List of United States presidential assassination attempts and plots

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Assassination attempts and plots on Presidents of the United States have been numerous: more than 20 attempts to kill sitting and former presidents, as well as the Presidents-elect, are known. Four sitting presidents have been killed: Abraham Lincoln (the 16th President), James A. Garfield (the 20th President), William McKinley (the 25th President) and John F. Kennedy (the 35th President). Two presidents were injured in attempted assassinations: former President Theodore Roosevelt (the 26th President), and President Ronald Reagan (the 40th President).

Although the historian J.W. Clarke has suggested that most American assassinations were politically motivated actions, carried out by rational men,[1] not all such attacks have been undertaken for political reasons.[2] Some attackers had questionable mental stability, and a few were judged legally insane.[3][4] Since the Vice President of the United States has for more than two centuries been elected from the same political party as the President, the assassination of the President is unlikely to result in major policy changes. This may explain why political groups typically do not make such attacks.[5]

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Successful assassinations

Abraham Lincoln

Main article: Assassination of Abraham Lincoln

The assassination of Abraham Lincoln took place on Good Friday, April 14, 1865, at approximately 10:15 p.m. Lincoln was shot once in the back of his head by actor and Confederate sympathizer John Wilkes Booth while attending a performance of Our American Cousin at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C. with his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, and two guests. Soon after being shot, Lincoln's wound was declared to be fatal. Lincoln died the following day at 7:22 a.m. Booth was tracked down by Union soldiers and was shot and killed by Sergeant Boston Corbett on April 26, 1865. He believed that killing Lincoln would radically change U.S. policy toward the South.

James A. Garfield

Main article: Assassination of James A. Garfield

The assassination of James A. Garfield took place in Washington, D.C., at 9:30 a.m. on Saturday, July 2, 1881, fewer than four months after Garfield took office. Charles J. Guiteau shot him twice, once in his right arm and the other in his back, with a .442 Webley British Bulldog revolver. Garfield died 11 weeks later, on September 19, 1881, at 10:35 p.m., due to complications caused by infections. Guiteau was immediately arrested. He was tried and found guilty. A subsequent appeal was rejected, and he was executed by hanging on June 30, 1882 in the District of Columbia, two days before the first anniversary of the attempt. Guiteau was assessed as mentally unbalanced. He claimed to have shot Garfield out of disappointment for being passed over for appointment as
ambassador to France. He attributed the president's victory in the election to a speech he wrote for Garfield. [citation needed]

[edit] William McKinley

Main article: Assassination of William McKinley

The assassination of William McKinley took place at 4:07 p.m. on Friday, September 6, 1901, at the Temple of Music in Buffalo, New York. McKinley, attending the Pan-American Exposition, was shot twice in the abdomen by Leon Czolgosz, a self-proclaimed anarchist. McKinley died from his wounds eight days later, on September 14, 1901, at 2:15 a.m.

Members of the crowd captured and subdued Czolgosz. Afterward, the 4th Brigade, National Guard Signal Corps, and police intervened, beating him so severely it was initially thought he might not live to stand trial. Czolgosz was convicted and sentenced to death in federal court on September 23. He was executed by electric chair in Auburn Prison on October 29, 1901. Czolgosz's actions were politically motivated, although it is unclear what outcome he believed the shooting would yield.

[edit] John F. Kennedy

Main article: Assassination of John F. Kennedy

The assassination of John F. Kennedy took place on Friday, November 22, 1963, in Dallas, Texas, at 12:30 p.m. CST (18:30 UTC). Kennedy was fatally wounded by a sniper's bullets in his neck and head while riding with his wife Jacqueline in a presidential motorcade through Dealey Plaza. Although he was not formally declared dead until a half-hour after the shooting, he effectively died instantly.

Lee Harvey Oswald, an employee of the Texas School Book Depository in Dealey Plaza, was arrested shortly after at the Texas Theater. At 11:21 a.m. Sunday, November 24, 1963, while he was handcuffed to Detective Jim Leavelle and as he was about to be taken to the Dallas County Jail, Oswald was shot and fatally wounded in the basement of Dallas Police Headquarters by Jack Ruby, a Dallas nightclub operator who said that he had been distraught over the Kennedy assassination. The shooting by Ruby was televised, as Oswald's transfer was being covered by the media.

The ten-month investigation of the Warren Commission of 1963–1964 concluded that Kennedy was assassinated by Oswald. This decision has been subject to much dispute, and conspiracy theories continue to be popular.

[edit] Failed assassination attempts

[edit] Andrew Jackson
Illustration of Jackson's attempted assassination

- January 30, 1835: Just outside the Capitol Building, a house painter named Richard Lawrence aimed two pistols at the President, but both misfired. Lawrence was apprehended after Jackson beat him down with a cane. Lawrence was found not guilty by reason of insanity and confined to a mental institution until his death in 1861.[7]

[edit] Abraham Lincoln

Main article: Baltimore Plot

- February 23, 1861: The Baltimore Plot was an alleged conspiracy to assassinate President-elect Abraham Lincoln en route to his inauguration. Allan Pinkerton, eponymous founder of the Pinkerton National Detective Agency, played a key role in protecting the president-elect by managing Lincoln's security throughout the journey. Though scholars debate whether or not the threat was real, Lincoln and his advisers took actions to ensure his safe passage through Baltimore.
- August 1864: A lone rifle shot missed Lincoln's head by inches (passing through his hat) as he rode in the late evening, unguarded, north from the White House three miles to Soldiers' Home (his regular retreat where he would work and sleep before returning to the White House the following morning). Near eleven o'clock pm, Private John W. Nichols of the Pennsylvania 150th Volunteers, the sentry on duty at the gated entrance to the Soldiers’ Home grounds, heard the rifle shot and moments later saw the President riding toward him "bareheaded." Lincoln described the matter to Ward Lamon, his old friend and loyal bodyguard.[8][9]

[edit] Theodore Roosevelt

Main article: John Flammang Schrank

- October 14, 1912: Three and a half years after he left office, Roosevelt was running for President as a member of the Progressive Party. Before a campaign speech in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, John F. Schrank, a saloon-keeper from New York who had been stalking him for weeks, shot Roosevelt once in the chest with a .38 caliber revolver. The 50-page text of his campaign speech folded over twice in Roosevelt's breast pocket and a metal glasses
case slowed the bullet, saving his life. Schrank was immediately de-armed and captured and may have been lynched had not Roosevelt shouted for him to not be harmed.[10]

Correctly determining that he was not mortally wounded, Roosevelt went on with his scheduled speech despite the protests of his staff. He spoke for about 60 minutes, at one point showing his bloodied shirt to the crowd and remarking that "It takes more than that to kill a bull moose."[11] After the speech, he finally went to the hospital, where it was discovered that the bullet had lodged between his ribs. Doctors determined that it would be too risky to try to remove it, so it remained in Roosevelt's body for the rest of his life. He spent about two weeks recuperating before heading back out on the campaign trail.[12]

At Schrank's trial, the would-be assassin claimed that William McKinley had visited him in a dream and told him to avenge his assassination by killing Roosevelt. He was found legally insane and was institutionalized until his death in 1943. [13]

[edit] Herbert Hoover

- On November 19, 1928, President-elect Hoover embarked on a seven-week goodwill tour of several Latin American countries. While in Argentina, he escaped an assassination attempt by Argentine anarchists, led by Severino Di Giovanni, who tried to blow up his railroad car. The plotters had an itinerary but the bomber was arrested before he could place the explosives on the rails. Hoover did not refer to the incident. His complimentary remarks on Argentina were well-received in both the host country and in the press.[14]

[edit] Franklin D. Roosevelt

- On February 15, 1933 in Miami, Florida, Giuseppe Zangara fired five shots at Roosevelt. The assassination attempt occurred less than three weeks before Roosevelt was sworn in for his first term in office. Although the President-elect was not hurt, four other people were wounded and Chicago Mayor Anton Cermak was killed. Zangara was found guilty of murder and was executed March 20, 1933. The writer John William Tuohy has suggested that Cermak, not Roosevelt, was the intended target, but this is not a consensus of historians. The mayor was a strong foe of Al Capone's Chicago mob.[15][16]

[edit] Harry S. Truman

- In the summer of 1947, pending the independence of Israel, the Zionist Stern Gang was believed to have sent a number of letter bombs addressed to the president and high-ranking staff at the White House. The Secret Service had been alerted by British intelligence after similar letters had been sent to high-ranking British officials and the Gang claimed credit. The mail room of the White House intercepted the letters and the Secret Service defused them. At the time, the incident was not publicized. Truman's daughter Margaret confirmed the incident in her biography of Truman published in 1972. It had earlier been told in a memoir by Ira R.T. Smith, who worked in the mail room.[17]

Main article: Truman assassination attempt
On November 1, 1950, two Puerto Rican pro-independence activists, Oscar Collazo and Griselio Torresola, attempted to kill Truman at the Blair House, where Truman lived while the White House was being renovated. In the attack, Torresola mortally wounded White House Policeman Leslie Coffelt, who killed the attacker with a shot to the head. Collazo wounded another officer, and survived with serious injuries. Truman was not harmed at all but was at risk. He commuted Collazo's death sentence, after conviction in a federal trial, to life in prison. In 1979, President Jimmy Carter commuted it to time served.[18]

[edit] John F. Kennedy

December 11, 1960: While vacationing in Palm Beach, Florida, President-elect John F. Kennedy was threatened by Richard Paul Pavlick, a 73-year-old former postal worker. Pavlick intended to crash his dynamite-laden 1950 Buick into Kennedy's vehicle, but he changed his mind after seeing Kennedy's wife and daughter bid him goodbye.[19] Pavlick was arrested three days later by the Secret Service after being stopped for a driving violation; police found the dynamite in his car. Pavlick spent the next six years in both federal prison and mental institutions before being released in December 1966.

[edit] Richard Nixon

April 13, 1972: Arthur Bremer carried a firearm to an event intending to shoot Nixon, but was put off by strong security. A few weeks later, he instead shot and seriously injured Governor of Alabama George Wallace.

February 22, 1974: Samuel Byck planned to kill Nixon by crashing a commercial airliner into the White House.[20] He hijacked the plane on the ground by force, and was told that it could not take off with the wheel blocks still in place. After he shot the pilot and copilot, an officer shot Byck through the plane's door window. He survived long enough to kill himself by shooting. These events were portrayed in the film The Assassination of Richard Nixon.

[edit] Gerald Ford

Main article: Ford assassination attempt in Sacramento

September 5, 1975: On the northern grounds of the California State Capitol, Lynette Fromme, a follower of Charles Manson, drew a Colt M1911 .45 caliber pistol on Ford when he reached to shake her hand in a crowd. She had four cartridges in the pistol's magazine but none in the firing chamber. She was quickly restrained by Secret Service agent Larry Buendorf. Fromme was sentenced to life in prison, but was released from custody on August 14, 2009 (2 years and 8 months after Ford's death). [21]

September 22, 1975: In San Francisco, California, Sara Jane Moore fired a revolver at Ford from 40 feet (12 m) away.[22] A bystander, Oliver Sipple, grabbed Moore's arm and the shot missed Ford.[23] Moore was sentenced to life in prison.[24] Tried and convicted in federal court, she went to prison for life. She was paroled from a federal prison on
December 31, 2007 after serving more than 30 years. (It was more than a year after Ford’s natural death.)

[edit] Jimmy Carter

Main article: Raymond Lee Harvey

- Raymond Lee Harvey was an Ohio-born unemployed American drifter. He was arrested by the Secret Service after being found carrying a starter pistol with blank rounds, ten minutes before President Jimmy Carter was to give a speech at the Civic Center Mall in Los Angeles on May 5, 1979.

Harvey had a history of mental illness, but police had to investigate his claim that he was part of a four-man operation to assassinate the president. According to Harvey, he fired seven blank rounds from the starter pistol on the hotel roof on the night of May 4, to test how much noise it would make. He claimed to have been with one of the plotters that night, whom he knew as “Julio.” (This man was later identified as a 21-year-old illegal Mexican, who gave the name Osvaldo Espinoza Ortiz.) At the time of his arrest, Harvey had eight spent rounds in his pocket, as well as 70 unspent blank rounds for the gun. Harvey was jailed on a $50,000 bond, given his transient status, and Ortiz was alternately reported as being held on a $100,000 bond as a material witness or held on a $50,000 bond being charged with burglary from a car. Charges against the pair were ultimately dismissed for a lack of evidence.

[edit] Ronald Reagan

Main article: Reagan assassination attempt

- On March 30, 1981, as he returned to his limousine after a speech at the Hilton Washington Hotel in the capital, Reagan and three other men were shot and wounded by John Hinckley, Jr. Reagan was struck by a single bullet which broke a rib, punctured a lung, and caused serious internal bleeding. He was rushed to nearby George Washington University Hospital for emergency surgery and was then hospitalized for about two weeks. Upon release, he resumed a light workload for several months as he recovered. He was the first sitting president to survive being shot in an attempted assassination.

Hinckley was immediately subdued and arrested at the scene. Later, he claimed to have wanted to kill the president to impress the teen actress Jodie Foster. He was deemed mentally ill and was confined to an institution. Besides Reagan, White House Press Secretary James Brady, Secret Service agent Tim McCarthy, and D.C. police officer Thomas Delahanty were also wounded in the attack. All three survived, but Brady suffered brain damage and was permanently disabled.

[edit] George H. W. Bush
April 13, 1993: Fourteen men believed to be working for Saddam Hussein smuggled bombs into Kuwait to assassinate former president Bush by a car bomb during his visit to Kuwait University several months after he had left office. The plot was foiled when Kuwaiti officials found the bomb and arrested the suspected assassins. Two of the suspects, Wali Abdelhadi Ghazali and Raad Abdel-Amir al-Assadi, retracted their confessions at the trial, claiming that they were coerced. Bush had left office in January 1993. The Iraqi Intelligence Service, particularly Directorate 14, was proved to be behind the plot.

On June 27, 1993 President Bill Clinton ordered retaliation against Iraq as part of Operation Southern Watch: 23 Tomahawk cruise missiles were fired against the Iraqi Intelligence Headquarters. Clinton had decided to act based on three pieces of evidence: first, suspects in the plot confessed to FBI agents in Kuwait. Second, FBI bomb experts linked the captured car bombs to the same explosives made in Iraq, including a 175-pound car bomb found in Kuwait City on April 14. Third, intelligence reports confirmed that Saddam had been plotting to assassinate the former President for some time. Leaders from both parties supported Clinton's attack.

**[edit] Bill Clinton**

- January 21, 1994: Ronald Gene Barbour a retired military officer and freelance writer, plotted to kill Clinton while he was jogging. Barbour returned to Florida a week later without having fired the shots at the president, who was on a state visit to Russia. Barbour was sentenced to five years in prison and was released in 1998.
- September 12, 1994: Frank Eugene Corder flew a stolen single-engine Cessna onto the White House lawn and crashed into a tree. Corder, a truck driver from Maryland who reportedly had alcohol problems, allegedly tried to hit the White House. He was killed in the crash. The President and First Family were not home at the time.
- October 29, 1994: Francisco Martin Duran fired at least 29 shots with a semi-automatic rifle at the White House from a fence overlooking the north lawn, thinking that Clinton was among the men in dark suits standing there (Clinton was inside.) Three tourists, Harry Rakosky, Ken Davis and Robert Haines, tackled Duran before he could injure anyone. Found with a suicide note in his pocket, Duran was sentenced to 40 years in prison.
- 1996: During his visit to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in Manila in 1996, Clinton motorcade was rerouted before driving over a bridge. Service officers had intercepted a message suggesting that an attack was imminent, and Lewis Merletti, the director of the Secret Service, ordered the motorcade to be re-routed. An intelligence team later discovered a bomb under the bridge. Subsequent U.S. investigation "revealed that it [the plot] was masterminded by a Saudi terrorist living in Afghanistan named Osama bin Laden".

**[edit] George W. Bush**

Further information: 2001 White House shooting
February 7, 2001: While President George W. Bush was in the White House, Robert Pickett standing outside the fence, shot several times toward the building. The U.S. Park Police said, according to CNN correspondent Eileen O'Connor, that they confiscated a sophisticated handgun and, had the shooter not been at an obstructed angle view, he could have reached targets in the White House. Following a stand-off of about ten minutes, a Secret Service officer shot Pickett, wounding him. Pickett was then immediately taken to a hospital for surgery. Pickett was found to have emotional problems and employment grievances. Pickett had previously written letters to the President about these grievances. A court in July 2001 sentenced Pickett to three years imprisonment in connection with the incident.

September 11, 2001: On the morning of the September 11 attacks, President George W. Bush was at the Colony Beach and Tennis Resort on Longboat Key, Florida. He woke up around 6:00 AM and prepared for his morning jog. Men of apparent Middle Eastern descent arrived at the Colony Beach Resort and claimed they had a "poolside" interview with the President. Lacking an appointment, they were turned away. TIME magazine suggested they were there for an assassination attempt modeled on one used against the Northern Alliance military leader Ahmed Massoud two days earlier. Witnesses have recalled seeing 9/11 hijacker ringleader Mohamed Atta in the Longboat Key Holiday Inn a short distance from where Bush was staying as recently as September 7, the day Bush’s Sarasota appearance was publicly announced. About three hours after the possible assassination attempt, Bush was making a scheduled appearance at a nearby elementary school when the main 9/11 attacks began.

May 10, 2005: While President George W. Bush was giving a speech in the Freedom Square in Tbilisi, Georgia, Vladimir Arutyunian threw a live Soviet-made RGD-5 hand grenade toward the podium. The grenade was live and had its pin pulled, but did not explode because a red tartan handkerchief was wrapped tightly around it and delayed the firing pin. After escaping that day, Arutyunian was arrested in July 2005, during which he killed an Interior Ministry agent. Convicted in January 2006, he was given a life sentence.

Barack Obama has been the target of several reportedly credible threats since first running for president. The first came in North Carolina in 2008 during the presidential campaign, when Jerry Blanchard made threats at a Waffle House in Charlotte. Blanchard said Obama was the antichrist and planned to shoot him. The Secret Service intervened and the threatening man was arrested.

On July 31, 2008, Raymond H. Geisel was charged with threatening the Democratic candidate. He called Obama by a racial epithet and said, "If he gets elected, I'll assassinate him myself".

A third scare came in Denver. Cousins Tharin Gartrell and Shawn Adolf, and their friend Nathan Johnson, went to Denver allegedly planning to assassinate Obama during his
acceptance speech at the 2008 Democratic National Convention, but officials said there was not substantial threat. The three men were arrested. A fourth attempt in Tennessee involved two white supremacists who planned to drive their car at the Democratic nominee Obama, and open fire with guns. They were arrested on October 22, 2008 before taking any action.

[edit] Presidential deaths rumored to be assassinations

[edit] Zachary Taylor

On July 4, 1850, President Zachary Taylor was diagnosed by his physicians with cholera morbus, a term that included diarrhea and dysentery but not true cholera. Cholera, typhoid fever, and food poisoning have all been indicated as the source of the president's ultimately fatal gastroenteritis. More specifically, a hasty snack of iced milk, cold cherries and pickled cucumbers (pickles) consumed at an Independence Day celebration might have been the culprit. On July 9, Taylor was dead.

In the late 1980s, author Clara Rising theorized that Taylor was murdered by poison and was able to convince Taylor's closest living relative, as well as the Jefferson County, Kentucky Coroner, Dr. Richard Greathouse, to order an exhumation. On June 17, 1991 Taylor's remains were exhumed from the vault at the Zachary Taylor National Cemetery, in Louisville, Kentucky. The remains were then transported to the Office of the Kentucky Chief Medical Examiner, Dr. George Nichols. Nichols, joined by Dr. William Maples, a forensic anthropologist at the University of Florida in Gainesville, Florida, removed the top of the lead coffin liner to reveal remarkably well preserved remains which were immediately recognizable as those of President Taylor. Radiological studies were conducted of the remains before small samples of hair, fingernail and other tissues were removed. Thomas Secoy of the Department of Veterans Affairs (and a direct descendant of Taylor's Democratic presidential opponent Lewis Cass), ensured that only those samples required for testing were removed and that the coffin was resealed. The remains were then returned to the cemetery and received appropriate honors at reinterment. The samples were sent to Oak Ridge National Laboratory, where neutron activation analysis revealed traces of arsenic at levels less than one one-hundredth of the level expected in a death by poisoning.

[edit] Warren G. Harding

In June 1923, President Warren G. Harding set out on a cross-country "Voyage of Understanding," planning to meet ordinary people and explain his policies. During this trip, he became the first president to visit Alaska. Rumors of corruption in his administration were beginning to circulate in Washington by this time, and Harding was profoundly shocked by a long message he received while in Alaska, apparently detailing illegal activities previously unknown to him. At the end of July, while traveling south from Alaska through British Columbia, he developed what was thought to be a severe case of food poisoning. He gave the final speech of his life to a large crowd at the University of Washington Stadium (now Husky Stadium) at the University of Washington campus in Seattle, Washington. A scheduled speech in Portland, Oregon was canceled. The President's train proceeded south to San Francisco. Upon
arriving at the Palace Hotel, he developed pneumonia. Harding died of either a heart attack or a stroke at 7:35 p.m. on August 2, 1923. The formal announcement, printed in the New York Times of that day, stated that "A stroke of apoplexy was the cause of death." He had been ill exactly one week. \[66\]

Naval physicians surmised that he had suffered a heart attack. The Hardings' personal medical advisor, homeopath and Surgeon General Charles E. Sawyer, disagreed with the diagnosis. Mrs. Harding refused permission for an autopsy which soon led to speculation that the President had been the victim of a plot, possibly carried out by his wife, as Harding apparently had been unfaithful to the First Lady. Gaston B. Means, an amateur historian and gadfly, noted in his book The Strange Death of President Harding (1930) that the circumstances surrounding his death lent themselves to some suspecting he had been poisoned. Several individuals attached to him, personally and politically, would have welcomed Harding's death, as they would have been disgraced in association by Means' assertion of Harding's "imminent impeachment." Means was later discredited for publicly accusing Mrs. Harding of the purported murder.