

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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“Presidential Little-known, Medicine-related Interesting Facts: Number Three”

Presidential history is filled with fascinating little-known facts. President James Garfield’s death has been characterized as an assassination by some and as the result of medical malpractice by others. President Garfield was in office less than 4 months when he was shot by Charles Julius Guiteau, in 1881. One bullet exited his body and another lodged in his chest. At the scene, a dozen doctors inserted their fingers and instruments into the wounds, and Garfield died 80 days later from infection and blood poisoning. Guiteau, the shooter, reportedly said, "Yes, I shot him, but his doctors killed him." President Richard Nixon was hospitalized for phlebitis while under a court subpoena. In October 1974, President Nixon was diagnosed with phlebitis, a circulatory problem that develops when a blood clot slows the circulation in a vein. His doctors recommended surgery after discovering a large blood clot in his thigh. Nixon was reluctant to undergo the surgery that doctors recommended, but was finally swayed when they told him he might die without it. Surgeons attached a plastic clip to a vein in his groin area to prevent clots from passing to his upper body. At the time, Nixon was under subpoena to appear at the trial of former aides involved in the Watergate scandal. Editors for the *Washington Post* were skeptical about the opportune timing of his problem and printed a cartoon showing the President wearing a cast on the "wrong" foot. President George H. W. Bush, the 41st President, along with his wife, Barbara, were diagnosed with Graves’ disease. First Lady Barbara Bush was diagnosed in 1989 with Graves’ disease, a condition that results in an overproduction of thyroid hormone. News about her condition raised awareness of this condition, which affects women 8-10 times more often than men. In 1991, President Bush experienced atrial fibrillation and was also diagnosed with Graves’ disease. His doctors described it as a "bizarre twist" that the president was afflicted with the same, noncontagious condition as his wife. Malaria, which was widespread throughout the early history of the United States, was not uncommon during the administrations of Presidents George Washington and James Monroe, and both of these presidents became infected with it themselves. The disease was eliminated as a significant public health problem after World War II. During that war, however, President John F. Kennedy contracted the disease in the Solomon Islands. The illness, along with his severe back pain, curtailed his military service. President John Tyler suffered mostly from respiratory infections and bouts of dysentery, but not malaria.

In the America that I love, a wide variety of medical disorders and illnesses have plagued our Presidents. It makes us realize, good health is truly a blessing.

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