthur: A Machine Politician Who Became a Reformer

President he succeeded: James A. Garfield

Term of office: September 19, 1881–March 4, 1885

Few people expected Chester A. Arthur to become president—and even fewer expected him to become a reformer.

Arthur assumed office after James A. Garfield died from wounds inflicted by an assassin. Garfield had been shot by Charles Guiteau, a disappointed office seeker who believed he deserved a government appointment.

The assassination focused national attention on the spoils system, under which political parties rewarded supporters with public jobs. Arthur seemed an unlikely person to change it. He had built his career in New York's Republican political machine and once served as collector of the Port of New York, an important source of patronage.

As president, however, Arthur surprised his critics. In 1883, he signed the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act. The law required competitive examinations for certain federal jobs and protected covered employees from dismissal for political reasons. Its initial reach was limited, but it established the foundation of a professional civil service.

Arthur also supported modernization of the neglected United States Navy. His administration approved the construction of new steel warships, helping begin the transformation of the Navy into a modern force.

He attempted to restrain excessive government spending and vetoed a costly rivers-and-harbors bill, although Congress overrode him. Arthur also signed legislation reducing tariffs, but the reductions were modest and satisfied neither protectionists nor advocates of freer trade.

His record included serious shortcomings. Arthur signed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which suspended immigration by Chinese laborers. He had vetoed an earlier, harsher version but accepted the revised law. The measure was the first major federal immigration restriction directed against a particular nationality.

Arthur also declined to intervene as the Supreme Court dismantled portions of federal civil-rights legislation. His administration did prosecute some election-related violence in the South, but federal protection of Black voting rights continued to weaken.

Suffering from serious kidney disease, Arthur made only a restrained effort to secure the Republican nomination in 1884. He was not a great president, but his willingness to challenge the patronage system demonstrated that an accidental president could rise above the political machinery that had created him.