

## Charles Guiteau's reasons for assassinating President Garfield, 1882

### Introduction

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Charles Julius Guiteau employed the unusual defense of poetry to plead his innocence while on trial for assassinating President James Garfield. Guiteau's odd behavior in court made him a media sensation and the Gilded Age press eagerly published his irrational verse. While this poem was never printed, Guiteau was obviously worried about his historical legacy. The verse illustrates his obsession with fame.

The poem is a unique look into the mind of one of American history's more eccentric characters. Suffering perhaps from schizophrenia, Guiteau, an attorney, felt he was owed a government job for his few speeches made in support of Garfield during the 1880 presidential campaign. After repeated attempts to obtain an ambassadorship, he was told by Secretary of State James Blaine never to return. This sent Guiteau into angry spasms of revenge that led him to shoot Garfield in 1881. Here Guiteau recapitulates his overtures and laces his poem with extreme religious imagery, calling the assassination a "Divine command." He attempts to satisfy his martyred ego and to vindicate his actions to posterity, writing "I saved our party and our land." Guiteau compares his plight to Moses', writing "God kept Moses. / He will me. / I fear no man!"

### Excerpt

I executed  
the Divine command.  
And Garfield did remove,  
To save my party,  
and my country  
From the bitter fate of War

## Charles Guiteau's reasons for assassinating President Garfield, 1882

## Image

*The Saturday Star.*

My Case.

Today, before my God  
 I stand,  
 A patriot and a Christian man;  
 Condemned by men to die;  
 For obeying  
 God's commands.

"Ye murdered Garfield,  
 And ye must die."  
 'Twas God's will,  
 Not mine,  
 That he should die.  
 Thirty eight cases,  
 In the Bible  
 Can be found,  
 Where the Almighty  
 Has directed  
~~The~~ The Removal  
 Of Rulers, who were going wrong.  
 I executed,  
 The Divine command,  
 And Garfield did remove,  
 To save my party,  
 And my country  
 From the hands of the  
 A man with Chute and Lammie Paris;

Charles J. Guiteau, "My Case" [poem], June 1, 1882 (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC06319)

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### Transcript

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Charles J. Guiteau, "My Case" [poem], June 1, 1882 (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC06319)

For Saturday Star.

#### My Case.

Today, before [*struck: I*] my God

I stand,

A patriot and a Christian man;

Condemned, by men to die;

For Obeying,

God's Command.

"Ye murdered Garfield,

And ye must die".

'Twas God's will,

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That he should die.

Thirty eight cases,

In the Bible

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Where the Almighty

Has directed

[*struck: The*] The Removal

Of Rulers, who were going wrong.

I executed,

The Divine Command

And Garfield did remove,

To save my party,

And my country

From the bitter fate of War. –

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(A war with Chile and [*struck*: Perrue] Peru;

[2] If nothing worse,

Concocted by the scheming brain of Blaine.)

For this;

Say fools and devils,

“On the gallows, ye must die!”

Had ye Garfield,

Were living,

And die in War?, or,

Garfield, dead, to [*struck*: die,] live,

In peace?

Garfield, dead,

Is worth more than

[*struck*: Than] Garfield living;

Because, Garfield, under

Blaine's vindictive spirit,

Proved a traitor,

To the men that made him,

And imperilled the Republic

Hang Blaine!

If some one ye [*struck*: will] must hang;

For his vindictive spirit,

Caused poor Garfield's death.

Garfield's exit in New Jersey,

Was an act of God.

But the Washington Court,

In bane.

[3] Are cowards,

## Charles Guiteau's reasons for assassinating President Garfield, 1882

And cranks,  
And failed [*struck*: to]  
To execute the law.  
(For six and twenty states  
Have passed laws,  
To remedy the defects.  
Of the common law,  
Which they followed  
To get their law!)  
These gentlemen  
In bane,  
Would have me go,  
Whether or no,  
I appeal, therefore,  
To higher officials,  
For justice and freedom.

My inspiration made  
General Arthur President.  
He made Supreme Court Judges.  
To their courts,  
I Appeal,  
To test the legality,  
Of my conviction.  
I judge the United States  
Supreme Court Judges  
Have backbone and brains.  
[4] To administer the law,  
As they find it,  
And they will say: go.

## Charles Guiteau's reasons for assassinating President Garfield, 1882

Arthur, and his officials, Know,  
 I saved our party and our land.  
 They fatten at the public crib,  
 While I, in prison, languish;  
 Condemned to die!  
 Is this right? I say no.  
 It is the basest ingratitude,  
 And nothing but a sickly sentiment, –  
 Makes it so. –  
 That I should pi[*struck: m*][*inserted: n*]e, and die  
 While they fatten at the crib.  
 Because, I made them;  
 And saved my county, [*struck: and*]  
 And theirs, from overthrow.  
 A[*struck: nd*][*inserted: s*] men of honor,  
 They are bound,  
 To stand by me, now.  
 And woe, [*struck: be*]  
 Be unto them,  
 If they do not!

Moses killed a man.  
 This made Pharaoh mad.  
 And Moses he would slay.  
 [5] God kept Moses.  
 He will me.  
 I fear no man!

Fools and devils,

## Charles Guiteau's reasons for assassinating President Garfield, 1882

Crucified Our Lord.

“Father, forgive them”.

But the Almighty,

Does not,

Do business,

That way!

The [*struck: answer*] [*inserted: retribution*] came,

[*struck: q*][*inserted: Q*]uick and sharp,

In fire and [*struck: flood*] [*inserted: blood,*]

In shot and shell,

In endless pain [*struck: !*]

[*struck: illegible phrases*

Rename, ye Americans,

And ye men of power,

What ye do;]

[*inserted: When Jerusalem went out!*

(See my book on this.)

So it will be, –

With my enemies.

For I am God's man,

And don't forget it!]

Lest the almighty

Follow you,

As he did

The Jews!

[6] This [*inserted: is*] fact; not blasphemy.

Corkhill his wife did loose.

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And Gray was shot.

And thus, did God relati~~ate~~ate [*sic*]!

Some think me a devil.

Some a lunatic.

Some an inspired patriot.

The last is right;

And I stick to it!

I Command,

All men, every where,

To believe it,

Under penalty,

Of God's wrath.

Charles Guiteau

United States Jail

Washington D.C

[*struck*: M] June 1, 1882.

Notes: On page 5 of Guiteau's poem, several lines of the second stanza were pasted over with a smaller sheet of paper. This made the first three lines illegible due to the adhesive. As the remaining three lines are legible they have been indicated in the transcript. All the text is in Guiteau's hand and the additional text appears to be a revised stanza.