

A STUDY OF POLITICAL ASSASSINATIONS¹

Power Psychology
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We may consider that the first political assassination was the murder of Abel by Cain. Cain was living in a theocracy, and his God had shown a preference for Abel. Cain reasoned that if Abel was destroyed he would succeed to this position of pre-
cedence.

Perhaps the second most publicized assassination was that of Julius Caesar. Ostensibly this action on the Ides of March, as explained by Cassius to Brutus, was to prevent Julius from becoming Emperor. Augustus, Julius' grandnephew, became Emperor of Rome 21 years after the assassination which was supposed to rid Rome of Emperors.

Cassius and most of the other conspirators were in fact not primarily interested in preventing an autocracy in Rome; they wished to revenge Pompeii's death. There were a few, like Brutus, who had somewhat higher motives, if such can be said of a murderer. These felt that they were maintaining the Roman Republic. This they did not do. Once more an assassination with somewhat high motives failed to accomplish what the perpetrators expected.

While murder for profit, for religious or political reasons, has been with us for centuries, it would seem that our word "assassination" comes from the name of a tribe in Asia Minor. I quote from the Collier's Encyclopedia, Volume 2, page 382:

ASSASSINS, from the Arabic "Hashshahin," or addicts of the drug Hashish (hemps), a secret order of religious fanatics. Founded in Iran by the Persian, al-Hasan-ibn-al-Sabbah, a Fatimid missionary, the movement was one of propaganda with little regard for spiritual objectives. In its graded system of authority, the *Shahd-ud-Jabal*, known to the Crusaders in popular translation, as the "Old Man of the Mountains," was chief of operations, aided by two groups of subordinates, the Grand Priors,

and, below them the contingents of desperadoes ready to do or die in blind obedience to the command of their chief.

From Alamut, their mountain stronghold in the northwest of Qazvin in Iran the Assassins spread their militant anarchical influence through many parts of the Moslem world by establishing a chain of hill forts in northern Iran and Syria and by pursuing a policy of secret assassination against their enemies.

Toward the close of the eleventh century, the Assassins gained a foothold in northern Syria, their chief in Syria, Rashid-ad-Din Sinan who in turn had become the "Old Man of the Mountains," terrorized the invading Crusaders in a campaign of systematic murder.

This group was the first "murder incorporated." Most of their killings were to improve the power of the "Old Man of the Mountains," their leader, whoever that might be.

During the latter years of the Roman Empire, emperors were killed by the people, by the Legions, or by individuals, but nothing was changed except the name of the man who wore the purple. Rome deteriorated and was destroyed finally by the barbarians.

The cultural and scientific Renaissance did not lead to an improvement of morals. Political murder was almost a way of life. Slaves were forced to taste food before members of the oligarchy or of the autocracy would eat it. No person of importance ever left his house without his hefty bodyguard, and there were many battles on the streets of Rome, Florence, Verona, Milan, and Venice. These had political overtones.

Yet they changed nothing. The city-states continued along their diverse political ways and their cooperative activity in cultural and scientific progress. The Man of the Renaissance grew and developed in spite of the political chaos around him. During the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror, there were many assassinations, both officially by the Committee and the guillotine, and by direct action, as

happened to Marat. These occur in every time of trouble and are different from the type of assassination we are considering. These were killings for power, the transfer of power from one group to another, or from one person to another. They are very similar to our gang killings, resulting from lawlessness and producing more lawlessness.

The same thing happened in the Russian Revolution and has happened many times in countries with unstable governments in this century. These are similar to the political murders during, before, and after the Renaissance in Italy and other parts of Europe.

There is another form of assassination where dedicated men seek to destroy a true tyrant. In this age of enlightenment and reason, we seem to end up with many dictators who keep their places through fear, their secret police, and their complete suppression of all civil liberties. Several plots were made on the life of Hitler, although only one reached to the point of action. It was unsuccessful.

The murder of Trujillo was perhaps the latest successful one in this category. For a while it seemed that democracy had returned to Santa Domingo, but it was not to be for long. The military took power and to all intents and purposes a dictatorship returned.

Political assassination had not changed for thousands of years from the time of Cain to the last of the Medici's, but as we move into our modern era, we find a subtle change in the character of the people involved.

Assassinations, both successful and attempted, can be grouped into three general classifications: conspiracy, person-to-person, and by a hired killer who has no personal involvement with his victim.

While the members of the tribe of Assassins were for hire (and many medieval murders were committed by hired killers), today these individuals want no part of assassination of prominent political leaders. It is too dangerous, and they can ply their trade on less prominent victims with almost complete safety.

The best known conspiracy is that developed by Shakespeare in his great

classic, *Julius Caesar*. It is the best known only because it is re-enacted frequently all over the world. The deed itself may have been almost forgotten before it was made the subject of the play.

The assassination of Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria, and his wife on June 28, 1914 was carried out by a group of Slavic conspirators who sought to bring about freedom of the Slavic people held subject by the Hapsburgs. While this was one of the causes of World War I, it is doubtful that the conspirators expected the world cataclysm that they triggered. Empires fell, dynasties were ended, and millions died and after it was all over Yugoslavia was established. But the irony of it all was that the Croats found themselves again a minority but in a different setting. They remained a restless group who were a constant threat to the authority of the Serbs.

Conspiracies in the last hundred years in this country resulted in the death of Lincoln and the attempt on the life of Harry Truman by a group of Puerto Rican nationalists.

The attempt on President Truman and the simultaneous shooting up of the Senate was hardly a conspiracy, even though it involved several people, but seemed to have been a disorganized emotional outburst of a group of individuals.

Lincoln's death resulted from a so-called conspiracy, one of the most stupid, futile and poorly conceived conspiracies in history.

How a group of people could believe that the killing of a few persons in Washington could make it possible for the South to rise again is beyond understanding. Lee had surrendered his barefoot army and all field pieces, rifles and equipment were stacked and in the hands of Grant's veterans. Grant and Sherman between them had hundreds of thousands of well-trained, well-equipped, and well-fed veterans facing a few die-hard guerrillas who were armed only with sabres, rifles, and hand-guns, with perhaps a few rounds of ammunition apiece.

Such an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow the government could only have increased the desire of the radicals to destroy

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the culture of the South. Lincoln might have controlled them. Neither Johnson nor anyone else could. The crushing blow of reconstruction fell full force on the defeated Confederacy.

It would seem, from what we know of this tragic farce, that it was conceived by John Wilkes Booth, who retained for himself the most glamorous target.

If this is so, and all things point to this conclusion, then the murder of Lincoln follows the general pattern of most modern-day political assassinations: A single man with a desire that results from long brooding to destroy a leader who is antagonistic to some belief that the assassin considers to be important. It is very important to him. This is a very personal matter to the man, and is a kind of person-to-person action. The individual to be destroyed has become a personal enemy of the assassin and must be destroyed.

Such a person cannot be diagnosed or catalogued in psychiatric terms. He is undoubtedly sane under the McLaughlin Rule and might be under the Durham decision.

They are not average members of their society. Most of them are "loners," living very much to themselves. Their mental orientation is inward, not outward.

John Wilkes Booth was a fine actor, but all his life he was a rebel against authority. He was raised in a home of moderate luxury and attended private academies, but he was a disciplinary problem throughout his younger years. He was a practical joker of a sadistic type.

While he sat out the War between the States in the North he was a rather outspoken Southern partisan. He brooded a great deal as defeat after defeat wracked the Confederacy, and he began to develop a feeling that Lincoln was the cause of it. Thus he reasoned that if Lincoln and other top leaders were eliminated, the North would collapse and defeat would be turned into victory.

His sister wrote his story and left out very little of his early-day troubles, but insisted that he was not insane. Under the McLaughlin Rule, he certainly was not, but he was hardly an average member of his society.

He had poor judgement because by the time he decided to act, the cause of the Confederacy was completely lost. Even if all the people designated by the conspirators along with Grant and Sherman had died, nothing would have happened except some temporary high-level confusion, but the succession of government would have been as complete as it was in our day, 98 years later.

He was no student of history, although he was aware of the fate of the conspirators who killed Caesar, and the utter futility of their act. One might think that Lincoln had become a symbol to him, a symbol of authority. It must be remembered that the primary cause of the War of the 1860's was not slavery, but the authority of the Union versus States' Rights.

He also developed an obsession for fame. He did not seem to think that his acting fame, which was considerable, was enough. He had told his friends, "What a glorious opportunity for a man to immortalize himself by killing Abraham Lincoln." This concept may motivate more assassins than is now realized. It may have been a major motivation to Lee Oswald.

Charles Guiteau who murdered Garfield had been called a half-crazed, disappointed office seeker. Apparently, from what little is known about him he was not half-crazed but a fully developed acting-out schizophrenic, who killed his victim because he believed God had told him to. He was hardly a serious office seeker since he had no qualifications. He was not a typical political assassin and was not responsible for his act by any rule of law. Nevertheless, he was executed.

Leon Czolgosz who killed McKinley may have been more typical. However, some of the alienists of his day considered him to be a schizophrenic or suffering from dementia praecox although no one was permitted to examine him sufficiently to make a firm diagnosis after his arrest.

He was always strange, made no close friends. As a boy, he never associated with girls and preferred to play with younger children. While he read a good deal, he was a poor student. He was not an active disciplinary problem in school but was

definitely a passive one, in that he was, to say the least, uncooperative. As was the practice in those days, he was considered lazy.

While he showed certain withdrawal characteristics, he never acted out except when he declared himself an anarchist. Those who belonged to this group never accepted him and considered him to be a spy.

Dr. Allen McLane Hamilton considered him to be a defective who had drifted into paranoia and had developed delusions of paranoia and grandeur.

But Czolgosz stated that he killed McKinley because he was an oppressor of the working man. These were the days when the working man was oppressed. Perhaps McKinley was partially responsible because his government was definitely anti-labor and pro big business. Again, though, McKinley could only be a symbol and not the cause of this situation. He could only have been a symbol to his murderer, a symbol of authority to a man who had resented authority all his life.

Perhaps we can say that we have three men who were very much alike in basic personality defects. Booth, in spite of his statements to his fellow conspirators, must have known that killing a president would not change anything except the name of the man who lived in the White House.

We must assume that they did not expect to change the basic political philosophy of the country as it was at the time. There must have been other motives. Two interlocking concepts seem probable. One, that they were seeking immortality and second, that they were destroying the symbol of the highest authority in this country. There was no personal animosity involved. Their victim was a symbol of their general basic anger against the social order. It was also their road to immortality.

Can assassination of our political leaders be prevented by arrest of potential killers? Absolutely not. Many people have commented upon the fact that the F.B.I. interviews individuals who are potential assassins but do not arrest them and that they have failed in their duty. This is very

fuzzy thinking. We do not know of the purposes of these interviews.

The F.B.I. interviews hundreds of persons every year who have some connection, vague or more or less real, with some subversive group or party. Most of these persons have a history of rebellion against authority at some time in their lives. Many of them own some kind of firearm. Probably all of them want to change our form of government, or, at the very least, the person in office.

Which of them should be arrested? Obviously, none can be under our Constitution. One must have committed an overt act or be suspected of having committed one before one can be picked up for questioning. That is as it should be. Otherwise we would have a police state, and all of our martyrs would have died in vain.

Many persons, including some prominent news commentators, have stated that President Kennedy died because of the mass hate toward the Kennedy's engendered by their fight against segregation. This we find very hard to accept. If the assassin was a sympathizer with Communist principles, then he should have approved integration and should not have been personally involved in that aspect of politics.

However, it is possible that inflammatory statements made in the press and over the airwaves may have stimulated a number of persons to think that someone ought to shoot "that man." Perhaps the assassin was infected with this deadly virus. Perhaps, though, he is like most other modern day assassins in that he approached that day with a purely personal desire to destroy the symbol of the form of government which he despised, democracy. We shall never have a factual answer to this question.

The successful assassin does not write threatening letters, come to Washington and state that he is going to kill the President, or in other ways tip his hand. Those who do are obviously ill. Those who succeed are ill only in the degree and type that are all murderers who plan their crime in advance.

We can state that political assassination does not change the flow of history in

a nation or state. It does not change the character of the government of the state or nation.

Since most successful assassins are uneducated it is possible that they might think that the murder of "that man" would make it possible for the people to rise and set up a people's government.

It is more logical to assume that the assassin has developed a personal antagonism against "that man" not because that man is named Lincoln or McKinley or Kennedy but because that man is a symbol of the authority which the assassin resents.

So the symbol must be destroyed and "that man" dies. *END*