

Arthur E. Guedel

Memorial Anesthesia Center

Grover Cleveland's Request

By Merlin Larson, M.D.

It is rare to perform a truly great anesthetic and then be insulted by the press for “botching the job.” However, this is precisely what happened when Ferdinand Hasbrouck agreed to deliver anesthesia to President Grover Cleveland on July 1, 1893. In the last issue of the *CSA Bulletin*, the anesthetic delivered to President Cleveland was briefly mentioned. The full story of this anesthetic and the individual who was “honored” to attend the president provides a historical example of the hazards that accompany a special request.

The “honor” (request) to give this anesthetic was delivered to Dr. Ferdinand Hasbrouck only a few days before the actual operation was performed. Little is known about this anesthetist/dentist except that he was a prominent and skillful practitioner of the nitrous oxide technique. The operation was to be performed in the salon of the yacht *Oneida* in total secrecy while it was en route from New York to Buzzard's Bay in Massachusetts. The United States economy was nearly in ruins, and the President and his close advisors were of the opinion that any doubt about the health of President Cleveland would lead to panic and collapse of the financial system.

The planned (secret) procedure was to be done in the sitting position and involved cutting away most of the maxilla up to the orbital rim on the left side of the face. The task must have seemed formidable to Hasbrouck, especially when considering the fact that Cleveland was nearly 300 pounds. In 1893 there were no intravenous lines, no electronic monitors, no blood pressure devices, no suction, no ventilators, no laryngoscopes, no special airway devices, and no endotracheal tubes. Hasbrouck agreed to administer the anesthetic provided he could leave the yacht after the surgery to administer another anesthetic in Greenwich, Connecticut, a commitment that he had made prior to the request to attend the President.

The exact details of the anesthetic are not known with certainty. However in W.W. Keen's (Keen was first surgical assistant) book entitled *The Surgical Operations on President Cleveland in 1893* (George Jacobs, Philadelphia, 1917) and in newspaper articles on the subject (*New York Times* and *Philadelphia Press*) some facts are known.

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Cleveland was positioned in an upright chair tied to the main mast of the yacht. He was induced with nitrous oxide and air with a device similar to those shown in Figure 1. Hasbrouck then quickly removed two carious bicusps and the mask was reapplied. When Cleveland was adequately obtunded, the surgeon, Joseph Bryant injected into and around the lesion located on the hard palate with cocaine. The operation was performed between intermittent mask applications of nitrous oxide and air. Bleeding was controlled with hot compresses and a portable battery powered electrocautery. The mask continued to be intermittently applied to keep the President asleep until the nitrous oxide supplies were exhausted.

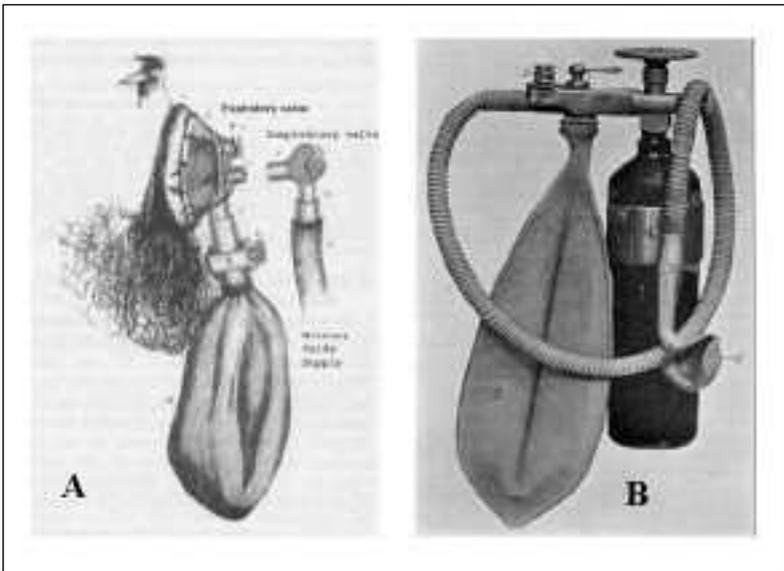


Figure 1: A. J.T. Clover described this device to administer nitrous oxide and air in 1868 (*The administration of nitrous oxide as an anaesthetic, Br Med J, 2:201, 1868*). B. Arthur Guedel constructed this nitrous oxide/air apparatus around the turn of the century. An analysis of the Cleveland anesthetic indicates that a similar device was used on board the *Oneida*. Although nasal inhalers were used at the time and also mixers were available that delivered variable concentrations of oxygen/nitrous oxide, these techniques were not used by Hasbrouck. Illustration B is taken from James T. Gwathmey's textbook, *Anesthesia*, (D. Appleton and Company) dated 1914.

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After 42 minutes the nitrous oxide tank was depleted and the President's personal physician, Dr. Robert M. O'Reilly, administered ether. Ether was delivered either by passing compressed air through a bubble vaporizer or simply by dropping it onto a face-gauze. The operation was completed after one hour and 23 minutes and an intra-muscular injection of morphine 10 mg was given. Total blood loss was less than 200 cc. The President slept soundly for several hours and was out of bed on the second postoperative day ... (surprisingly) with no complications arising from the procedure. Oxygen in compressed cylinders was available in 1893 and a tank was on board the Oneida but it was never used during the case. Keen's report indicated that they had no method of mixing oxygen and nitrous oxide on the yacht.

Although Hasbrouck had delivered this remarkable anesthetic, the subsequent events were highly damaging to his reputation and the slander he received was never rectified during his lifetime. After the procedure was completed, Hasbrouck asked permission to leave the Oneida in order to fulfill his commitment to Dr. Leander P. Jones, a prominent physician who catered to the blue-bloods of Newport and Manhattan. The consensus on board the yacht, however, was not to allow permission for anyone to disembark because doing so might lead to a break in the total secrecy under which the operation was performed.

Hasbrouck was persistent, argued that he was no longer needed, and demanded to leave the Oneida. He finally was allowed to leave the boat at Greenwich on the afternoon of July 2nd ... one day late for his appointment with Dr. Jones. When Hasbrouck arrived in Connecticut, Jones was not amused by Hasbrouck's tardiness and demanded an explanation for his late arrival. Reluctantly, Hasbrouck then explained that he had been detained by none other than the President of the United States, apparently thinking that this would assuage his unhappy client. Jones, however, was not satisfied with this brief explanation and demanded a full account of the operation and the reasons for Hasbrouck's delay.

After Hasbrouck relayed the entire story, Jones accidentally met up with an old friend, E. J. Edwards, who wrote a news column for the *Philadelphia Press* under the pen name "Holland." Although the story had been told to Jones under strict confidence, he nevertheless disclosed the complete information on the operation to Edwards who then wrote an account (Figure 2 A) of the operation in the *Philadelphia Press* on August 29, 1893. The news alarmed the public regarding the health of the President, and threatened the stability of the fragile government now enmeshed in the worst financial crisis ever known in its 117- year-old history.

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Denial of Holland's story by official government spokesmen was swift. One by one, the participants in the operation vehemently denied the story in the *Philadelphia Press* as a hoax. They dismissed Hasbrouck, to whom the story was eventually traced (Figure 2 C), as an insignificant and incompetent dentist who had been asked to pull some of the President's teeth, had botched the job, and had been asked to leave the boat. Bryant vowed never to speak to the dentist again. Several members of the government suggested a severe punishment (Figure 2 D) to those, including Hasbrouck, who spread lies about the President's health.



Figure 2: Newspaper headlines breaking the news of Cleveland's illness. A: Holland's initial revelation that Cleveland had an extensive operation (*Philadelphia Press*, Tuesday August 29, 1893). **B:** Following the publication of Keen's book in 1917, E. J. Edwards finally reveals the first source of the story about Cleveland's operation (*Philadelphia Press*, September 26, 1917). **C:** Although Hasbrouck described the operation in this 1893 interview, he did not reveal that he was the source of the initial "leak" (*Philadelphia Press*, Wednesday, August 30, 1893). **D:** Threat of punishment for "Rumor Mongers," e.g., Hasbrouck and Edwards (*New York Times*, Thursday, August 31, 1893).

Eventually the public came to view the story by "Holland" as totally false. Cleveland made a remarkable recovery and had no speech impediment, having been fitted with an oral dental prosthesis. Hasbrouck was totally discredited and not heard from again. Cleveland died of a cardiac condition on June 24, 1908, never divulging the true account of his secret operation. Keen's revelation of

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the true story verifying and authenticating the account of the dentist/anesthetist was published in 1917 after all the characters (except Keen and Edwards, see Fig 2 B) in the drama were deceased. ... small compensation to the now dead Hasbrouck.

There are lessons to be learned with regard to the “request” case. For one, a request to provide anesthesia service to a prominent personality creates more tension than would prevail in just another routine day in the operating theatre. In addition, there are significant risks involved—a minor complication or even a misunderstanding between individuals (as between Hasbrouck and Jones) might be reported in the national or international media and tarnish one’s otherwise exemplary reputation.

For Hasbrouck, the anesthetic was a “lose-lose” assignment from the start. Any number of skillful anesthetics to famous individuals are never disseminated in the popular press as a revelation that “here we have a truly great anesthesiologist” on the same level as “here we have a truly great surgeon or cardiologist.” Although Hasbrouck suffered in the public’s eye, perhaps when he reflected on his impressive accomplishment he was able to achieve some peace of mind. Perhaps that is the message here—we are the only ones who know when we have excelled, and everyone knows when we have failed.

The only “Google” connection to the name of Ferdinand Hasbrouck directs one to a gravestone in the St. John’s Graveyard in Monticello, New York, with the dates 1844-1909, perhaps (not proven) the same individual who lost his reputation while providing a remarkably difficult anesthetic *on request* to his Commander-in-Chief. The surgical specimen removed from Grover Cleveland’s jaw and the instruments used during the operation are on display in the Mütter Museum of the College of Physicians (<http://www.collphyphil.org/general.asp>) in Philadelphia.

References available
on request.



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