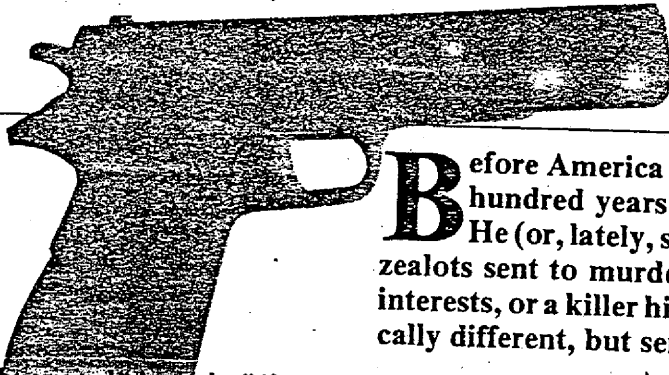


# Assassin-Americanus

Always a Lonely Nut?

by Jacob Cohen



**B**efore America offered a third definition to the world exactly one hundred years ago, there were basically two kinds of assassins. He (or, lately, she) was either an ardent member of some group of zealots sent to murder a public figure in order to further the group's interests, or a killer hired to perform the same task: people, psychologically different, but serving the same historical function.

The original "Assassins" (from the Arabic *hashishi*, meaning *hashishburner*) were a fanatical religious sect in Persia which, from the late 11th to the early 13th centuries, killed sundry caliphs, proconsuls, and prominent crusaders who threatened their millennial destiny. Led by the legendary Old Man of the Mountain, the Assassins would take courage from hashish. And historians agree that the group would not have survived as long as it did without it. Subsequent assassins took courage from various zealous causes — ideological, religious, ethnic, sometimes everyday political — but their intentions, like those of the first Assassins, were a rational extension of their interests as they imagined them: to remove, frighten, punish, desecrate, encumber, or confuse their enemies. Or, simply, to effect history in a manner favorable to their cause. Or, sometimes, to publicize themselves. Although not all assassins confess their crimes publicly, the crime is always a quintessentially public one; the office of the symbolic reputation is the intended victim, not the private, actual person, who, many times in history, has been liked by his assailants. And in its cold, impersonal quality as well, the act of assassination, as traditionally performed, has a certain rationality. Not all assassins were paragons of mental health, of course, few of history's makers and shakers are, but assassins did operate cogently on the historic stage, sucking passion from real and potent political forces which shape our public world.

At least that was the case until America presented to the world Charles Julius Guiteau, who, on July 2, 1881, shot President James A. Garfield and became the first full-fledged "lonely-nut" assassin in history. Thereafter, each time assassins struck in America, killing President McKinley, Governor Huey Long, John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, Robert Kennedy, and (I would include) John Lennon, and attempting to kill Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry Truman, George Wallace, Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan, it was viewed as the work of this unique American species, *Assassin-Americanus*, who like the Loch Ness Monster, had surfaced again. The concept of the "lonely-nut" assassin became a national ideology through which the country assured itself that, unlike Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America, our public world did not breed political murder, specializing instead in quixotic psychopaths.

On close scrutiny, the "lonely-nut" theory fails as an all-purpose explanation for American assassins. While most of the killers and would-be killers may have been loners, they were quite rational in history's sense of the term, acting in spiritual connection with zealots who inspired, if they did not literally arrange, the killings. The ardent anarchists who shot McKinley and attempted to kill Franklin Roosevelt; the Puerto Rican nationalists who set upon Truman; James Earl Ray, King's virulently racist assassin; and Palestinian Sirhan Sirhan, Robert Kennedy's confessedly political killer, may have acted alone but they are close kin to the age-old political assassin, inspired by potent historical forces. John Wilkes Booth, Lincoln's assassin in 1865, was neither lonely, being the head of a small group of conspirators, nor crazy. An avid Confederate sympathizer, Booth planned originally to kidnap Lincoln and hold him hostage in order to bargain for small concessions, a prisoner exchange perhaps, all of which made terroristic sense in the midst of the Civil War. The eventual assassination scheme emerged from the kidnapping plot, incorporating many of its elements. If it was an act of rather vainglorious desperation on the part of Booth and his associates, coming as it did after the Confederate defeat was sealed, it still should be linked in its motive-force and circumstance, with classic historical assassinations.

But Guiteau is a different and fascinating assassin, as are Arthur Bremer, who crippled George Wallace; Mark David Chapman, Lennon's killer; John Hinckley, Reagan's accused; and, perhaps, Lee Harvey Oswald, John Kennedy's killer.

According to the textbooks, Guiteau was a "disappointed office seeker," and that is partially true. He had worked for President James A. Garfield's election, serving as an advance man and speaking before miniscule audiences. Once he pressed a copy of a campaign speech, a pile of worthless clichés, which he had written for Garfield into the hands of someone in his entourage. Later, when he heard what sounded like one of his clichés repeated by Garfield, he became convinced that it was his speech, and that his speech had won the election. He then began a relentless letter writing assault on the President-elect demanding an ambassadorship or at least a consulship. Finally, someone close to Garfield told Guiteau, in so many words, to disappear, which is the wrong advice to give *Assassin-Americanus*.

According to the legal definition of sanity operative at the time, the McNaughton rule, which I believe remains sound as a legal, if not psychological definition, Guiteau was legally sane. He planned and executed the killing meticulously, aware of its status as a crime. Expecting arrest, he even prepared a kind of publicity packet for the press with a brief, flattering autobiography, a copy of a theological tract he had written called "The Truth," and a letter to the American public explaining his motives. "I did it. I am a Stalwart

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of the Stalwarts," he wrote, repeating those words when arrested.

The Stalwarts and the so-called Half-Breeds were one of two warring factions in the Republican Party at the time. At the convention Garfield had emerged as a compromise candidate because he promised to steer a middle course between the two sides. However, in the months following his election Garfield seemed to favor the Half-Breeds in his appointments. The Stalwarts began denouncing the President, in the exaggerated rhetoric of American politics in the 19th century, as a traitor and the ruination of the Republic.

Perhaps Guiteau associated his own rejection with Garfield's general betrayal of the Stalwarts, perhaps he took the condemnation of Garfield by the Stalwarts as some sort of cryptic command to slay the villain, but, in his own mind, he clearly answered a higher (and lower) calling. God, Guiteau proudly announced, had personally ordered him to kill Garfield in order to put the Stalwarts back in power and save the Republic. He was not angry at Garfield, he said, and, at any rate, he was sure that Garfield would not have objected to being the necessary victim of Divine Providence. Convinced that he would be released from jail by the people who had benefitted from his act, Guiteau was also sure that his notoriety and subsequent autobiography would make him a rich celebrity and enable him to marry well.

**H**ere we begin to approach the American nub of the matter. In a culture worshipful of extravagant, individual success, of outlandish ideas turned to gold by outlandish ambition, the outlandish Mr. Guiteau was extravagantly unsuccessful. The bullied son of a religious fanatic, 20 years before the shooting, at his father's insistence, he had joined a Utopian community which practiced Christian Communism (free-love, shared property) under the charismatic inspiration of the formidable Joseph Noyes. Even in that undemanding, noncompetitive atmosphere he gained the reputation of being an unreliable worker and after an initial

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devotion to Noyes, he angrily left the community denouncing Noyes, his father's hero, for having kept all the women for himself. Throughout his adult life he was a consummate failure. He was a failed newspaper and publishing mogul (he dreamed of being another Horace Greeley), a failed lawyer (who kept trying to gain huge fortunes through hopeless and hapless law suits), a failed lecturer (he was run out of several towns for stopping his announced lecture after ten minutes and trying to make off with the gate receipts) and a failed religious leader (his book, "The Truth," was simply a plagiarized version of Noyes' which, however, failed to have anything like Noyes' impact). He lifted weights but was neither attractive nor strong; he was a health-food faddist but was constantly sick. He was chronically friendless and impoverished. People who met him kept telling him he was crazy.

Then, in 1881, he had a revelation about how to use his one special gift — which was a previously unrecognized talent for mayhem. (He had attacked his sister-in-law with a knife when he was a teenager and beaten his former wife over and over again.) And God knows he deserved glory, having single-handedly elected a President of the United States. Why not assassinate that President, his creation, in a nation terrified of assassination and what it might suggest about the political system? Why not present himself as His-

tory's Martyr, a higher Innocent (in a country which insisted on the innocence of even its guilty) and gain, in one gesture, the stunned, riveted, aghast *attention* of the nation? What else is success but *attention*? It was an idea which could not fail. Even an unsuccessful assassination attempt would serve the purpose (as John Hinckley, Reagan's love-tormented alleged assailant, has recently proven). Political murder as an instrument of cosmic self-promotion: it was an idea before its time and Guiteau had it first, before America's thousands of the other failed, puritanical, violence prone, everyday paranoid schizophrenics.

As always happens with a bright idea, imitations and improvements followed. Arthur Bremer, George Wallace's assailant, a compulsive loner, a nonentity with a fondness for guns who stalked several presidential candidates of differing political persuasion before settling on Wallace. There seems to have been nothing personal in the killing, little that was political except the victim. John Hinckley, Reagan's assailant, is the failed son of a rich, ardent Reaganite, who carried Lee Harvey Oswald memorabilia with him, a fondness for guns, loves and apparently heeds the Kamikazee Klones, a rock group, saw a movie about an assassin and fell in love with the actress who played a teenage prostitute in the film, and allegedly attempted murder, he says, to win her love. Both men should be placed in a line of violent descent which begins with Guiteau. And Mark David Chapman, John Lennon's killer, should also be included, though Lennon is not a conventional political figure. He was, however, a public institution, made spokesman for a generation by implied acclamation, and, at any rate, for America's lonely assassins it is not the political position but rather the celebrity, the power to command admiring attention, which is the victim. A failure as a missionary and youth counsellor for the YMCA, with a fondness for guns, Chapman worshipped Lennon, but could not forgive him for once having compared the Beatles favorably to Jesus Christ. More to the point, he envied and despised him for having made a financial killing (as we say) on idealistic verse set to music. In killing Lennon he killed the embodiment of his own best and worst selves, a saviour and a traitor, gaining immortality into the bargain.

**S**hould Oswald be included in the short list of America's lonely-nut assassins or the longer list of the political sort? Until recently I confidently linked him with Guiteau despite Oswald's obviously intense Leftist convictions and a previous history of assassination for Leftist reasons. However, as far as is known (and Oswald is the most thoroughly studied assassin in history) he never had an unkind word for Kennedy and indeed, if his wife Marina is to be believed, he admired and envied the President. Further, Oswald shot Kennedy from the very building in which he worked and he took the job there before he could possibly have known that Kennedy was coming to his very doorstep. This and a hundred other coincidences might convince one that the assassination was hastily improvised by one man though it was not at all surprising given Oswald's private history and his particular despair at that moment in his life. Always a loner, a conspicuous failure despite his own predictions that he would be one of History's great men, his marriage faltering, his sexual competence under radical review by his wife, it seemed that he acted not out of political conviction but out of a need for prominence, all the time proclaiming his higher innocence, perhaps concocting ideological justifications, basking in the attention: like Guiteau.

I still lean to this version, but with this caveat. New acoustical evidence developed recently strongly suggests that there may have been a second gunman. Was he (or she) Oswald's partner in private madness or a political accomplice? Did an *Assassin-Americanus* strike again or not? The problem haunts me and will no doubt haunt our nation's historical memory forever.