

Portrait of Presidential Assassin: White, Short, Weak-Sighted Loner

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Who among us is the assassin? Who could or would or will be the next to be captured immemorably in slow-motion movies, thrusting the gun forward out of the crowd?

Just as a police detective might obtain a composite sketch of a wanted criminal by overlaying drawings of the suspect's facial features, so a researcher might project a crude image of the American political assassin:

He is a man, white, short and slender, foreign-born or a first-generation American, perhaps an only child or a younger child in a larger family, the product of an unstable home with a weak father.

He's a loner and lives alone in a cheap room; he's isolated and not at all good with women, is unable lately to hold down a job, had an early and unsatisfactory military record, is involved in some cause but only as an outsider, has strong beliefs

but changes them, has a history of depression or suicidal tendencies but is not totally disorganized, sees his problems in political terms, and feels insignificant and powerless.

The picture is drawn from the lives of assassins, from studies of hundreds of persons who have threatened or harassed presidents, and from the calculations of social scientists who have tried to fathom those obscure individuals who can deflect history with a single, simple deed.

Assassination for centuries has been a tool of terrorists, propagandists and royal and civil schemers, but except for the attempt by Puerto Rican nationalists to kill President Truman, all American presidential assassination attempts apparently have been the work of disturbed men who acted out of private and seemingly irrational reasons.

See ASSASSINS, A22, Col. 1

ASSASSINS, From A1

Last Monday, at a shopping center in Laurel, Md., another figure was shot down—presidential candidate George Wallace, who now lies with a bullet in his spine in a Silver Spring hospital paralyzed — perhaps permanently — from the waist down. Arthur H. Bremer, a 21-year-old Milwaukee man, has been charged.

Not all assassins possess all or even most of the characteristics listed above, and of course there are thousands of persons who fit the description who would never consider attacking a president or a candidate.

Psychiatrists who have explored the subject declare that there is no predicting who is a potential assassin.

Luck may play a large role.

Yet researchers have discovered what they see as patterns of background and behavior, and theorists have tried in their tentative way to give meaning to the patterns. Granting the fallibilities of social science, here are some of their findings and ideas:

PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

There have been seven at-

tempts by individuals to kill presidents—successful attempts on the lives of Lincoln, Garfield, McKinley and Kennedy and unsuccessful attempts on Jackson and both Roosevelts. All the assailants were white men who were slender and not tall, between the ages of 24 and 38.

(Sirhan Sirhan, the convicted killer of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, was short, slight and 24; James Earl Ray, the killer of Martin Luther King, was 40 and of medium height and build.

Age may not be an important factor. Dr Edwin A. Weinstein, a psychiatrist who studied hundreds of presidential threats for the White House following President Kennedy's death in 1963, found that ages of the subjects ranged between 14 and 76. Two similar studies had the same result, although they agreed that most subjects were white men.

Gordon Hall, an authority on political extremists, has found that characteristics of his subjects are very similar to those of presidential assassins and threateners — loneliness, poor family back-

ground, poor jobs, sexual hangups, a tendency to express feelings violently, an early and unhappy stretch in the military and short stature.

Most of them are quite short," he said in an interview last week. "I'm talking about guys 5 feet 6, 5 feet 5 and below . . . The left-wing types are even smaller . . . I've never seen such small guys, and I've never seen so many guys with eyeglasses . . . You get the feeling that there hasn't been any type of athletic triumph in their background. The puny little guy with bad complexion and bad eyesight: They stand up there and talk about smashing the state."

FAMILY BACKGROUND

Of the seven presidential assailants, only Lee Harvey Oswald and Garfield's attacker, Charles Julius Guiteau, were not foreign-born or of foreign-born parents.

In a 1943 study of psychotic visitors to government offices in Washington, 16 of 53 were foreign-born and eight others one generation removed. A similar study in 1960-61 showed 11 of 38 to be born in another country.

A disturbed family back-

ground seems to be ever more common. The 1969 report of the assassination task force of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence said that all seven presidential assailants "experienced an absence or disruption of the normal family relationship between parent and child." The report stated:

"Typically, the family was disrupted by the death or absence of one parent. As an only or younger child, the assassins may have been denied closer relationships with sibling. Most of the assassin did not have satisfactory relationships with women.

"Thus the assassins had insufficient close personal relationships on which to define the basic conception upon which their entire identity depended; they were forced to define and relate their identity not to specific persons but to an abstract such as The State or an ideological movement.

"Such a person would have a kind of 'lover' or 'best friend' relationship with The State or ideological movement, and would create his fundamental self-image from this relationship. This sets up the psychological conditions that politicize such a personality to explode in deadly violence against the head of state as the symbol and embodiment of his lover."

Dr. David A Rothstein, who studied 11 men who had

Springfield, Mo., for threatening the lives of presidents, found what he described as a rage against inattentive mothers, which expressed itself as rage and resentment against male authorities because of the absence or ineffectiveness of the fathers.

In the majority of cases, Rothstein reported, the sons entered the military in search of a meaningful group and strong masculine figures with which to identify. When the military proved unable to fulfill these functions, the rage that had been expressed against the parents was turned against the government and ultimately against its leader, the president.

LIVING PATTERN

The 1969 assassination task force report noted that from one to three years before their attacks each of the seven presidential assailants was unable to hold a job.

One was a competent house painter who quit work, another an actor whose deteriorating voice cost him roles, another a petty swindler and evangelist, another a wire-mill worker who quit during emotional difficulties, another who sold his saloon and drifted, another who quit as a bricklayer to seek a warmer climate, and another, Oswald, who did not hold a steady job after returning to the United States from Russia.

The only exception among presidential attackers—the only one to lead a settled family life and to be steadily employed — was Oscar Collazo, who led the attack on Truman in 1950, which the Commission on Violence calls the only rational assault on a president.

The 1943 study of White House visitors noted high unemployment, as did the Weinstein study in the 1960s. And Gordon Hall says of the extremists he has gotten to know: "They have lousy jobs. These guys all seem to be shipping clerks or deliver lunches in the garment district . . ."

Almost all researchers have noticed the high incidence of early military duty with less than honorable discharges, and the lack of success with women. In the 1943

study, only five of the 53 men were married and living with their wives, and in the 1960-61 study only eight of 38.

Dr. Rothstein believes that many of the patients who had threatened presidents did so immediately after being rejected by a woman who was important to them.

Not having female companionship, these men live alone, and, Gordon Hall says, "They all live in rooming houses, every damned one of them." His particular subjects, the political extremists, he calls "the boarding house type." He describes their living quarters:

"The room usually has a good number of books in it, although the guys themselves are not particularly bookish . . . Most of these guys are utterly inarticulate. If you look at these books there are a hell of a lot of books on witchcraft, voodooism, and on the right wing Hitler and Goebbels . . . a lot of pinups of girls, drawings, very, very voluptuous, large-breasted . . . usually very inexpensive places, \$18 or \$22 a week, cluttered, single bed, dark, a lot of leaflets around, usually a single bare light bulb."

BELIEFS AND BEHAVIOR

Like John Wilkes Booth, who believed in the Southern cause but did not take part in the Civil War, like Lee Harvey Oswald, who identified with the Soviet way of life but could not become a part of it, the assassin characteristically believes in a cause but stays outside of the movement.

The beliefs may change, as with Hall's classic boarding house type who was a member of the Nazi-like National Renaissance Party in New York and who said he wanted to be the Adolf Eichmann of America, then six months later turned up at a meeting of a Communist



GORDON HALL
... cites characteristics

been committed to the federal medical center at

youth league with a black girl friend and said his idol was Che Guevara.

Those people who threaten presidents, Dr. Weinstein says, tend to think of their problems in political terms even though they may not be able to become members of any political group.

He recalls an armed soldier who leaped the White House fence because he was having problems with a prostitute and wanted to talk to the president about Army morale. Another man worried about dying of an incurable disease and thought that the president was suffering the same fate. He wanted to kill the president and himself in a final act of glory.

Weinstein concluded in a report:

"The individuals most dangerous to the safety of the president are those socially isolated people who adapt to stress by symbolizing their problems in political idioms, and who identify with the president in terms of violence and death. In the context of such an identification, the act becomes institutionalized and is perceived as a stroke of national policy or patriotic heroism."

The assassin, seeing himself as hero or martyr, feels no remorse for his act. The ordinary killer, having slain someone close to him, often is filled with guilt. The assassin, recruited by fate or by God, is like the hired soldier in feeling no pain at having killed a stranger. He may have been striking out at the office rather than the occupant.

The assassin may even appreciate his victim. As Priscilla Johnson McMillan of Harvard University wrote of Oswald:

"Oddly enough, Oswald liked John F. Kennedy. He approved his course in civil rights. He followed the personal lives of several of the Kennedys . . . It would be true to say that Oswald did not much want Kennedy to be dead. He gave no thought to the consequences of such a death. He merely wanted to kill him. Nor did he want to do so very badly."

Dr. William Davidson, chairman of an American Psychiatric Association task

force on the relevance of psychiatry to politics, believes that a primary factor in assassinations of the last 10 years is "the sense of powerlessness" that many Americans feel.

"We are creating a backlog of people who are essentially bypassed," he said in an interview last week. "They can't make any sort of influence felt . . . They are absolutely without exception meaningless people,

and they in some primitive way try to become meaningful, even if it means destroying someone and destroying themselves."

Dr. Rothstein, who studied patients who had threatened presidents, and Dr. James L. Foy, a Georgetown University psychiatrist who codirected the 1960-61 study of psychotic visitors to the White House, agreed that their subjects might be called sicker than men with the same basic personalities who actually attack presidents and candidates.

Rothstein said of the assassins, "I think that they were more organized, so that they didn't end up just frustrating themselves, whereas the ones who wrote the [threatening] letters—it was almost a self-timing action, so they got picked up and put in a hospital."

The task force report to the Commission on Violence put it this way:

"In one sense, the assassin grapples with his private misery more concretely, even more practically or realistically than does the normal person, the neurotic of the deluded, psychotic. However horrible his deed, however pathological his interpretation of events, the assassin is a man who has politicized his private miseries. He has attempted to become part of a social institution which promises him freedom from his overpowering self-loathing . . .

"Unloved, he is unloving. He lacks the quality of empathy. The assassin relates rather to an abstraction such as aggregate man or the political community. The fault as he sees it lies not in himself but in the structure of the community wherein he lives, and it is concentrated in the person who is the leader of the community, the president," for whom he feels no warmth because of his lack of human identification.

The assassin, neither functioning normally nor so badly off that he is lost in a world of fantasy, is "perched precariously on the edge of reality. He is incapable of sustained work toward a long-range goal, but is capable of bursts of frenzied activity which are ultimately doomed to failure.