



The Assassin Syndrome

As children, they are lonely, friendless introverts, often living in broken homes. They grow up full of self-loathing and have troubled relationships with the opposite sex. Drifting from job to job, they become chronic losers with grandiose fantasies and goals. At some point, something goes haywire. They grow increasingly violent and irascible. They may fixate on a single object of adoration or hatred until, through some scrambled logic of their own, they confront a public figure with a gun.

That rough psychological profile loosely fits each of the more than one dozen people who have tried—often successfully—to kill a U.S. President or other prominent national public figure. Unlike European countries,

rowly missed Franklin Roosevelt in 1933, all lost their mothers as young children. The father of John Shrank, who wounded Teddy Roosevelt in 1921, died soon after his son's birth; Lee Harvey Oswald's father died before he was born. Later assailants also fit the pattern. James Earl Ray's father deserted the family; so did Sirhan Sirhan's. Both of Gerald Ford's assailants, Lynette (Squeaky) Fromme and Sara Jane Moore, quarreled bitterly with their parents.

Like John Hinckley, many would-be attackers grew up in the frustrating shadow of more successful older siblings. John Wilkes Booth's brothers, for example, were prominent actors. "This one-down family position predisposes the boy to develop a rebellious attitude toward authority and tradition," says psychiatrist Irving Harris,

before their act. Lawrence, for example, quit his job as house painter, then became violent and abusive. Booth lost his voice and turned angry and irrational. The year before he shot John Kennedy, Oswald lost several jobs and separated from his wife. Similarly, Bremer was demoted from his busboy job for erratic behavior, and police found him sitting in a car, with bullets and a pistol, one year before he shot Wallace.

Spy: Many of the would-be assassins searched for causes to believe in and joined extremist groups only to find they didn't belong. Booth claimed to have killed Lincoln to avenge the Southern defeat, but he never fought for the Confederacy. Oswald's bid for Russian citizenship was rejected, and he was the sole member of his "Fair Play for Cuba Committee." Moore,



WTOP-TV

AP photos

Lee Harvey Oswald: Shot two days after arrest *Sirhan Sirhan: Eligible for parole in 1984* *Arthur Bremer: Eligible for parole in May 1982* *'Squeaky' Fromme: Eligible for parole in 1985* *Sara Jane Moore: Eligible for parole in 1986*

where assassinations tend to be political acts by terrorist groups or military juntas, assassinations in the United States have almost always been the work of loners, fulfilling some twisted private desire.* Experts blame the phenomenon on everything from lax gun control and the "American dream," with its unrealistic promise, to violence in the movies and even rock music. Whatever the causes, each new assassination or attempt raises the same questions: how can the human time bombs be spotted and what, if anything, can be done to defuse them.

Death: The most comprehensive profile of Presidential assailants was compiled as part of a 1969 study ordered by Lyndon Johnson after Robert Kennedy's assassination. Although there are exceptions to the pattern, the similarities are remarkable. The study found that almost all had troubled childhoods, and many lost one parent through death or divorce. Charles J. Guiteau, who shot James Garfield in 1881, Leon Czolgosz, who killed William McKinley in 1901 and Giuseppe Zangara, who nar-

who has studied Presidential assassins. "He can do it in a roguish way, like Billy Carter, or he can resort to assassination to manipulate the limelight."

As children, the assailants-to-be have trouble making friends. Arthur Bremer, who shot George Wallace in 1972, was a wary loner who muttered under his breath. Most of them shared a physical resemblance: as a rule, the men were short and slight or chubby, the women dumpy and plain. Frequently, they had stormy relationships—if any—with the opposite sex. Richard Lawrence, who tried to kill Andrew Jackson in 1835, never married, nor did Shrank, Zangara or Ray. Bremer doted on a 15-year-old girl who spurned him, then lamented his virginity in diaries found after his arrest. "The people who become assassins have poorly developed libidos and trouble establishing sexual identities," says psychiatrist David Abrahamsen, who suggests that attacking a President may be the ultimate way to prove manhood.

Rootless and aimless as young adults, they usually floundered. The 1969 study found that almost all had undergone a dramatic personality change one to three years

a jangled matron, joined several radical groups, but informed on them to the FBI. Czolgosz tried to join an anarchist group and was branded a police spy—much as Hinckley was expelled from the National Socialist Party of America when its leaders suspected he was an undercover agent.

Like Hinckley's dreams of Jodie Foster, many assailants developed bizarre fantasies. Lawrence claimed he was King Richard III and believed that the United States was keeping him from his wealth. Guiteau imagined he had earned an ambassadorial post. Such delusions are often ways to "take revenge for an extreme sense of helplessness," says Abrahamsen—a means of compensating for feeling "that they are nobodies."

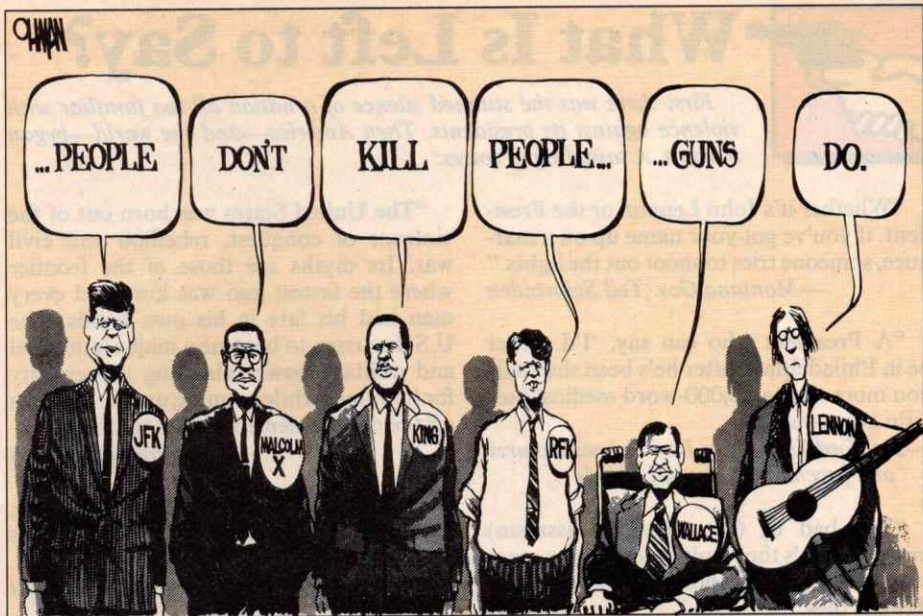
Ultimately, it is to become "somebody" that assassin-types turn to violence, psychiatrists believe. The assassin sees killing a public figure as a prominent achievement—even though it may be a displaced death wish. Such people "politicize their inner turmoil," often blaming society for their failures, says psychiatrist Lawrence Freedman, who helped compile the 1969 study. Robbed of a parent figure in child-

*Two exceptions were Oscar Collazo and Griselio Torresola, Puerto Rican nationalists who stormed Blair House in 1950, intending to kill Harry Truman to dramatize their fight for Puerto Rican independence.

hood, they may also be striking at the ultimate father figure. In attacking a President, experts say, the assassin is attacking the office, not the man. Indeed, several assailants have switched targets. Oswald originally gunned for Gen. Edwin A. Walker; Bremer stalked Nixon for weeks.

Given their tangled motives and oddly isolated lives, assassin types seem unlikely hired guns for shadowy conspiracies (box). Yet conspiracy buffs have seen dark plots in every assassination and attempt. Guiteau's sister maintained that a second gunman, hiding in a doorway, actually killed Garfield. Because Zangara's bullet killed Chicago Mayor Anton Cermak, some conspiracists think the assault actually was a plot by mobsters to kill Cermak, not Roosevelt. Lawrence's attack on Andrew Jackson was thought to be a Whig Party plot. Conspiracy theories are still emerging about John F. Kennedy's assassination—alleging everything from a second gunman to a coffin switch. None of the alleged plots has ever been proven, and some psychiatrists say that the theories suggest a national need to see something sinister behind each assassination—rather than the possibly more alarming truth about demented individuals with guns.

Perhaps most disturbing of all is the fact that though they can sketch the profile of the typical assassin, experts don't know what to do with the information. Hundreds of thousands of citizens fit the basic mold—but no one can predict when or if they might become violent. Experts can accurately predict violent behavior in only about one of three cases. "Among violent people, some are mentally ill," says psychiatrist



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Searching for causes: Which comes first, the gun or the gunman?

Daniel Freedman of the University of Chicago. "Among the mentally ill, few are violent." Although Hinckley had seen a therapist, would-be assassins rarely come into contact with psychiatrists before their acts—and those who threaten violence are seldom believed, mainly because the vast majority never carry out their threats.

Detention: Law-enforcement officials and Secret Service agents don't know what to do about assassin types either. It is a Federal crime to threaten the President of the United States, and in some states a person who does so and exhibits signs of

psychosis can be incarcerated temporarily. Still, the U.S. Constitution guards against most "preventive detention"—and psychiatrists and legal experts alike warn that people cannot be institutionalized for having potentially criminal backgrounds. The answer—if there is one—would seem to be greater private supervision of possibly dangerous people by their friends, doctors and families so that they are not, as Hinckley's parents reportedly described their son, "wandering aimless and irresponsible."

MELINDA BECK with DONNA FOOTE in Chicago, EMILY NEWHALL in New York and bureau reports

For Conspiracy Buffs Only

In all the recent history of assassinations and assassination attempts in America, none seemed more clearly the work of one man with one gun and no rational motive than last week's audio- and video-taped attack on Ronald Reagan. But this shooting, like the others before it, churned up the usual wake of anomalies, discrepancies and coincidences that attend chaotic events in the real world—and so provided the usual grist for yet another generation of conspiracy theorists to chew over for years to come. The black comic and conspiratorialist Dick Gregory scooped the pack this time, assuring a Los Angeles talk-show host that the CIA and the FBI did it—and experienced students of the literature of assassinations could almost see a hundred similar theories blooming out of what seemed so fallow a patch of ground.

Among the possibilities:

- **The Hinckley-Didn't-Do-It-or-at-Least-Not-Alone Theory.** The very videotapes that make such a seemingly open-and-shut case against John W. Hinckley Jr. never actually show his face until after his capture. As it happened, he was standing back in a cluster of newsmen, behind the cameras, until he started shooting. But a dedicated conspiracy buff might argue that he was (1) an innocent fall guy or (2) only one gun among two or more. Argument (2) offers the more tempting fodder for the conspiratorialist: one or two anomalous flashes of light

on the tape, a suspended moment in which members of Reagan's security force look the wrong way for the source of the shots and the scrambled first reports from an embarrassed Secret Service misstating the make and caliber of the pistol involved—a perfect invitation to a two-gun scenario.

- **The Maybe-Hinckley-Did-It-but-the-Government-Helped Theory.** The first question a conspiratorialist might ask is how an ex-Nazi once arrested on a gun charge in Nashville, Tenn., on a day when Jimmy Carter was in town could escape being punch-carded into the Secret Service's computerized list of potential assassins. There were real security lapses at the scene as well—the ease with which Hinckley slipped into the press pack, for example, and the clay-pigeon distance Reagan had to walk to his car when it could have been parked closer to the hotel exit. The evidence in each instance points to carelessness, but there are no mistakes in conspiracy theories—only calculated acts.

- **The Cherchez-Le-Veep Theory With Mystery Woman and Trilateral Corollary.** For the farthest-out plot-spinners, it will not pass notice that (1) George Bush addressed the Trilateral Commission the Sunday night before the shooting, that (2) Hinckley's brother, Scott, had a dinner date with Bush's son Neil that Monday and that (3) there were several phone calls from an unidentified woman to Hinckley's hotel room that day (the FBI said she was trying to call someone else). Any significance in these occurrences can be left to the imagination, and probably will be.