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## Call for Presidential Assassination?

*By Laura Bulkeley Goldsmith*

Politics can be an ugly business, not an original thought. Many pundits during the current 2004 presidential election, however, have noted that the political rhetoric on both sides of the aisle has scaled new heights of stridency, spite, and salacious enmity. Having studied history, one may take this notion to task. Yet, a new book has been written that I believe is unprecedented in serious American literature. It is called *Checkpoint: A Novel*, by Nicholson Baker. The book records a "dialogue" between two middle aged men who have been friends since high school. Ben has driven to Washington D.C. to visit Jay who has called him in desperation. Jay, in fact, is in the middle of a fiery obsession; that obsession being the assassination of George W. Bush. The book and its author ask, referring to Bush's policies: "How do you react to something that you think is so hideously wrong? How do you keep it from driving you nuts? What do you do with your life while this wrong is being carried out? What are the thoughts -- the secret thoughts, the unpublishable thoughts, so to speak -- that go through your head?"

In the case of *Checkpoint*, political despair leads to presidential assassination plans. While Ben tries to talk Jay out of his mission, asking him, for example, to realize that the Secret Service would kill him before he could get the job done and that Vice President Dick Cheney, who would step in, would be worse, he nevertheless engages him in conversation for 115 pages rather than alerting the authorities. The book is open-ended. The reader never knows if Jay will move ahead with his plans.

The author of this book, Nicholson Baker, is not some blogger ranting in obscurity on the internet. He is not unknown; no, he is more often than not reviewed quite favorably and has sold respectably as well. Previously, his works have included *The Fermata*, part fantasy, part hard core porn, and *Vox*, a "novel" in which the author basically "transcribes" a long telephone conversation between two people who meet over a phone-sex call-in line. He is praised by the mainstream press for his attention to detail and his keen observation of human behavior.

Baker and his protagonist, Jay, join the ranks of Democrats who cannot abide what they perceive as a "selected" president. They are in horror over Bush 43's reorder of American foreign policy. They read "conspiracy" into his every move and are consumed by their personal contempt for him as a man and political contempt for his ideas. (For all of the above, see *Fahrenheit 911*, a documentary film by Michael Moore, released by Miramax.) Former Vice President Al Gore has compared Bush to Stalin and Hitler. Senator Edward Kennedy has accused the president of starting a war ("cooked up in Texas") in order to achieve political advantage.

More than twenty popular musicians are joining forces in nine swing states across the U.S. from October 1 to October 8, 2004 in order to rally support against the re-election of President George W. Bush. There are four current theatrical productions and five best-sellers (a full one-third of the New York Times list) variously devoted to deriding, belittling, assaulting, and diminishing him. The following documentaries have been released or will be released, all vilifying Bush:

- *Breaking the Silence: Truth and Lies in the War on Terror* (2003) (TV)
- *The Man Who Knew Bush* (2004)
- *Uncovered: The War on Iraq* (2004)
- *Bush's Brain* (2004)

Never have the worlds of literature, theatre, and music taken on the chief executive with such intensity and fury. Still, I do not believe that a discussion for and against the assassination of a sitting president has been the subject of a work of fiction, reviewed by respected publications as if it were simply a meditation on political despondency and frustration. Some may consider the book a baby boomer's tantrum or a conspiracy theorist's handbook; however, publisher Knopf has given credibility and author Baker has given voice to a character whose despair and anger lead to the unthinkable.

A cursory look at past presidential assassins, indicates that they, too, were enraged over governmental matters. Famously, John Wilkes Booth proclaimed, after he shot President Abraham Lincoln on April 15, 1865: "Sic semper tyrannis!" or "Thus always to tyrants!" A passage in his diary read, "Our country owed all her troubles to him (Lincoln), and God simply made me the instrument of his punishment." The safety of the president was never again to be assured.

Charles Guiteau, after his assassination of James Garfield on July 2, 1881, said: "The president's tragic death was a sad necessity, but it will unite the Republican party and save the Republic. I have no ill-will to the president. His death was a political necessity." Guiteau, like Booth, had his reasons.

September 6, 1901, Leon F. Czolgosz, a self-proclaimed anarchist, shot President William McKinley. Among his statements as to motive: "I killed President McKinley because I done my duty." And, "I killed the President because he was the enemy of the people, the good working people. I am not sorry for my crime." It was reported that, prior to the assassination, in his spare time, Czolgosz read radical anarchist magazines and newspapers.

The latter decades of the 20th century were defined by the events of November 22, 1963, when Lee Harvey Oswald assassinated President John F. Kennedy. Handbills had been circulating around Dallas in the days before the president's arrival. They claimed JFK was "WANTED FOR TREASON" and listed seven grievances against him. Number seven reads, "He has been caught in fantastic LIES to the American people&" Oswald never had an opportunity to explain his motives, as he was shot to death himself by Jack Ruby on November 23rd. A self-proclaimed Marxist and Cuban sympathizer, Oswald said in custody only: "Everyone will know who I am now." Indeed.

Thankfully, there is a list of presidents who have survived identified assassination attempts:

- Andrew Jackson (January 30, 1835)
- Theodore Roosevelt (October 14, 1912)
- Franklin D. Roosevelt (February 15, 1933)
- Harry S. Truman (November 1, 1950)
- Gerald Ford (September 5, 1975, and September 22, 1975)
- Ronald Reagan (March 30, 1981)

Presidential assassination is, shall we say, a deadly serious matter. Our nation has been shattered by each of them. Even James Garfield, president less than 200 days, was mourned for two days in Washington, D.C. by more than seventy thousand people, lined up at the Capitol rotunda to pay their respects. It should not be fodder for a screed masquerading as a novella, published by a major publishing house, reviewed dispassionately with words like, "compelling" by a major national newspaper, and printed with a bulls-eye on the cover, no less. Shame on Knopf and shame on Nicholson Baker. Let us hope *Checkpoint: A Novel* does not inspire any contemporary malcontents in the volatile atmosphere of 2004. Of this there is no doubt: Words have power.