

How an assassin's bullet helped create the postal exam



There's a saying that it's who you know and not *what* you know that helps you get a job. Letter carriers know that isn't true, as they have to take the test to prove what they know.

The Postal Exam 474, also called the Virtual Entry Assessment – MC (474), is used for evaluating candidates applying for both city and rural mail carrier positions. This replaced the

retired Postal Exam 473 last year. It has three sections:

1. **Work Scenarios:** Eight questions used to evaluate how applicants respond to a variety of situations that letter carriers encounter daily on the job.
2. **Tell Us Your Story:** 20 multiple-choice questions that review an applicant's work experiences and background.
3. **Describe Your Approach:** A personality-based test to evaluate an applicant's preferred style and approach to work.

In other words, you have to be qualified for the job to get the position.

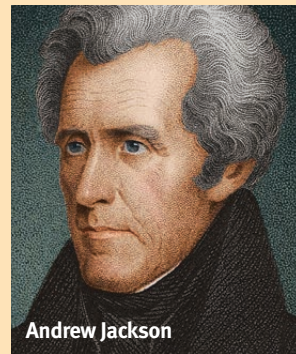
But that wasn't the case back in 1828, when Andrew Jackson was elected president of the United States and instituted what became known as the "spoils system." While campaigning, Jackson promised positions in the federal government in exchange for political support and campaign donations. When he won, he delivered on those promises.

Under the claim of creating a chain of command within the federal government that obeyed the highest entity in that government (President

Jackson himself), he replaced scores of experienced employees with political cronies. Hardest hit was the Post Office Department. In one year, 423 postmasters were dismissed so the jobs could go to Jackson's supporters. (It wasn't until decades later that letter carrier became a position.)

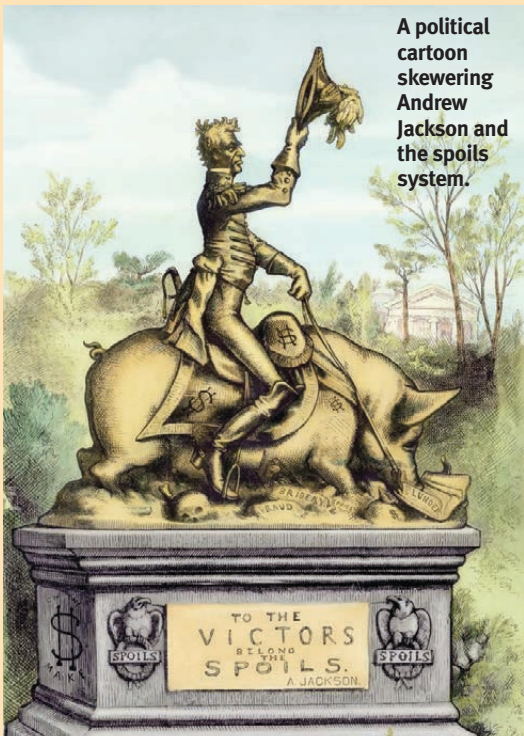
The practice continued after Jackson left office, and whenever there was a transfer of the presidency from one party to another, there would be a transfer of jobs to new political appointees. It didn't matter whether the new postal workers were competent, because they had the support of the president, and it didn't matter whether the old ones had been good at their jobs.

This may have worked for the politicians, but many reformers wanted a change. In 1872, a whole wing of the Republican Party left to form the Liberal Republican Party and oppose President Ulysses S. Grant, whose administration was infamous for graft and corruption. The Liberal



Andrew Jackson

A political cartoon skewering Andrew Jackson and the spoils system.



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Republicans lost in a landslide and disappeared, but the reform sentiment remained.

Who knows how much longer it would have taken reformers to pass what became known as civil service reform, had it not been for the election of James Garfield in 1880 and his assassination at the hands of Charles Guiteau a short time later.

Guiteau, originally from Freeport, IL, knew something about corruption. After failing to pass the entrance exams for the University of Michigan, he joined a utopian community in Oneida, NY, but was generally disliked. He became a clerk at a Chicago law firm and eventually passed the bar, becoming a lawyer. Specializing in bill collection, he often kept most of his clients' money from his collections, to the point that in 1872 he moved to New York City to evade his own bill collectors and dissatisfied clients.

In New York, he developed an interest in politics, supporting Horace Greeley, the Liberal Republicans' candidate for president against Republican Grant. Guiteau wrote a disorganized speech in support of Greeley, which he delivered once. Strangely, Guiteau was certain that this show of support for Greeley would lead the candidate, if

elected, to be so grateful as to appoint Guiteau as minister to Chile.

Unsurprisingly, those closest to Guiteau thought he was crazy, with even his own father convinced he was possessed by the devil. He wandered, destitute, outrunning his bill collectors for several years. By the election of 1880, his attention returned to politics.

Now supporting Grant, who was campaigning to get the Republican nomination for a third term, Guiteau wrote another speech, this time in support of Grant and lauding the former general's Civil War record. When Grant lost the nomination to James Garfield, Guiteau simply substituted Garfield's name but left many references to Grant's war record.

Though he delivered the speech only twice, Guiteau apparently thought that he was responsible for Garfield's election and decided that he deserved a consulship for his vital assistance. Though he first asked for a posting in Vienna, he eventually settled on Paris as his choice.

Guiteau wrote many letters about his expectations for the position. He even arranged a meeting with Garfield at the White House (at the time, it was common for position seekers to wait in the White House for possible presidential meetings). He confronted any cabinet member he could, both through letters and in person, to try to forward his appeal, though all of them were rejected. One official, tired of Guiteau, told him, "Never speak to me again on the Paris consulship as long as you live!"

Guiteau, moving from boarding house to boarding house to evade paying his bills, felt that God had communicated with him to kill Garfield, so that Vice President Chester Arthur would become president. He bought an ivory-handled pistol that he thought would look nice in a future museum collection, and then waited for President Garfield at a railroad station in Washington, DC, having learned of his schedule from a newspaper article.

Guiteau stepped forward and shot Garfield twice; one bullet grazed the president's arm, while the other punctured his vertebrae but missed the spine,

lodging near the pancreas. Neither shot was fatal. However, nearly 10 doctors who happened to be on scene at the train station poked Garfield's wounds with their unwashed fingers, likely introducing harmful germs.

The assassin was arrested and whisked away by police (at his own insistence). He became convinced that Vice President Arthur would intercede on his behalf in the ensuing legal proceedings, as Arthur was a well-known proponent of the spoils system, and Guiteau had, in a sense, just given him the presidency.

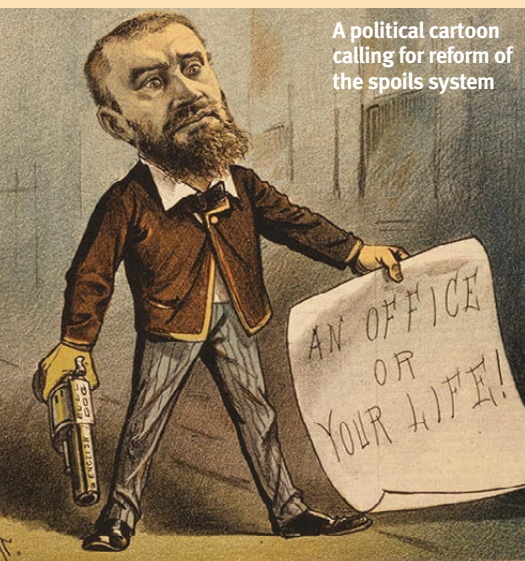
Garfield survived for 11 weeks. He was given heavy doses of quinine, morphine and alcohol, which brought on vomiting that left him weak and emaciated. His doctor continued to search for the embedded bullet, eventually bringing in Alexander Graham Bell, who had developed a metal detector, but the bullet remained elusive. Eventually a massive infection overcame Garfield (most likely from his medical treatment, both at the station and in the hospital), and he died on Sept. 19, 1881.

The case generated lots of media attention. Reformers quickly made the case that had there been a proper civil service system, there might not have been a disappointed office seeker-turned-assassin. A famous political cartoon portrayed him with his pistol and a sign that read, "An office or your life!"

Guiteau pleaded not guilty by reason of insanity, and his behavior during



Charles Guiteau



A political cartoon calling for reform of the spoils system



An artist's recreation of the aftermath of the shooting of President Garfield

the trial certainly seemed to exhibit it. He frequently cursed the judge, most of the witnesses, the prosecution, and even his defense team. He delivered his testimony in epic poems and asked for legal advice from spectators in the audience. He even claimed that he should be freed because of medical malpractice. "The doctors killed Garfield, I just shot him," he said.

He was found guilty and sentenced to death. On June 30, 1882, he danced his way to the gallows, despite being denied his request for an orchestra, and was hanged. Supposedly, bits of the rope were sold as souvenirs by the prison guards.

Meanwhile, reformers started a major campaign for reform, arguing that the spoils system had played a key role in the assassination. During his first annual address to Congress, President Arthur, a former proponent of the spoils system, requested civil service reform legislation. Though he didn't get it from the Republican-led Congress, when Democrats won control of the House during the 1882 election, the lame-duck Congress quickly passed the reform legislation so that Republicans could take credit for the bill and could protect Republican officeholders from defeat.

Among other provisions, the legislation, known as the Pendleton Act, specifically required candidates for jobs as letter carriers and post office clerks in every post office with 50 or more employees to take competitive exams to qualify for those jobs. It also included language that made their positions permanent. Although the law excluded all postmasters and other employees in the smaller post offices, approximately half the postal workforce was covered.

Here are some of the questions from an early form of the test:

ARITHMETIC

Question 1: *A carrier makes 4 trips a day, carrying 64 letters and 32 papers each trip. The letters average in weight $\frac{1}{4}$ oz. each and the papers 2 oz. each. How many pounds of mail does he deliver in a day? (16 oz. to the pound.)*

Question 2: *In an office employing 35 carriers, each carrier loses 20 minutes a day in idle talk. Suppose the average salary of each to be \$2.50 for ten hours work, what is the cost to the Government of the lost time each day, and what will it amount to in a year of 313 working days?*

LOCAL DELIVERY

Question 1: *Name the principal railroads (not exceeding five) which pass through or terminate in this city, and give the location (the street or streets on which situated) of the principal depot or ticket office of each.*

Question 2: *Name four streets which pass nearest to the building in which this examination is held, and mention one public building or prominent business house on each.*

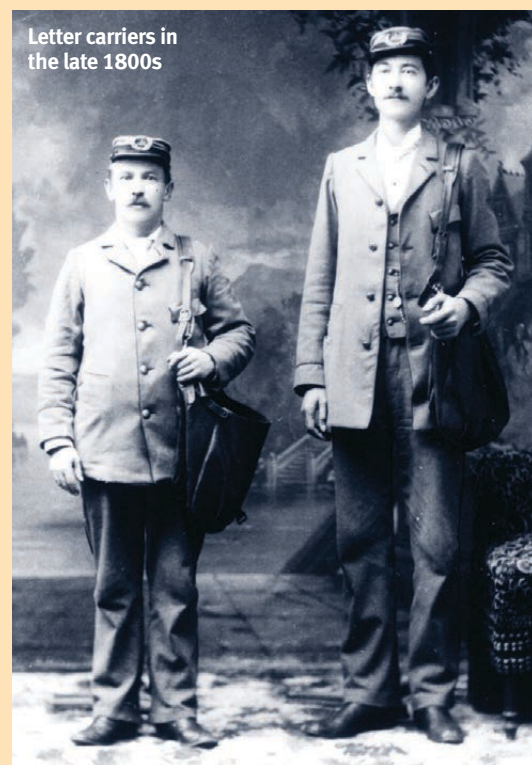
Question 3: *Name the principal hotels in this city (not exceeding five) and the location (street or streets on which situated) of each.*

With the reform, for the first time since Andrew Jackson's administration, letter carriers were hired because they were qualified for their jobs—not because they were members of a certain political party. As a result of these reforms, the high turnover among

letter carriers began to diminish, and a permanent core of carriers with a stake in the service developed.

The passage of the Pendleton Act had another effect on letter carriers. The relationship between Congress and letter carriers began to change. If letter carriers could no longer be counted on to represent the political interests of senators and representatives at home, why should Congress do anything for them?

Congress's interest in the welfare of letter carriers quickly faded, and carriers found it necessary to unite to protect their interests. By 1887, these letter carriers had created *The Postal Record* as a way to spread news and information about the job. And in 1889, above a saloon in Milwaukee, WI, the National Association of Letter Carriers was established. **PR**



Letter carriers in the late 1800s