**James Garfield was Not Saved by the Telephone**

On July 2, 1881, President James A. Garfield was shot at the Washington railroad station. The first doctor on the scene gave him half an ounce of brandy and a dram of spirits of ammonia. Garfield promptly vomited.

D. W. Bliss, a leading Washington doctor, appeared and immediately tried to locate the path of the bullet in Garfield’s body through the use of a heavy “Nelaton Probe.” The instrument was introduced into the wound and turned slowly, probing for the point of least resistance, which, the doctor hoped, would be the bullet track. Unfortunately, the President was a muscular man and had been walking briskly when shot. Now he lay on his left side with muscles relaxed. When Bliss’s probe suddenly slipped downward and forward thee and a half inches into the President’s body, it did not follow the course of the bullet, The instrument did, however, become stuck between the shattered fragments of Garfield’s eleventh rib, and was removed only with a great deal of difficulty, causing the President terrific pain. Bliss next inserted his little finger into the wound, widening the hole in another unsuccessful probe for the bullet. When other expert doctors arrived from around the country, they, too, were unable to locate the bullet. A large black-and-blue spot did form, however, exactly where doctors assumed the bullet was and, coincidentally, where Dr. Bliss had originally probed.

Daily bulletins on the President’s health worried the American public. One citizen, Alexander Graham Bell, inventor of the telephone, had a brainstorm. With one of his telephone receivers, he rigged up an electrical induction system with a primary and secondary coil, which, when brought into the close proximity to a metal object, such as a bullet, created a slight disturbance in the balance of the circuit and sounded a faint hum in the telephone receiver. Because of Bell’s worldwide fame, Garfield’s doctors agreed to give the timely invention a try.

At the appointed hour, Bell arrived at the White House. The President was propped up in his bed and the equipment was put in place. While Bell stood behind the bed with the telephone receiver to his ear, an assistant slowly moved the coils around Garfield’s abdomen and back. When the coils crossed the black-and-blue spot, Bell’s face lighted up. He heard a hum. The experiment was repeated several times, once with Mrs. Garfield listening to the receiver, and each time a faint hum was detected as the coils crossed the black-and-blue area. The bullet was there, Bell confidently informed the President’s doctors, but it was deeper than they had estimated. The doctors, however judged that a major operation, when the exact location of the bullet was still somewhat uncertain, would be too hazardous.

But days later, when the President’s temperature began to climb, the doctors reopened their previous incision and enlarged it outward and –as Bell had recommended-downward. Still they found no bullet. Garfield’s condition wavered over a month longer. He finally died on September 17, 1881.

According to some medical historians, Garfield probably would not have died had he simply been left alone. What killed him, they say, was not the bullet, which became wrapped in a protective cyst, but infections caused by unsterile instruments and hands-infections that Garfield’s body could not resist because the President had become weak after staying in bed for two months. Of course, Garfield’s doctors, some of the best in the country, did not have the benefit of present-day knowledge.

And the bullet? In the autopsy it was located a full ten inches from where the doctors and Alexander Graham Bell had said it was. Bell’s contraption had been no more accurate than a divining rod. Did Bell and Mrs. Garfield want to hear a hum so desperately that both simply imagined it? Or was it perhaps the sound of the President’s metal-spring bed? It is impossible to say. Bell’s invention however, was not a total failure. Later in a more elaborate form, it worked-for the army in the detection of land mines.

Source: Rudolph Marx, *The Health of the Presidents* (New York: Putnam’s 1960), p. 242: *American Heritage Pictorial History of the Presidents of the United States* (New York: American Heritage Publishing Company, 1968), p. 530.