

THE ASSASSINS

A psychological report on why creative, dynamic leaders in time of stress are particular targets of the 'out' men

By Sidney J. Slomich and Robert E. Kantor

Of the 20 American Presidents since Lincoln, four have been assassinated.

Abraham Lincoln, the great conservator of the Union, was warm, magnetic, intellectual. He projected an aura of detachment, independence and dynamism. He was assassinated by an unemployed actor who was a fanatic advocate of the beaten Confederate cause.

James A. Garfield sought to create an independent civil service and to protect it from predatory interests. A disappointed, mediocre, deranged office-seeker killed him.

William McKinley had served one term as President and was embarked on a second. Intense conflict between industrial capitalism and Populist forces, especially in the Midwest and South, seemed to be drawing to an end.

Hate-Ravaged

A warm, life-affirming man with great personal magnetism, McKinley worked for reconciliation. He was shot by an anarchist suffering from severe mental derangement.

John F. Kennedy, a dynamic activist with an extraordinarily magnetic appeal, especially for the young, was trying to lead America into a technological society and at the same time to humanize it. He fell before a disoriented, hate-ravaged, mother-dominated failure.

There appears to be a pattern in these assassinations, embracing both the individuals involved and their social milieu. This may not be characteristic of all assassinations of public figures, but it appears to be increasingly characteristic of American public life.

Estranged Men

Verification and explanation of this pattern could be a contribution both to mental health and public policy.

Our hypothesis is that the emergence of charismatic public figures, at crisis points in the history of a constitutional democracy such as the United States, tends to generate assassination attempts by marginal men from estranged strata of society.

Such persons tend to be anxious, personally disoriented and socially isolated.

Specific elements of this hypothesis:

- Individuals from "underclasses," on the fringes of or outside normally organized society, form the pool from which most would-be assassins of charismatic public figures emerge in Western democracies. It is not the lower classes, but dispossessed elements of the lower middle classes, who supply this pool.

- The individuals who are driven to attempt such assassinations have strong, unfulfilled sex drives; are afflicted with abnormally intense envy; and feel alienated from society and from themselves.

They frequently develop schizophrenia or a split personality. Although characteristically apathetic, they may exhibit sudden sporadic violence.

Sporadic Violence

Afflicted with hopelessness and strong self-destructive drives, these individuals come to attach value to pain, frustration, and despair, and so become unable to adjust to signs of hope or promise.

They therefore may strike out destructively against public figures who hold forth

a hopeful future.

- The presence of rapid social change, plus estrangement of social elements from one another and from traditional values, is conducive both to the generation of charismatic public figures espousing action programs and to the triggering of their would-be assassins.

- The present age, with its mass communication, rapid technological change, and extreme social mobility, is peculiarly liable to produce the preconditions of

This provocative article on political assassins, ranging from John Wilkes Booth to James Earl Ray, was condensed from the March bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. Sidney J. Slomich is a political scientist at Stanford Research Institute. Robert E. Kantor, is a clinical psychologist.

this pattern of attempted assassination.

The assassinated Presidents were definite personality types, and so were their assassins.

Attempts against other public figures in America further illustrate the pattern.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt was to lead the United States into a new era

after the shocks and stresses induced by the Great Depression. He, too, was a vital personality; and he, too, was the target of a deranged anarchist.

Martin Luther King, also a dynamic, life-affirming national figure, sought a constructive resolution of paralyzing economic, social, and racial tensions. He seems to have been shot by a person whose known history has in-

involved habitual self-degradation and the sale of self for financial gain — characteristics associated with emotional deprivation.

Men on the Fringe

In a time of political and social stress, Sen. Robert F. Kennedy sought to bring the country to grips with its problems and to seek out rational, humane solutions. Also a dynamic personality with a charismatic appeal, especially for young people, he was apparently struck down by a withdrawn fanatic with multiple identity problems.

On the one hand, magnetic, dynamic personalities articulating progressive programs in times of challenge and

stress; on the other, fringe or "out" men, estranged from their origins usually in the lower middle class, suffering from a sense of personal inadequacy and failure, repression, and hopelessness.

These seem increasingly to be the characteristic preconditions of assassination attempts on the American public scene.

If the behavior patterns are substantially valid, it means that the likelihood of assassination attempts is quite high against creative, life-affirming political leaders with striking and active personalities, and quite low against men who are or seem to be neutral, mediocre or even dispassionate.

To put it directly, targets are most likely to be the good guys.

The flawed or broken man without hope strikes out at the charismatic politician who offers hope. The failure, the victim of society, assassinates the leader who tries to heal society's ills, who tries to transform the institutions which contributed critically to the twisting and breaking of the assassin.

The pathetic, underendowed victim turns aggressor and strikes; the gifted, courageous reformer becomes victim and falls.

Issues in great affairs — be they peace, civil rights, the preservation of the union or whatever — appear only peripherally, if at all.



MARTYRED PRESIDENT — Historic photo shows the assassinated Abraham Lincoln lies in state on presidential catafalque in New York on April 24, 1865. From Lincoln to JFK, presidential assassins have demonstrated common psychological quirks.

—AP Photo