



The Gentleman Boss

Thomas Reeves

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“ ‘Chet’ Arthur President of the United States. Good God!” was perhaps the most pithy contemporary reaction to the accession of the twenty-first Chief Executive. It has certainly been the most enduring, even though Arthur himself has remained an enigma—in large part because this shrewd, secretive New Yorker saw to it that many of his private papers were destroyed shortly before he died. Drawing on a wealth of newly discovered documents, Thomas Reeves has now written the definitive, full-scale biography of Arthur, revising our inconsistent assumptions about both him and his era.

He gives us, for the first time, the unknown facts about Arthur’s early life: how, before he entered the boss-dominated Republican Party under the tutelage of men like the notorious Roscoe Conkling, this son of an itinerant minister was a model of nineteenth-century youthful idealism, first as a beloved schoolteacher, then as a young lawyer directly involved in the abolitionist struggle, and finally, as a conscientious and honest Quartermaster General for New York during the Civil War. Reeves assiduously plots Arthur’s consistently successful career as a master dealer in patronage and electioneering as a survivor among connivers—a career that culminated in his nomination as James Garfield’s Vice-President and, when Garfield was assassinated, his own White House inauguration, in spite of the great scandal attending his removal from the directorship of the New York Customhouse and the revelation that Garfield’s assassin claimed to be an Arthur supporter.

As Reeves makes abundantly clear, this spoilsman supreme, who personified the worst gaudy excesses of the Gilded Age, administered the laws of the land honorably and even disinterestedly—to the chagrin of his fellow bosses and henchmen. Attacked by both Republican friends (the Stalwarts) and Republican foes (the Half-Breeds) and weakened by the fatal Bright’s disease (a fact that was only made public by Reeves himself in 1972), Arthur worked to eliminate extravagant government expenditures, enacted and enforced civil service reform (thus undermining the basis of his own public life), assisted in the birth of a modern navy, and initiated an aggressive, expansionist foreign policy that set precedents for later administrations. Above all, Reeves concludes, Arthur provided calm and reassurance to a nation shocked by Garfield’s murder and beset by recurrent economic depression.

Beyond its illuminating portrait of the life and fortunes of Chester Alan Arthur, *Gentleman Boss* gives a telling account of the politics and politicians that shaped Arthur’s world—the corruption of the Grant, Hayes, and Garfield administrations, as well as Arthur’s own; the civil service reform movement; the internal wars fought within the GOP and the government between the factions led by the vain, caustic, and arrogant Roscoe Conkling and his unrelenting competitor for “office and plunder,” James G. Blaine, the Plumed Knight from Maine—a world where “men manipulated, plotted, and stole for power and prestige and the riches that bought both.

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