

1-29-2007

Fame and Infamy

Patrick T. Reagan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/features>

ScholarWorks Citation

Reagan, Patrick T., "Fame and Infamy" (2007). *Features*. 44.
<https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/features/44>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Features by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Fame and Infamy

Fourteen Assassination Attempts on U.S. Presidents

By [Patrick T. Reagan](#)

The president is the most visible representative of the United States; like American staples Coca-Cola, McDonalds, and Ford automobiles, the president is recognizable to the vast majority of the planet's inhabitants. People from foreign lands know who he is and have developed their own opinions of him, positive and negative. It is from these "trappings of fame" that individuals have now and again decided to achieve personal infamy by ending the life of a president.

While we know the histories of the men who were killed, or whose lives were threatened, what do we really know about their assassins? Some, like Lee Harvey Oswald, have been the subject of numerous books and movies -- Oliver Stone's feature film *JFK*, for example, spent a great deal of time attempting to understand Oswald, often with factually questionable results. John Wilkes Booth is another figure who has received much attention from scholars, artists, and the public. But what do we know about Leon Czolgosz, who killed William McKinley, or John Schrank, the man who shot the mighty Teddy Roosevelt? What was their motivation and what did they hope to achieve?



Giuseppe Zangara (pictured) made an attempt on the life of President-Elect Franklin Delano Roosevelt seventy-five years ago this week.

While there have been fourteen assassination attempts against presidents, only four have been successful. Each was devised and enacted by an individual or group with an ax to grind and a dubious belief that their actions were justified. Some were purely insane but each had a reason for attempting the highest crime known to humanity. In fact, Stephen Sondheim brings them all together on stage in an off-beat musical, *Assassins*, whose first performance was in 1990. This essay will focus on the assassins and will attempt to shed some light on their motives.

The Assassins

Richard Lawrence

In January of 1835, Richard Lawrence, an English-born house painter, pulled out a pistol and fired at President Andrew Jackson inside the Capitol Rotunda from approximately thirteen feet away. While the firing cap exploded, the powder failed to ignite and no bullet was ejected. Moving closer Lawrence pulled out a second pistol which, when he pulled the trigger, again detonated the firing cap but not the powder. His only accomplishment was to make a substantial amount of noise and to enrage the temper of Andrew Jackson, who lunged at Lawrence with his cane. For Lawrence's sake, a young army officer reached him before Jackson could and pulled him to the ground.^[i]

Lawrence later claimed that he was an heir to the British throne and Jackson somehow stood in the way of his rightful place in line. Suffice it to say, Lawrence was arrested and tried. He was found not guilty by reason of insanity and was confined to a mental institution until his death in 1861.

John Wilkes Booth

John Wilkes Booth, the stage actor and ardent Southern sympathizer, shot President Abraham Lincoln in Ford's Theater on April 14, 1865. Hoping to give the South a last chance at winning the war, Booth conspired to kill Lincoln, Vice President Andrew Johnson, and Secretary of State William Seward. Only Lincoln's murder was actually carried to fruition.

The assassination took place during a production of *Our American Cousin*, a popular stage comedy during the 1850s and 1860s. Gaining easy access to the president's box, Booth moved noiselessly behind Lincoln, who was engrossed in the play, pulled out his pistol and shot the president in the back of the head. From the murder scene, Booth jumped down approximately twelve feet to the stage, snagging his foot on decorative bunting which adorned the president's box, and proceeded to break his leg upon landing. Eyewitness reports stated that Booth yelled either "*Sic semper tyrannus*," ("Thus always to tyrants" -- the Virginia state motto) or "The South is avenged," as he landed on the stage. While what Booth may have said is often disputed, his actions are not -- the president lay dying.

After making his way out of the theater, Booth was chased by Union soldiers throughout the countryside and was eventually trapped in a Virginia tobacco barn. When Booth refused to come out peacefully, the order came to set the barn ablaze, which presumably would force Booth to exit and surrender to the Union forces.

As the barn began to burn, Booth expectedly emerged but was promptly shot in the neck, against orders, instantly paralyzing him. Booth was dragged out of the fire and taken to the farmhouse's porch where he uttered his last words before dying: "Tell my mother I died for my country... useless... useless..."

Charles J. Guiteau

Charles Guiteau was born into what we would now term a "dysfunctional family"; his mother, father, sister, and many aunts and uncles had social eccentricities that made them polarizing figures to the public. For instance, his father, a strict disciplinarian who believed himself immortal, regularly beat Charles in order to cure his son's speech impediment. His mother, meanwhile, was an invalid who rarely left the house and died when Charles was only seven years old. Many Guiteaus spent the last years of their lives in mental institutions, so the roots of Charles's instability are easily understood. His own delusions of grandeur allowed him to believe that he had rightful claim to the presidency of the United States.^[ii]

Guiteau's instability continued through his adolescence and into adulthood, as he began a brief but failed law career and entered politics.

Convinced that he had earned an official post in James Garfield's administration by writing a stump speech for the president (which he never actually delivered), Guiteau awaited a prestigious appointment. When one failed to materialize, Guiteau borrowed ten dollars and purchased a .44 caliber "British Bulldog" pistol to kill the president. According to Garfield biographer Allan Peskin, Guiteau chose the particular model because he believed it "would look more imposing in the museum case that it was destined to occupy."^[iii]

On July 2, 1881, Guiteau's plan neared reality as he waited for Garfield in the Baltimore and Potomac Train Station. When the president arrived with Secretary of State James G. Blaine, Guiteau followed the two from a short distance before proceeding to fire a shot at close range into Garfield's back. The utter shock caused Garfield to spin around, crying out "My God! What is this?"^[iv] Guiteau then fired a second bullet into Garfield's stomach. After shooting the president, Guiteau attempted to escape but he was quickly apprehended and arrested. Offering little resistance, Guiteau stated: "I am a stalwart. Garfield is dead and Arthur is now president!"^[v] Initially, Garfield proved Guiteau wrong by clinging to life for nearly two and one-half months -- he finally succumbed to his wounds on September 19, 1881. Guiteau, stood trial and was found guilty of murder and sentenced to death. He was executed by hanging on June 30, 1882.

Leon F. Czolgosz

On September 6, 1901, anarchist Leon Czolgosz (pronounced *chOl'gOsh*) shot President William McKinley at the American Exposition in Buffalo, New York. As McKinley shook hands and greeted visitors, Czolgosz patiently waited in line while concealing a .32 Iver Johnson pistol with a banded right hand. Reaching the president, Czolgosz fired two shots from point blank range: the first bounced off of McKinley's suit button but the second drove into McKinley's stomach.^[vi] Stunned, the crowd immediately turned on Czolgosz and began to pummel him mercilessly. McKinley, lying on the ground bleeding, saw this and exclaimed, "Don't hurt him! ...[He] is just some poor, misguided fellow!"^[vii] McKinley succumbed to his wounds on September 14, 1901, whispering the phrase, "Nearer My God to Thee..."^[viii] before expiring.

Czolgosz openly admitted to shooting McKinley, claiming that he had "done his duty" because no "one man should have so much service and another man should have none."^[ix] Czolgosz was tried in a New York court and found guilty. On October 29, 1901, Czolgosz stated before his execution in the electric chair that he "killed the president because he was the enemy of the people -- the good working people," and he refused to apologize for his crime.^[x]

John Schrank

John Schrank had two delusional encounters with William McKinley that provoked him to make an attempt on the life of Theodore Roosevelt. First, he dreamt on the anniversary of McKinley's death that the slain president sat upright in his coffin and said "This is my murderer," pointing at Teddy Roosevelt, "Avenge my death." Second, on a night when Schrank had been up late writing he felt a tap on the shoulder and turned around to see McKinley standing over him, again telling him again to avenge his death. Days later, Schrank boarded a train with a .38 caliber pistol convinced that he had to kill Theodore Roosevelt on William McKinley's behalf.^[xi]

At the same time that Schrank boarded his train, Roosevelt was busy stumping for an unprecedented third term as President of the United States after a four-year hiatus from office, this time on the Progressive "Bull-Moose" ticket. Just prior to delivering a speech in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Roosevelt was approached by Schrank who fired one shot that penetrated Roosevelt's chest; the bullet, however, was slowed by Roosevelt's steel eyeglass case and by the folded transcript of his speech. Incredibly, against the advice of his doctors, Roosevelt delivered what is considered to be one of his finest speeches and thus openly demonstrated the sheer toughness of a "Bull Moose."

Schrank was not as lucky as Roosevelt. He was taken into custody and examined by physicians, who found him to be mentally ill. After being confined to Central State Mental Hospital in Wisconsin for thirty-one years, Schrank died of natural causes on September 16, 1943.

Roosevelt is peculiar to this list as he is the only ex-president in our history to have a serious attempt upon his life.

Giuseppe Zangara

Giuseppe (Joseph) Zangara fired five shots from a roadside bench at a car carrying Chicago Mayor Anton Cermak and President-elect Franklin Roosevelt. While each of the bullets missed Roosevelt, Cermak was fatally wounded.

Some accounts of the shooting have suggested that Zangara was a hired hitman for Chicago mobster Al Capone, and that the mayor -- not the president -- was truly the intended target. Mayor Cermak had promised to clean up the lawlessness that Chicago had faced since the rise of organized crime and this presumably threatened the business interests of Al Capone, who led the largest crime family in the city. Eyewitness accounts, however, held that Zangara's bullets only missed Roosevelt and hit Cermak because a nearby witness tugged the assassin's arm as he fired, saving the president's life.

Interviewed after his arrest, Zangara claimed that the reason for his crime was an intense hatred of presidents and the rich. He also stated that he had been suffering from intense pains in his abdomen for quite some time that had reportedly driven him insane.

Zangara was tried for murder, found guilty, and sentenced to death. He was executed in Florida's electric chair on March 20, 1933, just two weeks after killing the mayor.

Griselio Torresola and Oscar Collazo

Under the belief that assassinating the U.S. president would aid the cause of Puerto Rican independence, Griselio Torresola and Oscar Collazo conspired to kill Harry Truman at the Blair House in Washington, D.C., during White House renovations.

Torresola and Collazo planned to shoot their way into the residence, but as they approached the house from opposite directions a fierce gun battle broke out with authorities. Torresola was shot in the head and killed instantly while Collazo was shot in the chest and collapsed on the steps of the house, thus ending the brief shoot out. Three policemen were shot and one, Private Leslie Coffelt, later died from his wounds.

Collazo was tried for the murder and was sentenced to death. One week before his execution was to take place, in 1952, President Truman commuted his sentence to life in prison. In September 1979, President Carter further commuted his sentence and Collazo was freed from prison. He died in his home in Puerto Rico in 1994.^[xii] Collazo is the only attempted presidential assassin to die a free man.

Lee Harvey Oswald

JFK's is one of the most studied, debated, and discussed assassinations in U.S. history. Traveling in an open-topped car in Dallas on November 22, 1963, Kennedy was killed by Lee Harvey Oswald from the Texas School Book Depository. Using a Mannlicher-Carcano rifle, Oswald fired three shots at the car hitting Kennedy and Texas Governor John Connally. Connally recovered from his wounds but JFK was not so fortunate; he was pronounced dead at Parkland Memorial Hospital later that afternoon.

Amid confusion unleashed by the gun shots, Oswald was able to escape the scene, leaving behind a rifle and shell casings that were later used as evidence against him. Because of the treasonable nature of the crime, the suspect's physical description was broadcast almost immediately -- first to the Dallas police and then to the general public. It was the sheer speed of the information transfer that doomed Oswald's escape plan.

As Oswald walked hurriedly down a residential street, he was stopped by Officer J. D. Tippett. Presumably nervous and paranoid, Oswald shot Tippett and fled the scene, with many eyewitnesses to watch the crime unfold. Minutes later, Oswald was spotted entering a movie theater (without purchasing a ticket) in an attempt to hide from police. The theater workers called the police and helped identify Oswald. The assassin was arrested minutes later.

Two days after his arrest, Oswald was being transferred from the Dallas city jail to the local county jail. Standing amongst the large crowd of spectators, reporters, and police was Dallas nightclub owner Jack Ruby. Ruby, reportedly wishing to spare Jacqueline Kennedy from further torment and anguish, pulled out a gun and shot Oswald in the stomach, inflicting a fatal wound. Caught on live television, a recording of the chaotic scene is played repeatedly between November 22 and 24 every year. The live airing of the footage set the standard for how national tragedies are covered by the media still today.

What makes this assassination different from the others is the sheer multitude of yet unanswered questions. Was there a conspiracy? How many shooters were there? Did Jack Ruby kill Oswald for the mob or for the government? The list of questions goes on and on and the debate over why Kennedy was killed still rages and presumably will continue to do for generations to come.

Samuel S. Byck

Samuel Byck, a furniture salesman, concocted a plan in 1974 to hijack an airplane and to fly it into the White House, killing President Richard Nixon. Byck was convinced that the U.S. government was conspiring to oppress the poor, and he openly blamed the president for the ills of society. In 1972, Byck began sending out audio tapes that openly threatened Nixon, but while the Secret Service was notified of Byck's tapes they considered him generally harmless.^[xiii]

On February 22, 1974, Byck's threats became very real. He headed to Baltimore International Airport with a stolen .22 caliber pistol and a homemade bomb made of two gallons of gasoline. After shooting an airport security guard, Byck forced his way onto an airplane headed for Atlanta. As the plane sat on the ground, preparing for takeoff, Byck broke into the cockpit, pointed the pistol at the pilots, and ordered them to takeoff. When the pilots told him that they couldn't move until the wheel blocks were removed, he shot them in a fit of rage. Byck then ordered a passenger to the cockpit and instructed them to fly the plane, but by this point police officers had stormed the plane and fired shots through the open door, injuring Byck. Before the officers could enter the cockpit to apprehend him, he put the pistol in his mouth and ended his own life.^[xiv]

Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme

Gerald Ford is the only president to suffer two attempts against his life. The first was by Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme, a member of the infamous "Manson Family," on September 5, 1975, in Sacramento, California.

Ford was eagerly shaking hands with the gathered crowd and as he reached out to shake Fromme's hand, she produced a .45 caliber pistol and pointed it at the president. It was the president's good luck that the gun's chamber was empty (although the magazine did hold four bullets) and therefore did not fire. Fromme was immediately apprehended by a Secret Service agent and arrested. She was found guilty of the attempted assassination of President Ford and sentenced to life in prison, where she remains today.

Sara Jane Moore

The second attempt on Gerald Ford's life occurred just twenty-two days later, again in California. On September 22, 1975, Sara Jane Moore fired a pistol at President Ford from forty to fifty feet away as he interacted with a crowd in San Francisco. Moore's shot missed -- Oliver Sipple, a bystander, pulled her arm at the moment she fired. Moore was immediately arrested, tried, and found guilty. She was sentenced to life in prison and is currently serving her term at the women's federal prison in Dublin, Ohio.

John Hinckley Jr.

Just minutes after giving a speech to the AFL-CIO, Ronald Reagan was being escorted to the presidential limousine when John Hinckley Jr. fired six shots at him from close range. One shot ricocheted off of the limousine and entered Reagan's body just below his armpit; another bullet struck White House Press Secretary James Brady in the head while two others wounded Secret Service agent Timothy McCarthy and policeman Thomas Delehanty.

Reagan was rushed to George Washington University Hospital where he was immediately admitted for surgery, and although seventy years old, Reagan made a full recovery. The same could not be said for Press Secretary James Brady -- he remains partially paralyzed and permanently confined to a wheelchair.

Hinckley's assassination attempt involved a bizarre scheme to win the love and approval of actress Jodie Foster. Before the assassination attempt, Hinckley wrote a letter to Foster expressing his wish to impress her with a "historical deed."^[xv]

After the shooting and his subsequent arrest, Hinckley was found not guilty by reason of insanity on June 21, 1981, and was confined to St. Elizabeth's mental hospital in Washington, D.C. The verdict, however, outraged many Americans -- both the House and Senate held hearings on possible reinterpretations of the "Insanity Defense." Within three years of the verdict, "Congress and half of the states enacted changes in the insanity defense," which ultimately limited its use.^[xvi] Hinckley is still currently confined to St. Elizabeth's hospital.

Francisco Martin Duran

Using a Chinese-made, SKS 7.62 caliber assault rifle, Francisco Martin Duran, a hotel upholsterer from Colorado, fired twenty-nine shots at the White House on October 29, 1994. While many shots hit the White House, causing nearly \$4,000 in damage, none came close to hitting the president, who was upstairs in the residence watching a football game. Duran's rampage was stopped when two tourists tackled him as he was in the process of reloading his rifle.

Duran's apparent motive had been a series of on-the-air rants by Chuck Baker, a conservative talk show host in Colorado Springs, Colorado. In an article by Jeff Cohen and Norman Solomon, they describe Baker as someone who speaks "to the 'patriot' movement about forming guerrilla squadrons and taking out the 'slimeballs' in Congress." Baker is also known to have railed against gun control, and President Clinton had recently signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994. The bill also contained the Federal Assault Weapons Ban, which effectively outlawed assault rifles such as the SKS that Duran had used to shoot at the White House.^[xvii]

Duran was immediately arrested and charged with assaulting an officer (four counts), illegal possession of a firearm by a felon, destruction of U.S. property and interstate transfer of a firearm with intent to commit a felony. Duran mounted an insanity defense, but was determined to be mentally competent and found guilty on all counts against him. Duran was sentenced to forty years in prison and is currently serving his term out in Colorado.

Vladimir Arutinian

As George W. Bush spoke to a crowd gathered in Tbilisi, Georgia, on May 10, 2005, a young Georgian named Vladimir Arutinian threw a Russian-made hand grenade toward the president. The device landed sixty-one feet from the president and failed to detonate because a red handkerchief that Arutinian had wrapped around it was too tight and did not allow the firing pin to deploy fast enough.^[xviii]

Due to the sheer size of the crowd, Arutinian was able to blend in and escape. However, he was eventually captured on July 20, 2005, after a shootout with Georgian police in which a Georgian Minister of Internal Affairs was killed. While Arutinian was indicted by a U.S. federal grand jury for attempting to assassinate the president, he faced trial in Georgia on charges of attempted murder of Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili and murder of Georgian agent Zurab Kvividze. He was found guilty on both counts and sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole in early 2006.^[xix]

^[i] Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999) 201.

^[ii] Allan Peskin, *Garfield* (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 1999) 588.

^[iii] Peskin, 591.

^[iv] Peskin, 596.

^[v] Peskin, 596.

^[vi] Lewis L. Gould, *The Presidency of William McKinley* (Lawrence: The University of Kansas Press, 1980) 251.

^[vii] Gould, 251.

^[viii] Gould, 252.

^[ix] William A. DeGregorio, *The Complete Book of U.S. Presidents* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2002) 368.

^[x] DeGregorio, 368.

^[xi] Classic Wisconsin, *Assassin*, <http://www.classicwisconsin.com/features/assassin.html> (Accessed November 27, 2006).

^[xii] Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Frequently Asked Questions: Assassination Attempt on President Truman's Life, <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/trivia/assassin.htm> (Accessed November 27, 2006).

^[xiii] The Free Information Society, *Samuel Byck*, <http://www.freeinfosociety.com/site.php?postnum=602> (Accessed November 29, 2006).

^[xiv] Ibid.

[xv] University of Missouri-Kansas City, *John W. Hinckley Jr.*, Famous Trials: University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law, <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/hinckley/HBIO.HTM> (Accessed November 29, 2006).

[xvi] Kimberly Collins, Gabe Hinkebein, Staci Schorgl, *The John Hinckley trial and Its Affect on the Insanity Defense*, University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law, <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/hincklev/hincklevinsanity.htm> (Accessed November 29, 2006).

[xvii] PRA: The Public Eye.org, *Guns, Ammo and Talk Radio*, <http://www.publiceye.org/eves/gunsammo.html> (Accessed December 4, 2006) .

[xviii] Federal Bureau of Investigations, *The Case Of The Failed Hand Grenade Attack: Man Who Tried to Assassinate President Convicted Overseas*, <http://www.fbi.gov/page2/jan06/grenadeattack011106.htm> (Accessed December 4, 2006).

[xix] CNN, *Bush Grenade Attacker Gets Life*, <http://www.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/europe/01/11/georgia.grenade/index.html> (Accessed December 4, 2006).