

THE EARLIER ASSASSINS

ASSASSINATION has never been an instrument of politics in the U.S.: no plot to seize power, no palace intrigue, has ever cost an American President his life. The three assassins whose bullets killed Presidents Lincoln, Garfield and McKinley were lonely psychopaths, adrift from reason in a morbid fascination with the place history gives those who reverse its orderly progress. Each sought an hour of mad glory—and each died convinced that history would understand.

John Wilkes Booth, 26, was among the most famous American actors of his time, but in the year before he killed Abraham Lincoln, his career was clouded with doom. "I must have fame—*fame!*" he would cry, but his grand Shakespearean voice was slipping into a chronic and desperate hoarseness, and he wildly determined to find his destiny away from the stage. "What a glorious opportunity for a man to immortalize himself by killing Abraham Lincoln!" he remarked to friends in Chicago two years before his crime.

Booth enlisted several conspirators in a plan to abduct Lincoln and hold him hostage in exchange for imprisoned Confederate troops, but as his plot disintegrated he decided on murder instead, and a number of the others withdrew. Booth nervously bided his time until he could seize a dramatic moment. He chose the night of April 14, 1865, when Lincoln was to attend a performance of *Our American Cousin* at Ford's Theater in Washington. Booth visited the presidential box—No. 7—a few hours before curtain time, saw that the lock on its door was broken, and cut a small peephole through the wood.

Lincoln's only guard was drinking at a nearby tavern when Booth struck. While the audience cheered and hooted over a slapstick line in the play ("Well, I guess I know enough to turn you inside out, old gal—you sockdologizing old mantrap"), Booth slipped into the box. With a shout of "*Sic semper tyrannis!* [Thus always to tyrants!]," he fired a shot from his derringer into the back of Lincoln's head. He slashed his way past Lincoln's companion, leaped ten feet to the stage and, with a broken shinbone, hurtled himself past startled stagehands and into the night.

Lincoln died nine hours later. Booth lived like a dog while the search for him spread out across the country. Occasionally he saw a newspaper, only to read with bafflement and bitter disappointment that his crime had been condemned throughout the South. On April 26 he was cornered in a barn near Bowling Green, Va. Troops set fire to the barn to force him out and, as he was silhouetted in the flames, saw him felled by a single bullet. "Tell Mother I died for my country," he whispered as he was dragged from the fire.

Charles Julius Guiteau, 39, was known to President James A. Garfield only as a bragging pest who incessantly called at the White House to ask for "the Paris consulship." Guiteau, a lawyer and evangelist, described himself as an employee of "Jesus Christ & Co.," but wandering around Washington, sockless and absurd, he announced that his real mission was the salvation of unity in the Republican Party. At last he decided that God's will had or-

dained Garfield's death. He bought a .44-cal. revolver, tested it by firing at saplings along the Potomac, and went by the Washington jail to check on its comforts. "Very excellent," he decided.

When Garfield entered Washington's Baltimore & Potomac railway station at 9:20 a.m., July 2, 1881, on his way to a two-week vacation in the North, Guiteau stepped from behind a bench, walked within a few feet of the President and shot him in the back. "My God, what is this!" Garfield cried, toppling forward. Guiteau was captured immediately. He pleaded insanity of the "Abrahamic" variety—like Abraham in murderous pursuit of Isaac, he was in the command of a wrathful God. "Let your verdict be that it was the Deity's act not mine," he told his jurors, but they took only 65 minutes to condemn him to death. Garfield, cheerful and brave throughout his struggle for life, died 80 days after the shooting.

Leon F. Czolgosz, 28, thought of himself as an anarchist. But he seemed such a dubious character in even that company that five days before his murder of President William McKinley, *Free Society*, an anarchist periodical, carried a warning that he was a spy. After reading of the anarchist assassination of Italy's King Humbert I, the idea of killing the President began to grow in his mind. A week before the murder, he bought a .32-cal. pistol for \$4.50.

On Sept. 6, 1901, Czolgosz took a place in a receiving line in the Temple of Music at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo. Crowds streamed into the domed room to shake the President's hand. Czolgosz, dressed in his best, simply stepped in among them. None of the 50 guards present noticed the gun he held wrapped in a white handkerchief. McKinley extended his hand as Czolgosz drew up to him. The killer slapped it away and fired two shots point-blank into the President's chest and abdomen. Guards and soldiers pounced on him and beat him with rifle butts until McKinley called out, "Be easy with him boys." McKinley died eight days later. Czolgosz told his disgusted lawyers that he would take no part in his defense. "I killed the President because he was the enemy of the good working people," he said. "I am not sorry for my crime." The trial lasted 8½ hours. The jury needed only 34 minutes to condemn him to death.

All three killers were very likely insane. None had criminal past. But the national passions aroused by their crimes seem, in retrospect, a chilling echo of the assassinations themselves. Guiteau went raving to the scaffold, where a crowd that had paid as much as \$300 each for the pleasure of seeing him hang heard him cry "Glory, glory, glory," as the door was sprung from beneath his feet. Czolgosz was electrocuted only 46 days after McKinley died, and a carboy of sulphuric acid was poured into his coffin afterward, by way of post-mortem punishment. Sergeant Boston Corbett, the soldier who claimed he had killed Booth, in defiance of orders that he be taken alive, explained that he had acted on God's authority. "Providence directed me," he said.