

## Acknowledging Failure

Few outside the ranks of historians know much about President James Garfield and for good reason; our twentieth president was elected on March 4, 1881, and died on September 19 after being in office just 199 days. Garfield was shot on July 2 by Charles Guiteau, a mentally unbalanced lawyer. Guiteau was delusional, he believed the president owed him a diplomatic post in Paris though he was unqualified for the position. Guiteau thought God wanted him to save the country by assassinating the president.

During the 80 days between Garfield being shot and his death, the president went from 210 pounds to only 130. Doctor Willard Bliss, his primary physician, tried to remove the bullet but inadvertently created a new path which other surgeons would mistakenly follow. The tragic result was that the original three-inch bullet hole eventually became a 21-inch puss filled channel.

There are many ironic details surrounding Garfield's death. Bliss had treated President Lincoln when he was assassinated and Lincoln's son, Robert, was with Garfield the day he was shot. Alexander Graham Bell created a crude metal detector to help locate the bullet.

The president's doctors probed his wound with unsterilized hands, a common practice at the time. Infection certainly played a major role in Garfield's death, though whether his wound would have killed him is debated. Some experts are convinced he would have died of lead poisoning without surgery, while others believe his wound was not fatal but the treatment was. Bliss would eventually apologize for mistakes in treating Garfield.

At Guiteau's trial his legal team insisted incompetent medical care led to Garfield's death. They failed to mention of course that no medical care would have been needed had Guiteau not shot Garfield. Despite their efforts Guiteau was convicted, sentenced to death and executed on June 30, 1882, in Washington DC.

I understand why Guiteau's legal team took the approach they did, however, each of us is accountable to accept responsibility for our own behavior. Scripture makes that very point. The New International Version uses the word "repent" 26 times in the New Testament. Repenting means we admit we are wrong and ask forgiveness.

One of contemporary society's problems is that too few people accept responsibility for their own failures. Instead of trying to explain why our mistakes are not as bad as they appear, or blaming others, we need to admit to ourselves, others and God that we have messed up and ask for forgiveness. Only when we do that can we be forgiven and receive the fresh start we all crave when we fail.