

Chester Arthur
21st President




Terms: 1881-1885

Political Party: Republican

First Lady: Mary Arthur McElroy (sister)

Vice President: None

Overview

Born: October 5, 1830, in Fairfield, Vermont... "Arthur is president now," declared [James Garfield's](#) <www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/biography/presidents-garfield/> assassin. A cog in the New York party machine, upon his presidency, Arthur revealed an unanticipated integrity and honesty. He helped reform the civil service, prosecuted corruption in the post office and attempted to lower tariffs. By the end of his term, [Mark Twain](#) <www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/biography/grant-clemens/> decided, "it would be hard to better President Arthur's administration." ...Died: November 18, 1886.

The Era

- Shootout at the OK Corral in Tombstone, Arizona (1881)
- William F. Cody ("Buffalo Bill") organizes a Wild West show (1883)
- John Roebling completes the Brooklyn Bridge (1883)

EXCLUSIVE CORPORATE FUNDING FOR AMERICAN EXPERIENCE PROVIDED BY LIBERTY MUTUAL.
MAJOR FUNDING PROVIDED BY THE ALFRED P. SLOAN FOUNDATION, THE CORPORATION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING AND PUBLIC TELEVISION VIEWERS.
AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IS PRODUCED FOR PBS BY WGBH BOSTON.



Domestic Policy

Unexpectedly for a man whose early political career depended on political patronage, Arthur signed the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act into law. Advancement in government service was tied to merit, not party loyalty, and federal employees could not be dismissed for political reasons. Similarly, rather than spend the budget surplus on pet projects, Arthur vetoed pork barrel projects (although his veto was overridden). A fastidious dresser, Arthur did find \$30,000 to hire Louis Comfort Tiffany to design and furnish the White House.

Foreign Affairs

Arthur's sense of fairness affected his concept of foreign relations. He tried to lower tariffs in general (the Treasury was running a surplus) and negotiated trade agreements with partners in the Western Hemisphere. Protectionists in both parties worked to block these initiatives. When Congress passed a bill banning [Chinese immigration](#) www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/tcrr-cpr/ to America, Arthur vetoed it on the grounds that it violated existing treaties; a second bill placing a ten-year moratorium on Chinese immigration was signed by the president (that bill was renewed continuously until 1943). Arthur's most lasting effect on international relations turned out to be his investment in a modern navy, with [steam-powered](#) www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/photo-gallery/lincolns-technology/ engines and [steel](#) www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/streamliners-steel/ cladding.

“The Indian should receive the protection of the law. He should be allowed to maintain in court the rights of person and property. He has repeatedly begged for this privilege. Its exercise would be very valuable to him in his progress towards civilization.”

– Chester A. Arthur, 1884

EXCLUSIVE CORPORATE FUNDING FOR AMERICAN EXPERIENCE PROVIDED BY LIBERTY MUTUAL.
MAJOR FUNDING PROVIDED BY THE ALFRED P. SLOAN FOUNDATION, THE CORPORATION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING AND PUBLIC TELEVISION VIEWERS.
AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IS PRODUCED FOR PBS BY WGBH BOSTON.



Presidential Politics

Although the customs house was a federal appointment, Senator Roscoe Conkling, Arthur's patron, finagled to get the future president the head post there. The Republicans held onto their political power through kickbacks and overstaffing of departments like these, and the reformist [Rutherford Hayes](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/tcrr-cpr/) had Arthur removed from this post. James Garfield accepted Arthur as his running mate to appease the party bosses and then found his vice president opposed him in his battle of wills with Conkling. Upon Garfield's death, Americans feared the worst of Arthur, but he revealed himself to be an honest administrator. A year into office, Arthur was diagnosed with fatal kidney disease; he died a year and half after leaving the White House.

EXCLUSIVE CORPORATE FUNDING FOR *AMERICAN EXPERIENCE* PROVIDED BY LIBERTY MUTUAL.
MAJOR FUNDING PROVIDED BY THE ALFRED P. SLOAN FOUNDATION, THE CORPORATION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING AND PUBLIC TELEVISION VIEWERS.
AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IS PRODUCED FOR PBS BY WGBH BOSTON.

