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# **Giving Meaning to Martyrdom**

What Presidential Assassinations Can Teach Us About  
American Political Culture

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Spring 2012

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## Acknowledgements

I am immensely thankful to everyone who has helped me make this thesis possible. First and foremost, I want to thank Professor Renee Romano, my academic advisor, thesis advisor, and the leader of our honors seminar. It is no exaggeration to say that I cannot imagine this process without her guidance and encouragement (especially in the form of the delicious baked goods she made for seminar every week!). I remain in awe of her ability to look at my incoherent drafts and be able to beautifully and precisely state the exact argument I wanted to make.

I would also like to thank all my other history professors at Oberlin for everything they have taught me. I would especially like to thank Professor Gary Kornblith for allowing me to write a section of my thesis for his class “The Civil War and Reconstruction” this past fall (and I am thankful to Gary and all my fellow Civil Warriors for the useful feedback they gave me).

However, the origins of this thesis predate my time at Oberlin, and for that reason I would like to thank my high school history teacher John Baxter for introducing me to the topic of presidential assassination and helping ignite my love of American history.

I would also like to thank my fellow history-thesis writers. They have made this process so much better with their advice, companionship, and commiseration during what might otherwise have been a lonely process. They are all awesome and have written spectacular theses!

Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for all their love and support (and for listening to me ramble on about dead presidents and crazy assassins). I am particularly thankful to my aunt, Carol Sheriff, for the advice she gave me when I was writing my prospectus; this project might never have made it off the ground without her help. And most of all, I want to thank my parents. They have not only supported me through this entire process and given me excellent feedback on my drafts, they have always believed I could succeed in doing anything I wanted to and have been there for me when I have no faith in myself. Mom and Dad, I love you!

## Introduction: Presidential Assassination in the United States

The seed of this thesis was planted with one word, written on the blackboard of my tenth-grade history class: “Czolgosz.” It was the last name of President William McKinley’s assassin, and I immediately fell in love with it and its delightfully Polish consonant clusters. I started to research Leon Czolgosz, the man who had such an alluring name, and quickly discovered the Stephen Sondheim musical *Assassins* and the book *Assassination Vacation* by Sarah Vowell. I listened to and read these works over and over because they captivated me with their obscure facts and stories about American history. My thoughts returned to assassination my junior year of college when I took a class about historical memory, because I felt that the popular rendering of each assassination did not adequately account for what I knew about them. I was particular curious why the stories of some assassinations were so widely known, but others were not. I eventually realized this was a question I would never be able to answer definitively, but that I could look at how the initial media coverage of each assassination matched up to its eventual popular depiction. As I delved into my primary sources, I found that there was much to be gleaned by comparing the reactions to all four assassinations.

This thesis explores the media coverage of the four murders of sitting United States presidents and what these assassinations reveal about American political culture. These unlucky presidents were Abraham Lincoln, assassinated in 1865; James Garfield, assassinated in 1881; William McKinley, assassinated in 1901; and John F. Kennedy, assassinated in 1963. Although historians have studied each of these assassinations to different extents, this thesis is unique in that it compares all four and looks at how

assassination, as a phenomenon, has played a role in American political culture, that is, the shared values and ideas that have shaped the nation's perspective on its government and politics. While each of these assassinations is not equally remembered today, all of them are informative.

The media coverage of the four successful assassinations in American history provides a window into how Americans have understood the past, present, and future of their nation and how that understanding has changed. Assassination is a traumatic event that constitutes a challenge to the nation's most cherished values, as well as its function and stability. As such, it has prompted Americans to reflect on their country's founding principles, its contemporary political affairs, and the historical significance of each assassination. These reflections reveal what ideas Americans have relied on in their darkest times and give us a fuller understanding of what political convictions our nation has valued throughout its history.

This thesis draws on several intersecting realms of scholarship. The first encompasses the research on each individual assassination. More books have been written about the presidencies of Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy than any others.<sup>1</sup> However, according to Edward Steers Jr., author of *Blood on the Moon: The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln*, despite the enormous amount of research on Lincoln, very little formal scholarship focuses on his assassination. Steers wrote *Blood on the Moon* to fill that void, discuss the Lincoln assassination in its historical context, and correct myths and misconceptions about the assassination. Most works on the Lincoln

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<sup>1</sup> John Robert Greene, “‘The Torch Has Been Passed to a New Generation’: The Myths of John F. Kennedy,” in *America in the Sixties* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2010), 39.

assassination similarly explore the motives behind it. In contrast to the Lincoln assassination, which according to Steers comprises only a minority of the scholarship on Lincoln, the Kennedy assassination dominates studies about Kennedy. Many of these works explore the causes of the Kennedy assassination. This includes Vincent Bugliosi's *Reclaiming History: The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy*, in which he describes the assassination in painstaking detail in an attempt to disprove any and all conspiracy theories.

Far fewer books have looked at the assassinations of James Garfield and William McKinley. These books, too, look at the causes and effects of the assassinations. In *Dark Horse: The Surprise Election and Political Murder of James A. Garfield*, Kenneth D. Ackerman explains how the Garfield assassination grew from the political context of time. About the McKinley assassination, Scott Miller wrote *The President and the Assassin: McKinley, Terror, and Empire at the Dawn of the American Century*, which discusses how both McKinley and his assassin believed they could change the world.

However, each of these works focuses only on a single assassination, whereas this thesis uses these works as background material on each event, but expands on them by taking a comparative approach that encompasses all four assassinations. Discussing all four exposes the parallels between them and, therefore, what can be claimed about assassination as a phenomenon in the United States.

This thesis also draws on work about political violence, that is, an act of violence used to achieve political ends. I am particularly interested in using political violence as a way to explore political culture. As Jennet Kirkpatrick explains, most Americans who engage in acts of political violence see themselves as supporters, not opponents, of the

American political tradition, often justifying their acts in terms of American political values like liberty and rights.<sup>2</sup> For that reason, she says, it is difficult to determine whether those who commit acts of political violence “are defenders of traditional political institutions or rebels who hope to undermine the established political order.”

Assassination, a form of political violence that involves the murder of a prominent political figure, has been used since the beginning of history. Because assassins often conflate their targets with the state that the target supposedly represents, they frequently have grievances with the state and not necessarily with the targeted person.<sup>3</sup> Given this, I am interested in what impact political violence has on a nation’s political culture.

A third area that this thesis draws on is scholarship about historical memory. In exploring how acts of violence influence (or do not influence) the way presidents are remembered, it uses the methodology of historical memory. This methodology asks how different actors contribute to the way that an event or person is remembered. It also asks how and why historical events are framed the way they are. In her book about Pearl Harbor, Emily S. Rosenberg says, “Memory is presented as an ever-changing process through which ‘realities’ are remembered and forgotten, meanings are produced and contested, values are professed and debated, and political positions are expressed and challenged.”<sup>4</sup> I take a similar approach in studying the legacies of assassinated presidents. I also draw on Iwona Irwin-Zarecka’s work on framing, which she describes as the process by which people manipulate a situation and arrange the facts to achieve a

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<sup>2</sup> Jennet Kirkpatrick, *Uncivil Disobedience: Studies in Violence and Democratic Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Lindsay Porter, *Assassination: A History of Political Murder* (New York: Overlook Press, 2010), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Emily S. Rosenberg, *A Date Which Will Live: Pearl Harbor in American Memory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 7.

particular result.<sup>5</sup> I use this to analyze the way each assassinated president is remembered today.

### *Sources*

For the purposes of this thesis, I have limited my source base to the *New York Times*, a daily newspaper published in New York City. The mass media is a valuable source because it both aggregates and influences public opinion. The media's primary role is to publish news stories that are "accessible to, and interesting for" as large and varied a public as possible. The media often generates interest in a news story by personalizing it: focusing on individuals and conducting interviews.<sup>6</sup> The media, especially the *New York Times*, is a particularly good window into the opinions of the establishment (those who hold the power in a society).<sup>7</sup> In addition to gathering a slice of the public opinion, the media also helps influence it to some extent. While theories differ on how effective the media is in shaping public opinion, some evidence suggests that the media does, in fact, affect it.<sup>8</sup>

The *New York Times*, in particular, is a useful media source for my project. It is a newspaper that was published during the time periods of all four successful presidential assassinations and continues to be published today. Also, it has historically been

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<sup>5</sup> Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1994), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, *The Interplay of Influence: News, Advertising, Politics, and the Mass Media*, 5th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2001), 41–42.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, *Interplay of Influence*, 106.

<sup>8</sup> Some theories suggest that people mindlessly absorb what the media tells them, while others propose that the media has a rather minimal effect, because people only take in ideas that corroborate their preconceived notions. See David L. Paletz, *The Media in American Politics: Contents and Consequences* (New York: Longman, 1991), 104–6, 139.

accessible to a significant number of Americans because it is published in New York, the nation's most populous city (a title that it has held since at least 1790 according to the United States Census Bureau). The *New York Times* also contains many types of sources: in addition to articles and editorials, it includes transcripts of government dispatches, speeches by important political figures, and sermons preached by religious leaders. It even includes articles and editorials from other newspapers of varying political perspectives from across the country and the world.

This thesis focuses on a subset of the articles covering each assassination. For each case, I examined articles from the week after the attempt on the president's life and the week after his death. I also studied a five-day span of articles at intervals of one month, three months, six months, and one year after the assassination. Finally, I read the coverage for five days after events related to the assassination that I deemed most important: for the Lincoln assassination, the death of John Wilkes Booth and the hanging of the Lincoln conspirators; for the Garfield assassination, the end of Charles Guiteau's trial and his execution; for the McKinley assassination, the end of Leon Czolgosz's trial and his execution; and for the Kennedy assassination, the death of Lee Harvey Oswald and the release of the report of the Warren Commission. I also looked at the coverage of each assassinated president between January 1, 2000 and March 15, 2012 to gauge how each president is talked about today.

### *The Four Assassinations*

At least eleven attempts on the lives of various presidents of the United States have occurred, however, only four have actually resulted in the death of the president.<sup>9</sup> The first American president to be assassinated was Abraham Lincoln, on April 14, 1865, while he was attending a play at Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C. The assassination occurred five days after Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrendered to Union General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox, effectively ending the Civil War. During the play, John Wilkes Booth, an actor from Maryland and a Confederate sympathizer, fatally shot Lincoln and then screamed, "Sic semper tyrannis," Latin for "Thus always to tyrants." The Lincoln assassination was part of a larger plot to kill Lincoln along with his vice president Andrew Johnson, and his secretary of state William Seward. Although the man assigned to kill Johnson failed to act, Seward sustained significant injuries from the attempt on his life. Booth originally escaped, but died on April 27 during a standoff with the federal soldiers who had hunted him down. Several of Booth's conspirators were hanged for their part in the plot.

James Garfield, the second American president to be assassinated, was standing on the platform at the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad Station in Washington, D.C., on July 2, 1881, about to leave for a summer vacation, when he was shot by a chronically unemployed man named Charles Guiteau. Guiteau, a delusional man who thought he

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<sup>9</sup> Material drawn from the following sources: Willard M. Oliver and Nancy E. Marion, *Killing the President: Assassinations, Attempts, and Rumored Attempts on U.S. Commanders-in-Chief* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010); Kenneth D. Ackerman, *Dark Horse: The Surprise Election and Political Murder of President James A. Garfield* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2003); Scott Miller, *The President and the Assassin: McKinley, Terror, and Empire at the Dawn of the American Century* (New York: Random House, 2011).

deserved a job as consul to Paris, had harassed Secretary of State James Blaine for months, until one day Blaine told Guiteau, “Never speak to me again on the subject of the Paris consulship.”<sup>10</sup> Around the same time, Senator Roscoe Conkling of New York, the leader of the Stalwart faction of the Republican Party, and his junior colleague Thomas Platt, resigned from the Senate in a well-publicized feud with President Garfield.

Guiteau, who considered himself a Stalwart, decided to “remove” Garfield to heal this rift in the Republican Party (with Garfield out of the way, his vice president Chester Arthur, a close friend of Conkling, would become president). Garfield survived the initial attack but succumbed to his wounds on September 19. Guiteau’s sanity was the subject of a lengthy trial, during which he was eventually declared to be sane and responsible for his crime; he was executed on June 30, 1882.

On September 6, 1901, William McKinley, the third American president to be assassinated, was greeting his fellow citizens at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, when a young man with a bandage wrapped around his hand extended his arm to shake hands with McKinley. The man was Leon Czolgosz, an anarchist, and the bandage was being used to conceal a pistol that he used to shoot McKinley. Although McKinley, like Garfield, initially survived, he died on September 14. Czolgosz was an outsider in anarchist circles and part of his motivation for killing McKinley was to impress prominent anarchists, including his hero, Emma Goldman, the famous agitator and activist. Czolgosz was convicted in a swift trial and executed on October 30, 1901.

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<sup>10</sup> It is highly debatable that Guiteau actually contributed in any way to Garfield’s election campaign. The closest he came was writing a speech in favor of Garfield, which he never delivered.

McKinley was only one in a series of world leaders to be assassinated by members of the growing anarchist movement around the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup>

John F. Kennedy was the fourth American president to be assassinated. The Kennedy assassination has been a magnet for conspiracy theories, but the known facts of the case are relatively simple. On November 22, 1963, Kennedy was shot by a sniper while traveling by motorcade to give a political speech in Dallas, Texas. Kennedy died within hours and never regained consciousness. Texas governor John Connally, who was in the car with Kennedy, was also injured, but survived. The police arrested Lee Harvey Oswald, a communist sympathizer, and charged him with killing Kennedy, which Oswald denied.<sup>12</sup> As Oswald was being transferred to the county jail on November 24, a nightclub owner named Jack Ruby shot him. Because many questions were raised about who was behind the assassination, Kennedy's successor, Lyndon Johnson, commissioned a bipartisan group led by Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Earl Warren to investigate the assassination. The Warren Commission report, which was released in September 1964, determined that Oswald had acted alone in killing Kennedy, and Ruby, acting alone, had killed Oswald.

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My discussion of presidential assassination focuses on three main themes—republicanism, blame, and legacy. I begin by investigating how Americans understood republicanism at the time of each incident of assassination and how this understanding

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<sup>11</sup> Other victims included President Marie-François-Sadi Carnot of France in 1894, Prime Minister Antonio Cánovas del Castillo of Spain in 1897, and King Umberto I of Italy in 1900.

<sup>12</sup> Oswald had defected to the Soviet Union in 1959 and defected back to the United States in 1962. Upon his return he was involved in a Pro-Cuba group.

changed over the years. In the act of, assassination one person ousts the popularly elected president, thereby invalidating the will of the people. Therefore, each assassination was an affront to the very idea of American republicanism and raised questions about the robustness and stability of the republic. As republicanism is an important part of the nation's political heritage, Americans' response to assassination demonstrated how they related to their political past.

Next, I explore the debates about who and what to blame for each assassination. These debates often mirrored the political fissures of the day and different groups tried to mobilize each assassination to achieve political ends. Therefore, this allows us to examine debates about what sort of political present some Americans wanted to actualize.

Finally, I look at how Americans imagined the place that each assassinated president would occupy in the history of their country and how these predictions have matched with reality. The legacies of the four assassinated presidents offer a glimpse at the degree of power that assassination ultimately has in shaping our national memory. By considering what Americans anticipated would go down in history, we can look at what they wanted to pass down for their political future. Overall, I use this thesis to examine the numerous ways presidential assassination can be used to investigate American political culture.

## Chapter One: “The Republic Lives”

When John Wilkes Booth killed Abraham Lincoln, the United States was not even a hundred years old. Americans saw this act of political violence as directed at the heart of their young nation—its republican government. Because the assassination undermined one of the country’s core values, it forced the American people to contemplate the underlying principles of their government.

Each of the three subsequent presidential assassinations similarly caused Americans to confront the meaning and potential fragility of republicanism. They worried about their republic’s ability to endure an assault that seemed to threaten the fundamental nature of their government. They also reevaluated what a republic was and questioned how theirs should function. The pervasive discussion about republicanism in the wake of each presidential assassination reveals the changing nature of the republic and the relationship that Americans have had with it.

Between the assassination of Lincoln in 1865 and that of John F. Kennedy nearly a century later, Americans came to see the perseverance of their republic as being dependent less on the people of the nation than on the country’s laws and governmental institutions. As the years passed, the presidency as an institution became more central and important to the republic, creating a sharper division between the president and the people who elected him. Although the people were once viewed as reigning supreme within the American republic, over time their role became seen as less important to the overall health of the government.

*The Most Unintelligible Word in the English Language:  
A Brief History of Republicanism in the United States*

America’s founders all supported the idea of a republican government, however, they disagreed over what this concept actually meant. As John Adams once said, “There is not a single more unintelligible word in the English language than republicanism.”<sup>1</sup>

The question of how to define republicanism shaped important events in early American history from the writing of the Constitution to the Civil War. Yet despite frequent debate about its nature, early Americans were in agreement that republicanism was among the nation’s most paramount virtues.

In *The Great Republic*, a 1977 American history textbook written by a group of eminent historians, Gordon Wood argues that in the early days of the nation American republicanism was a revolutionary concept. He explains,

This republicanism...meant more than simply eliminating a king and instituting an elective system of government. It added a moral and indeed utopian dimension to the political separation from England—a dimension that promised a fundamental shift in values and a change in the very character of American society.<sup>2</sup>

This society was grounded in the idea that a citizen’s status depended on his merits, replacing the British society, which was built on hierarchical relationships between individuals.<sup>3</sup> In short, this new republican society was founded on the idea of equality, albeit an equality that was generally limited to white propertied men. As the magazine *American Museum* described it in 1787, “[T]he idea of equality breathes through the

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<sup>1</sup> John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, 7 July 1807, as quoted in Jennifer R. Mercieca, *Founding Fictions* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 19.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Bailyn et al., *The Great Republic: A History of the American People* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1977), 290–91.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

whole and every individual feels ambitious to be in a position not inferior to his neighbour.”<sup>4</sup>

This radical new form of government required, even demanded, moral and virtuous citizens. Wood explains that because “[h]istory ha[d] shown republics to be the most unstable kind of state, vulnerable to foreign influences and highly susceptible to faction and internal disorder,” the preservation of liberty and the stability of the states rested on having such citizens.<sup>5</sup> Creating a government that embodied these ideals demanded more than just a representative democracy wherein the people elected government officials. Rather, Americans insisted that the people, not their representatives, be sovereign. Wood claims that “[i]n Britain the people were totally embodied in the House of Commons; this embodiment gave Parliament its sovereignty.”<sup>6</sup> But in America, such a system was not enough to ensure the protection of the people’s sovereignty; as Wood concludes,

[i]n America, unlike England, the people were everything; they embraced the whole government, and no branch or part, as the House of Commons did, could speak with the complete authority of the people. Indeed, not even all parts of the government as a whole could collectively incorporate the full powers of the people.

Therefore, Americans set about designing a government where the people were sovereign.

This idea was the foundation of America’s first governing document, the Articles of Confederation. Fearing a strong central government, Americans chose to create a

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Bailyn et al., *Great Republic*, 307.

<sup>5</sup> Bailyn et al., *Great Republic*, 294–95.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 318–19.

government without an executive position.<sup>7</sup> But in response to the weak and ineffective governing that ensued, a group of elite Americans soon decided that the Articles needed drastic revision. In spite of their fears, they chose to re-create the structure of their government by drafting the Constitution, which strengthened the government in many ways, including the creation of the office of the presidency. As the Constitution's framers contemplated a new governing document, the role of the president within the republic posed one of their greatest challenges because a president could easily become tyrannical and undermine republicanism. Despite the flaws in the Articles of Confederation, they still valued the idea of a republic—in fact, James Madison expressed the belief that the delegates at the 1787 Constitutional Convention “were now to decide the fate of republican government.”<sup>8</sup> Following the ratification of the Constitution, republicanism was permanently enshrined in the structure of American government. Although ideas about republicanism changed over time, it remained a concept that Americans held dear.

*“Presidents May Be Assassinated, But the People Cannot Be”*

The Lincoln assassination raised commentary about the health of the republic, as Americans questioned whether a republic could endure such an unprecedented challenge to its integrity. A republic operates by following the will of the people, but an assassin abrogates the will of the people by murdering the leader that they chose. However, many quickly concluded that Lincoln's assassination would not impede the functioning of the American government, because the people remained sovereign even if their leader had

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 302.

<sup>8</sup> Morton Keller, *America's Three Regimes: A New Political History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 37.

been killed. Reactions to the Lincoln assassination show that Americans had great faith in their republic because they believed it was the people who were in control.

Although Americans acknowledged that the Lincoln assassination might have constituted a risk to the stability of their government, many expressed confidence in the republic's power to endure. The Reverend J. R. W. Sloane of the Third Reformed Presbyterian Church in New York City gave a sermon less than a week after Lincoln's death, where he insisted, "Mr. Lincoln is gone, but blessed be God the republic lives...As citizens of this republic we have reason to rejoice that our lot is cast where such an event does not produce even a jar in the machinery of government."<sup>9</sup> Moses Taylor, a prominent banker, assessed the situation similarly, saying that the assassination had tested "the strength and stability of popular government," but that the American public "ha[d] been found equal to the emergency."<sup>10</sup> Others expressed similar views.<sup>11</sup>

This faith in the republic was not merely optimism or wishful thinking, but stemmed from the fact that Americans saw their government as a direct vessel for the will of the people. They did not simply believe that elected officials were chosen to represent the opinions of the people, but that they were implements acting on behalf of the people. That is, they thought that the personal beliefs of government officials mattered less than the desires of the people. After Lincoln's assassination people demonstrated their strong adherence to this belief. A *New York Times* article from April 16, 1865, remarked that under other forms of government, assassination "may overthrow governments and wrap a

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<sup>9</sup> "The National Mourning," *New York Times*, April 21, 1865 [ProQuest].

<sup>10</sup> "The Obsequies," *New York Times*, April 22, 1865 [ProQuest].

<sup>11</sup> "The National Calamity," *New York Times*, April 16, 1865 [ProQuest]; "Brooklyn," *New York Times*, April 18, 1865 [ProQuest].

continent in the flames of war.”<sup>12</sup> However, that was not the case in the United States because

here the people rule, and events inevitably follow the course which *they* prescribe. Abraham Lincoln has been their agent and instrument for the four years past; Andrew Johnson is to be their agent for the four years that are now to come. If the people have faith, courage, and wisdom, the result will be the same.

Accordingly, this article maintained that the people had a far greater influence on national affairs than did the president. As another article bluntly stated: “Presidents may be assassinated, but the people cannot be, and the people alone is the real sovereign.”<sup>13</sup>

Even though Americans downplayed the significance of the president, they did care which candidate was elected. Furthermore, they did not facily believe that once a president was elected he would necessarily represent their values. In fact, less than five years before Lincoln was assassinated, the very fact that he was elected president caused several states in the Lower South to secede.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, the American people truly did see themselves, not their government, as sovereign. As the *New York Times* stated on April 18, 1865, “The people may value one man above another for a public servant, but they consider the services of none as *vitally* essential. The fate of the country they know rests with themselves alone.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, to Americans living in 1865, this manifestation of republicanism was not just an abstract political theory, but a concrete and present reality.

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<sup>12</sup> “The Murder of President Lincoln,” *New York Times*, April 16, 1865 [ProQuest].

<sup>13</sup> “Public Confidence Unshaken—Another Lesson to Europe,” *New York Times*, April 18, 1865 [ProQuest].

<sup>14</sup> Louis Masur, *The Civil War: A Concise History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 19.

<sup>15</sup> “Public Confidence Unshaken—Another Lesson to Europe.”

“A Bitter Satire on Our Political Institutions”

Given that the republic had already survived the Lincoln assassination, it seems logical that people would trust in the republic’s ability to maintain itself after the Garfield assassination. After all, the Lincoln assassination had occurred right after the end of the Civil War, a particularly unstable period in the nation’s history. Certainly, many did have faith in the government’s stability. On the day after Garfield was shot, the *New York Times* reported, “On the whole...great confidence was displayed in the innate strength of our popular institutions”; and the *Philadelphia Press* concurred: “The country stands with bated breath to-day...not paralyzed, not trembling, not surrendering our trust or hope, not doubtful that our institutions are equal to the severest strain.”<sup>16</sup>

However, despite the general faith in the government’s endurance, several people expressed their doubts about the republic’s survival. Among these was Thurlow Weed, an editor and a prominent member of the New York political community.<sup>17</sup> The *New York Times* reported that Weed “trembled for the future of the country.”<sup>18</sup> Weed contended that

[t]his was a popular Government depending on popular sentiment. But the people were drifting away from the sentiments on which the Government was founded, and, in the absence of these sentiments, the Republic seemed to be in actual danger.

When questioned, Weed refused to elaborate on what those dangers might be.

Some people even argued that the Garfield assassination was more dangerous to the future of the republic precisely because it happened during a period of peace and prosperity whereas the Lincoln assassination had happened in such a chaotic time.

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<sup>16</sup> “The News in This City,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1881 [ProQuest]; Quoted in “Comments of the Press,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1881 [ProQuest].

<sup>17</sup> *American National Biography Online*, s.v. “Weed, Thurlow,” by Phyllis F. Field, accessed April 19, 2012, <http://www.anb.org/articles/04/04-01194.html>.

<sup>18</sup> “Talks with Prominent Men,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1881 [ProQuest].

Richard W. Thompson, secretary of the navy under former president Rutherford B. Hayes, plainly said, “Assassination in a time of peace is worse than assassination in a time of war.”<sup>19</sup> Thompson suggested that in the context of the Civil War, the Lincoln assassination had added little to the overall turmoil of the country. The Garfield assassination, coming at a time of peace, had shocked an otherwise steady society. Thompson continued, “[The assassination of Garfield] was the most severe attack that could have been made on our Government and institutions, and if we can successfully live through the strain it will show the solidity and permanency of our institutions.” Thompson’s use of the word “if” suggests that he believed there was a possibility (however small) that the republic would not be able to withstand the menace of Garfield’s assassination.

Thompson was not alone in making this argument. An article in the *Baltimore American* claimed, “The assassination of President Garfield is the most serious calamity that has befallen the country since the birth of the Republic.”<sup>20</sup> Continuing, it claimed that the Lincoln assassination was “plainly traceable to the malignant influence of the rebellion.” But the Garfield assassination occurred at a time of peace and prosperity and at a time when “the loyalty of the South ha[d] ceased to be a cause of apprehension.” Essentially, the *Baltimore American* was able to explain away the Lincoln assassination as an effect of the Civil War, but found it far harder to dismiss Garfield’s assassination. Because there was no convenient way to explain away the Garfield assassination, the paper concluded that it was “a blow struck at the very life of republican institutions.”

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<sup>19</sup> “At the Fifth-Avenue Hotel,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1881 [ProQuest].

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in “Comments of the Press.”

Another possible explanation for why Americans were more worried about the stability of the republic after the assassination of Garfield than after that of Lincoln was their distrust of vice president Chester Arthur. Their skepticism was due to Arthur's close relationship with Roscoe Conkling.<sup>21</sup> During the three months that Garfield spent on what would become his deathbed, many people expressed their worry that Arthur was on the verge of the presidency. The *New York Times* described a crowd as "trembl[ing] with fear of the shame that may be ours if Gen. Arthur shall become the President."<sup>22</sup> This contrasted with the attitude that many people had about Andrew Johnson immediately after the Lincoln assassination. Moses H. Grinnell, a former congressman from New York, declared the day following the assassination that Johnson was "a jewel whose worth could not be overestimated."<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the tumultuous situation in the Republican Party may have played a role in Americans' doubts about the stability of the republic following the assassination of Garfield.

Also after the Garfield assassination, the *New York Times* published fewer references to the government being under the direct control of the people. Although this may be due partially to Americans' decreased confidence in the republic's stability, it may also be because Americans had begun to see the republic as less dependent on the people and more dependent on the country's political institutions. However, the idea that the republic depended on the people had not disappeared completely. Edwin Atkins Merritt, the former collector of the Port of New York, announced his belief that great

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<sup>21</sup> The assassin, Charles Guiteau, made it known that because his action was partially inspired by Conkling's resignation from the Senate, it was his goal for Arthur to become president.

<sup>22</sup> "Seeking the Latest News," *New York Times*, July 4, 1881 [ProQuest].

<sup>23</sup> "The National Calamity," *New York Times*, April 16, 1865 [ProQuest].

political upheaval would ensue if Arthur were to become president and that he would undo everything that Garfield had accomplished (he did not specify, however, what exactly Garfield did that was so significant during his less than four months in office). But Merritt was not particularly worried because “in all great emergencies in our history the people could be depended on as the great source of national strength and safety.”<sup>24</sup>

An indirect measure of how Americans understood republicanism can be found in their views about presidential protection. In contrast to European monarchs, early American presidents walked around without a security detail. This was a deliberate statement of republicanism because it implied both that the president was not seen as being above the rest of the nation and that he was available to those he represented, not guarded from them. Americans were proud that their president walked around unguarded. Scholar Richard J. Ellis writes, “Protecting the president could not be done without relinquishing a cherished part of the story Americans liked to tell each other about the exceptional nature of their republican experiment.”<sup>25</sup>

Some early American presidents did receive protection, but it was erratic and often on a voluntary basis.<sup>26</sup> What is important to note is that although some presidents did hire private security or had guards who volunteered to protect them, the government did not mandate presidential protection and thus it did not represent how the nation as a whole resolved to treat its head of state. This was still the case when Lincoln became president. As Lincoln himself said, “It would never do for a President to have guards with

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<sup>24</sup> “In Official Circles,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1881 [ProQuest].

<sup>25</sup> Richard J. Ellis, “Protecting the President,” in *Presidential Travel: The Journey from George Washington to George W. Bush* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2008), 103.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

drawn sabres at his door, as if he fancied he were, or were trying to be...an emperor.”<sup>27</sup>

Even after Lincoln’s assassination, Americans viewed protecting the president as thoroughly unrepugnant and American presidents continued to walk around unguarded.

Garfield’s assassination caused Americans to reconsider their position on presidential protection. Some remained vehemently against the idea of protecting the president. A *New York Times* article published after the assassination responded to suggestions that the nation change its “simple republican habits” by “surround[ing the president] with such safeguards as crowned heads in the Old World monarchies find necessary for their protection.”<sup>28</sup> The article continues:

It is certainly a bitter satire on our political institutions and a terrible rebuke to our boastings that two of our Presidents have been shot down, for all the world as if they had been iron-handed rulers in autocratic Russia or illiberal Germany, instead of wise and humane ministers of the people’s will in this free Republic.

The article, while acknowledging the tragedy that two American presidents had been assassinated, considered the idea of providing the president with security measures to be an affront to the ideals of republicanism on which the country was founded. Being true to the republican ideals that elevated the people above institutions meant that separating and guarding the president from the people represented an intolerable hypocrisy.

Others, however, began to express their disappointment that presidents were not adequately guarded from danger. The *New York Times* quoted one man as commenting, “After this, Presidents ought to protect themselves. They ought never to appear in a public place without men to watch over and guard them. It is a sad state of affairs when

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Ellis, *Presidential Travel*, 106.

<sup>28</sup> “A Lesson,” *New York Times*, July 4, 1881 [ProQuest].

the President of this country can be shot down like a dog in the street.”<sup>29</sup> The viewpoint that the president should have guards shows that beliefs about the role of the president in a republic were beginning to change. It made the president a person who deserved a higher level of protection than other citizens of the republic and began to devalue the role that the people had in sustaining the republic.

*“A Lesson among the Saddest of Those We Have to Learn”*

This shift to seeing the republic as dependent on the institutions rather than on the people became more evident after William McKinley’s assassination. As the usual questions about the stability of the republic came up, those who were confident in the republic tended to place their confidence in the institutions rather than the people. Additionally, the idea that the president was above the people and therefore worthy of protection gained ascendancy over the view that the president should be accessible to his constituents, as demonstrated when, following McKinley’s assassination, the Secret Service was officially charged with the job of protecting the president. While some rhetoric about the people’s sovereignty remained, its popularity was in decline.

Although the republic had now successfully survived two assassinations, some Americans again expressed their worry that the republic would not be able to overcome the shock of assassination following McKinley’s shooting. Ex-postmaster Charles W. Dayton commented that since the time of Lincoln, a president of the United States had been assassinated approximately every twenty years. He added, “The acts of

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<sup>29</sup> “At the Fifth-Avenue Hotel.”

assassination are all the more alarming because they have occurred under a democratic form of government. It is enough to make a man tremble for the future of the country.”<sup>30</sup>

Some of those who contended that the nation had nothing to worry about did continue to have faith that it was the people who supported and secured the republic’s survival. The Reverend Dr. D. M. Wilson of Unity Congregation Church in Brooklyn said, “We, the people, are sovereigns. We make our Presidents and we unmake them. They are our representatives.”<sup>31</sup> William Jennings Bryan, McKinley’s Democratic opponent in the 1896 and 1900 presidential elections, explained, “Under a Government like ours, every wrong can be remedied by laws, and laws are in the hands of the people themselves.”<sup>32</sup>

However, more and more Americans had begun placing their confidence in the institutions of the republic rather than with the people. The Reverend Dr. R. S. MacArthur of Cavalry Baptist Church claimed that it was the “machinery of Government” that was “equal to the strain of this terrible assassination.”<sup>33</sup> After McKinley died, the *New York Times* claimed, “There is no apprehension for the future, no thought about the National security and welfare, which are known to be assured by the character of our institutions,” and “The Constitution of this country...safeguards National interests.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> “Grief and Anger Stir Leading Men,” *New York Times*, September 7, 1901 [ProQuest].

<sup>31</sup> “New York Churches Pray for Mr. McKinley,” *New York Times*, September 9, 1901 [ProQuest].

<sup>32</sup> “W. J. Bryan on Anarchy,” *New York Times*, September 10, 1901 [ProQuest].

<sup>33</sup> “Scenes of Mourning in City Churches,” *New York Times*, September 16, 1901 [ProQuest].

<sup>34</sup> “The President and the People,” *New York Times*, September 15, 1901 [ProQuest]; “Standing Another Test,” *New York Times*, September 14, 1901 [ProQuest].

In the wake of McKinley's assassination, the debate about presidential protection again reflected changing ideas about republicanism. Some maintained that a presidential security detail was a measure that had no place in a republic, because it served to separate a leader from the people and place him above them. Cardinal James Gibbons, the archbishop of Baltimore, objected to presidential guards, saying that they were not a foolproof way of protecting a president from assassination but would certainly be a step away from the nation's republican ideals.<sup>35</sup> He said, "[L]et the President continue to move among his people and take them by the hand. The strongest shield of our Chief Magistrate is the love and devotion of his fellow citizens." Gibbons's words also show that he did not see the president's place as higher than the rest of the population, but instead as one citizen among his fellows.

However, by 1901 many Americans had come to the conclusion that protecting their president took precedence over maintaining pure republican ideals. George W. Wanamaker, the deputy appraiser at the Port of New York, described this newfound valuing of pragmatism over ideological purity. He said, "We are supposed to be a free people with very democratic ideas, but it is about time that additional safeguards were thrown about our Chief Magistrates."<sup>36</sup>

Others gave explanations as to why their ideas about presidential protection were changing. The Reverend Dr. Charles H. Parkhurst of the Madison Square Presbyterian Church claimed that Americans should stop asking their presidents to open themselves to danger. He acknowledged the value and power of the republican ideals that had left

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<sup>35</sup> *American National Biography Online*, s.v. "Gibbons, James," by Thomas W. Spalding, accessed April 19, 2012, <http://www.anb.org/articles/08/08-00538.html>; "Cardinal Gibbons Praises Mr. McKinley," *New York Times*, September 20, 1901 [ProQuest].

<sup>36</sup> "Grief and Anger Stir Leading Men," *New York Times*, September 7, 1901 [ProQuest].

American presidents unguarded from danger, saying that providing protection for their presidents was “a lesson among the saddest of those [the American people] have to learn, and we shall learn it with greatest reluctance.”<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, he believed that three dead presidents in one generation was “too great a sacrifice for the blessings of familiar intercourse between the President and the people.” What had once been considered a key and necessary aspect of republicanism was now considered ideal but not practical. Magistrate John B. Mayo of New York opined that the life of the president was more important than that of the average citizen, another thought representative of shifting national ideals. He said, “It is certainly a more serious crime to attempt to take the life of the President than that of an ordinary citizen, and our laws in this respect should be amended.”<sup>38</sup>

Although McKinley did have guards for protection, the government did not officially provide them for him.<sup>39</sup> However, after McKinley’s assassination, the public clamored to provide the president with federally sanctioned guards. Samuel J. Barrow, who represented the United States on the International Prison Commission, summed up the new ways that America thought about its republic. He proposed a law that would punish attacks on the president or on the authority of government.<sup>40</sup> This law represented a changed understanding of the republic. Noting that such a law would not be an effective deterrent against those who wished the president or the government harm, he said it was valuable nevertheless because it “would express a National conviction [rather] than

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<sup>37</sup> “Dr. Parkhurst Preaches on Anarchy,” *New York Times*, September 30, 1901 [ProQuest].

<sup>38</sup> “Judges’ View of Anarchists,” *New York Times*, September 8, 1901 [ProQuest].

<sup>39</sup> Ellis, *Presidential Travel*, 110–11.

<sup>40</sup> Samuel J. Barrow, “The Proposed United States Penal Code,” *New York Times*, November 3, 1901 [ProQuest].

constitute a National defense.” This new national conviction was “that a republic may be capable of reverence for personalized authority.” This constituted a definitive change in the idea of what a republic was.

This change in presidential protection was put into practice immediately after Theodore Roosevelt became president. A *New York Times* article noted, “An escort of twelve mounted patrolmen and service detectives waited there. The authorities felt that they could not take too much care in guarding the man who was to take the place of the martyred McKinley.”<sup>41</sup> After the McKinley assassination, the government chose to assign to the Secret Service the job of protecting the president.<sup>42</sup> The country had finally come to the conclusion that “the person of the Chief Magistrate must be shielded against all avoidable risks.”<sup>43</sup>

*“The Strength of Our Government of Law, Not Men...”*

By the time President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, nearly all the *New York Times*’s references to the republic’s stability implied that it hinged on the country’s political institutions, not its people. These institutions were laws and political offices (that is, the stature of the office itself, not the person who held it). A *New York Times* editorial published the day after Kennedy’s assassination stated that “the strength of our Government of law, not men, insures that no assassin’s act can overturn the institutions of the United States... The life of this old but youthful Union continues because of men like John F. Kennedy—and also because of the laws governing our

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<sup>41</sup> “Mr. Roosevelt Is Now the President,” *New York Times*, September 15, 1901 [ProQuest].

<sup>42</sup> Willard M. Oliver and Nancy E. Marion, *Killing the President: Assassinations, Attempts, and Rumored Attempts on U.S. Commanders-in-Chief* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), 67.

<sup>43</sup> “The President’s Peril,” *New York Times*, September 4, 1902 [ProQuest].

Republic.”<sup>44</sup> It was no longer the people who sustained the republic, but instead it was laws and great men who kept the country going.

This shift in the conception of the republic went largely unchallenged, although one of the most prominent voices against it had been that of Kennedy himself. After the assassination, the fact emerged that Kennedy, at his own request, had not been as well protected as he could have been. Those close to him explained that “[a]s President, he was also the leader of the non-Communist world. He considered it important to appear to the world as a free man among free men.”<sup>45</sup> Kennedy believed that going out in public with minimal protection was the best way “to demonstrate the difference between a free and open society and a police state.”

Kennedy’s reasoning for declining protection echoes arguments that earlier Americans made about the differences between a republic and a monarchy. In a republic, the president was merely one of the people and therefore had nothing to fear from them. This took on a particularly important meaning during the Cold War, when the United States saw the fact that it was a republic as one of its key advantages over and contrast to the dictatorships of the Soviet Bloc. A *New York Times* editorial claimed, “Other heads of government—even Khrushchev and Castro—expose themselves freely to their countrymen. No American President could do less.”<sup>46</sup> Since a leader moving among his people freely was a marker of republicanism, some Americans resisted the idea of presidential protection because even communist leaders moved freely among their people.

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<sup>44</sup> ““This Old But Youthful Union,”” *New York Times*, November 23, 1963 [ProQuest].

<sup>45</sup> Felix Belair Jr., “Secret Service Faces Changes in Its Procedures as a Result of the Assassination,” *New York Times*, November 23, 1963 [ProQuest].

<sup>46</sup> “The President’s Security,” *New York Times*, November 25, 1963 [ProQuest].

However, overall, the elevation of the presidency and the decline of the people had taken root. Following the Kennedy assassination, J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, recommended “that the President limit his public appearances by using television whenever possible and that he ‘avoid walking in public except when absolutely necessary.’”<sup>47</sup> The *San Francisco Chronicle* surmised that “the American people must feel troubled and ashamed that in this 176th year of their democracy they still have not learned to protect the life and safety of their highest servant.”<sup>48</sup> The idea that the president deserved protection because he was on a higher plane than the rest of the population had become mainstream.

The conception of a republic had fundamentally changed. As journalist Tom Wicker said, “national life—the basic expression of what John F. Kennedy loved to call ‘the great republic’—has become centralized and symbolized in the White House and the man who lives there.”<sup>49</sup> The idea expressed by Wicker that the nation had become centralized in the presidency refers to the presidency as an institution, not any specific occupant. The American republic had traded in the power of the people for the power of the presidency, the wisdom of the people for the steadfastness of laws.

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<sup>47</sup> Felix Belair Jr., “Kennedy Barred Car-Step Guards,” *New York Times*, November 24, 1964 [ProQuest].

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in “Opinion of the Week: At Home and Abroad,” *New York Times*, November 24, 1963 [ProQuest].

<sup>49</sup> Tom Wicker, “The Presidency: Johnson and Kennedy Compared,” *New York Times*, November 24, 1963 [ProQuest].

## Chapter Two: Framing Blame

Faced with the trauma of assassination, Americans sought to find someone or something to blame for what had happened. The debate about who or what to blame reflected the political rifts of the day. On occasion, people argued that the assassin was insane and therefore the act had no political significance. However, far more often, people sought to frame each assassination such that they could use it to achieve particular political ends. Sometimes, when these political ends were defined narrowly enough and enough consensus existed about the framing, this mobilization resulted in concrete political reforms. When the framing was more amorphous, however, it effected no real political change. Thus, the societal impact of each assassination can be better understood by looking at how people chose to frame it, how easily the predominating narrative about each assassination translated into political reform, and how popular the proposed political change was.

### *“The Legitimate Crowning of a Whole System of Crimes and Atrocities”*

In certain ways, the debate about who or what to blame that followed the assassination of Abraham Lincoln was an exception to the pattern that emerged after every other assassination, whereby the tragedy was framed to gain political ends. As in the other cases, the debate about who to blame did reflect one of the major political rifts of the day, that between the North and South over the validity of the slave system. Most Northerners blamed slavery for Lincoln’s death, but because slavery was essentially gone by the time of Lincoln’s assassination, there was no point to a widespread call for its abolition. Some Americans contended that the Lincoln assassination was the result of the still-present anti-Lincoln rhetoric espoused by Lincoln’s political enemies in both the

North and the South and called for the end of language that painted a President of the United States in such a negative light. However, locating the assassination's cause in anti-Lincoln rhetoric was neither easily translatable into a specific political action nor widely supported. For that reason, the Lincoln assassination was not successfully mobilized at the time to serve some larger political cause.

Long before Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, many Northerners saw slavery as a societal ill; however, the Civil War at its genesis was a more nuanced conflict than one just about black-chattel slavery. By 1860, an irreconcilable divide had grown between Northern and Southern society: what one section of the country needed to survive and thrive economically was completely incompatible with what the other section needed. However, by the time Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, and certainly by the end of the conflict, the ultimate goal of the war, from the Northern perspective, was the abolition of slavery.

Nonetheless, many Northerners believed that before slavery could be fully eradicated from American society, the system had claimed one final victim—President Abraham Lincoln. Even before an assassin could be identified, many people assumed that whoever had killed Lincoln must be a Southern rebel.<sup>1</sup> James Garfield (at the time a little-known Ohio congressman) expressed the beliefs of many when he said that what had killed Lincoln was not a single person but “the embodied spirit of treason and Slavery, concentrated into fearful hate, that struck him down in the supreme hour of the nation’s joy.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Another Account,” *New York Times*, April 15, 1865 [ProQuest].

<sup>2</sup> “Thirty-Ninth Congress,” *New York Times*, April 15, 1866 [ProQuest].

Some saw the Lincoln assassination as the culmination of the goals of the Confederacy and of the entire slave system. A *New York Times* editorial called Lincoln's death "the legitimate crowning of a whole system of crimes and atrocities."<sup>3</sup> United States District Attorney Daniel S. Dickinson agreed with this sentiment, adding, "We had expected that slavery would have died quietly, unhonored, and unsung, but it seems it preferred to go down guilty and bloody, with the life of a good man upon its hands."<sup>4</sup> But, as everybody knew, slavery was already on its way out; there was nothing more to be done to get rid of it. Additionally, nobody used Lincoln's death to rally for a particular kind of post-slavery society, for example a society where whites and blacks were truly equal. This may be in part because Lincoln himself never definitively articulated what type of post-slavery society he hoped for. Therefore, framing the assassination in terms of slavery did not produce any direct political mobilization or action.

While many Northerners believed that slavery was the ultimate cause of the Lincoln assassination, some believed that speech that disparaged Lincoln was another, more proximate cause. As a firmly Republican organ, the *New York Times* published an editorial accusing their Democratic competitors of sharing some of the guilt for the assassination. It explained that what had motivated John Wilkes Booth's deed was the belief that Lincoln was a tyrant. "Whence came this idea?" the editorial asked.<sup>5</sup>

Did he evolve it from his own broodings, or was it given to him? We cannot tell; but this we know, that it was an idea which very many of the Democratic presses of the North have sought to make current. They have countless times, during the last four years, applied to President Lincoln the very words *tyrant* and *oppressor*.

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<sup>3</sup> "The Assassination and the Rebellion," *New York Times*, April 20, 1865 [ProQuest].

<sup>4</sup> "The National Calamity," *New York Times*, April 16, 1865 [ProQuest].

<sup>5</sup> "License of Speech and Assassination," *New York Times*, April 21, 1865 [ProQuest].

It then accused journalists who worked for Democratic papers of using irresponsible and inflammatory language, saying, “They must have known that no President of the United States...could deliberately seek to destroy his country,” which suggests that the *Times* believed the Democratic papers were printing sentiments that they knew were untrue and exaggerated.

The editorial ended by suggesting that such rhetoric be considered criminal: “If violence upon the President is a crime, so is, in some measure, the use of language that may impel to it either the weak-headed or the bad-hearted.”<sup>6</sup> The *New York Times* was not alone in this outlook. The Reverend Dr. Samuel H. Tyng of Saint George’s Church on Stuyvesant Square said that those “whose words and avowals have often before encouraged and incited [the Lincoln assassination], should be held responsible for it.”<sup>7</sup> Tyng continued that the government should exact “a clear and distinct retribution upon the guilty inditers [*sic*] and accessories in such a crime.” However, it is difficult to regulate rhetoric, so the political action suggested to combat vehement rhetoric against the president was very vague; hence, nothing actually came of it.

*“The Spoils System Was Killed by Guiteau’s Bullets”*

After he was shot by Charles Guiteau, Garfield discussed what had happened with his secretary of state, James Blaine.

[Garfield asked,] “Blaine, what motive do you think that man could have had in trying to assassinate me?” To which Mr. Blaine replied: “I do not know Mr. President. He says he had no motive. He must be insane.” To this the President smilingly answered: “I suppose he thought it would be a glorious thing to emulate a pirate chief.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> “License of Speech and Assassination.”

<sup>7</sup> “The National Mourning,” *New York Times*, April 21, 1865 [ProQuest].

<sup>8</sup> “A Great Nation in Grief,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1881 [ProQuest].

Although Garfield's explanation of his assassin's motivations was no more than an attempt to be lighthearted in the face of the very serious threat to his life, it hints at the dilemma Americans faced in trying to frame the Garfield assassination. Some did claim that Charles Guiteau had shot Garfield because he was insane and that therefore the act had no political significance. However, others asserted that Guiteau had committed the act because he was a disappointed office seeker, spurred on by the corrupt patronage system, and hence there was a need for civil service reform.<sup>9</sup>

This question of whether Guiteau was insane or a disappointed office-seeker was the subject of a lengthy trial.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, Guiteau was declared sane and therefore responsible for his act, and advocates of civil service reform took this as an opportunity to mobilize for their cause and quickly succeeded in achieving their goals.

Immediately following the assassination, many people, including those who knew Guiteau personally, insisted that he was insane. Guiteau's brother-in-law George Scoville maintained that Guiteau had a history of insanity; he said that many physicians had analyzed Guiteau and pronounced him insane, including "a physician in Wisconsin who made a special study of insanity."<sup>11</sup> Many took Guiteau's supposed insanity to mean that the assassination had no political implications. The *Philadelphia Press* said, "This crime...is the deed of one maddened fanatic...representing nothing but his own

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<sup>9</sup> Civil service reform was a move to give non-elected government positions to the applicant with the most merit, as opposed to applicant that was most loyal to the party.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth D. Ackerman, *Dark Horse: The Surprise Election and Political Murder of President James A. Garfield* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2003), 443–44.

<sup>11</sup> Scoville later acted as Guiteau's defense attorney during his trial and mounted an insanity defense. See Ackerman, *Dark Horse*, 443–44; "The Assassin," *The New York Times*, July 4, 1881 [ProQuest].

insanity.”<sup>12</sup> At the Army and Navy Club in New York City, Colonel C. Triechel observed that “[t]he murder was probably the act of one insane man, who had been brooding over what he supposed were his own political wrongs, and there was no political significance in the matter at all.”<sup>13</sup>

Despite the evidence that Guiteau was insane, the prevailing frame for the Garfield assassination was that the patronage system was to blame. The *Portland Adviser* declared, “The spoils system is directly responsible for the infamous outrage. It was because the appointing power is now vested in the arbitrary will of a President that Guiteau’s malevolence was directed towards Garfield.”<sup>14</sup> The viewpoint that Guiteau was not insane comforted some because they saw it as imbuing the assassination with a larger meaning. The *Springfield Republican* said, “[L]et us rejoice that his death means something. The assassination of President Garfield by a disappointed office-seeker is the consummation of the spoils system.”

The determination that the patronage system was responsible for what had happened was quickly followed by calls for civil service reform. The Executive Committee of the Board of Trade and Transportation in New York City resolved that “even in the absence of other reasons, [the attack on Garfield] should be sufficient to commend to the adoption of a true civil service system.”<sup>15</sup> The committee insisted that a civil service system would not only protect future presidents from the wrath of disappointed office seekers, but would also lead to a more efficient government. Emory A. Storrs, a prominent Republican orator from Chicago, said, “Admonished by a terrible

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in “Comments of the Press,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1881 [ProQuest].

<sup>13</sup> “At the Clubs,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1881 [ProQuest].

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in “Opinions of the Press,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1881 [ProQuest].

<sup>15</sup> “Make It a Treasonable Crime,” *New York Times*, July 8, 1881 [ProQuest].

calamity...every man knows that in some practical, substantial way or other our civil service must be improved, and that in it there must be wrought some substantial changes.”<sup>16</sup> Many others echoed these sentiments and used the Garfield assassination as a clarion call for civil service reform.<sup>17</sup>

Sufficient consensus existed that the spoils system was to blame for the Garfield assassination and reform efforts quickly succeeded. As early as January 1882, the *New York Times* reported that “[a] resolute and practical effort is being made to remove this evil” because “[w]hatever may have been the mixed motives of Guiteau, the lamented Garfield would have been safe from his hatred had there been no such thing as ‘patronage.’”<sup>18</sup> On January 16, 1883, these reform efforts were realized with the passage of the Pendleton Civil Service Act, signed into law by President Chester Arthur.<sup>19</sup> Supporters of civil service reform had successfully used the Garfield assassination to achieve their political goal. Effectively, “[t]he spoils system was killed by Guiteau’s bullets.”<sup>20</sup>

*“A Law Should Be Passed Suppressing the Anarchists”*

Following the McKinley assassination another debate ensued about who or what to blame for the murder of the president. Before he was executed, Leon Czolgosz announced, “I killed the President because he was an enemy of the good people—of the

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<sup>16</sup> “A Wise Administration,” *New York Times*, August 4, 1881 [ProQuest].

<sup>17</sup> “Brooklyn Much Disturbed,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1881 [ProQuest]; “The Assassination,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1881, [ProQuest]; “Massachusetts Universalists,” *New York Times*, September 30, 1881 [ProQuest].

<sup>18</sup> “Hints for the Coming Year,” *New York Times*, January 1, 1882 [ProQuest].

<sup>19</sup> Ackerman, *Dark Horse*, 437.

<sup>20</sup> “Political Assassination,” *New York Times*, July 6, 1881 [ProQuest].

working people.”<sup>21</sup> Czolgosz clearly thought that there was something terribly wrong with American society. He believed the working class had a raw deal and that the government was actively exploiting them. However, the American people overwhelmingly viewed the assassination not as the failure of the government to take care of the working poor, but as the blight of anarchy unleashing its terror on the United States. This framing of the assassination led to a decisive political reaction, namely that of banning anarchists from entering the United States.

Initially, some people advanced the claim that Czolgosz was insane because there was no plausible motive, claiming therefore that the McKinley assassination was devoid of political significance. Former president Grover Cleveland remarked, “I cannot conceive of a motive. It must have been the act of a crazy man.”<sup>22</sup> Others agreed with this assessment, but many disputed it. Even those who believed that Czolgosz was insane still thought that he should be punished for his crime. E. F. C. Young, president of the First National Bank in Jersey City, New Jersey, said, “I can conceive of no reason for [Czolgosz’s] attempt except that he is insane, but even that should not shield him from punishment.”<sup>23</sup> Robert Davis, a leader of the Democratic Party from Jersey City, presumed that Czolgosz was insane but felt that “if he is sane enough to assassinate the President he is sane enough to hang for his crime.” Within a matter of days after the

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<sup>21</sup> “Assassin Czolgosz Is Executed at Auburn,” *New York Times*, October 30, 1901 [ProQuest].

<sup>22</sup> “Mr. Cleveland Horrified,” *New York Times*, September 7, 1901 [ProQuest].

<sup>23</sup> “Robert Davis Dies after Long Illness,” *New York Times*, January 10, 1911 [ProQuest]; “Feeling in Jersey City,” *New York Times*, September 7, 1901 [ProQuest].

assassination, doctors declared Czolgosz to be completely sane, which essentially ended the debate about Czolgosz's sanity until historians reexamined the issue later.<sup>24</sup>

After physicians established that Czolgosz was in fact sane, blaming anarchists for the assassination became the mainstream narrative. Henry C. Payne, a member of the Republican National Committee and a close friend of McKinley, explained that the assassination was the “carrying out...of a general plan upon the part of the Anarchists to kill the rulers of the leading nations of the earth.”<sup>25</sup> Although Czolgosz repeatedly insisted that he had planned and carried out the assassination alone, anarchists, as a group, were blamed for the crime.<sup>26</sup> Following the assassination, the Chicago police arrested several prominent anarchists, including Emma Goldman, who had given a speech that Czolgosz had pointed to as his inspiration.<sup>27</sup> Most Americans believed that it was anarchism as a philosophy—not just Leon Czolgosz, an individual who happened to be an anarchist—that killed William McKinley.

A few, however, thought this backlash against anarchism in the wake of the assassination was misguided, in that it did not address the real issue at hand, which they took to be poverty. Among this small number was the Reverend Father Ducey of St. Leo's Church in New York City. Ducey preached that the assassination “was but an evil manifestation of terrible social conditions. More than a million people of this city are obliged to live in foul tenements, and 10 per cent of this number yearly go to nameless

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<sup>24</sup> “Physicians Declare That Czolgosz Is Sane,” *New York Times*, September 10, 1901 [ProQuest].

<sup>25</sup> “Part of Anarchist Scheme,” *New York Times*, September 7, 1901 [ProQuest].

<sup>26</sup> “*New York Times*, September 8, 1901, front page [ProQuest].

<sup>27</sup> “Emma Goldman Is Arrested in Chicago,” *New York Times*, September 9, 1901 [ProQuest]; Scott Miller, *The President and the Assassin: McKinley, Terror, and Empire at the Dawn of the American Century* (New York: Random House, 2011), 297.

graves.”<sup>28</sup> Like Czolgosz, Ducey decried the living conditions of the country’s working poor and wanted change, but unlike Czolgosz, he believed that the way to deal with immense poverty was through charitable work, not assassination. He said, “These conditions cannot be corrected by violence and hatred, but rather by practical evidences of the brotherhood of man.” Although Ducey’s framing of the McKinley assassination revealed an important societal problem of the turn-of-the-century United States, calls for a change in the condition of the working class were rare.

Far more common were appeals for retaliatory measures against anarchists. Senator Thomas Platt of New York immediately suggested, “A law should be passed suppressing the Anarchists,” though he added that he was not entirely certain what such a law should entail.<sup>29</sup> Rabbi Joseph Silverman of Temple Emanu-El in New York City told his congregation that Americans must come together to “drive every Anarchist...from our shores. Let America be the first to declare that this country is no place for Anarchism and will not furnish the adherents of its principles with a habitation or refuge.”<sup>30</sup> Numerous other political and religious leaders proposed the passing of laws to suppress anarchists.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> “Scenes of Mourning in City Churches,” September 16, 1901 [ProQuest].

<sup>29</sup> “Leaders of Finance Avert Panic in Stocks,” *New York Times*, September 9, 1901 [ProQuest].

<sup>30</sup> “Rabbis Officer Prayer for the President,” *New York Times*, September 8, 1901 [ProQuest].

<sup>31</sup> “Judges’ View of Acts of Anarchists,” *New York Times*, September 8, 1901 [ProQuest]; “New York Churches Pray for Mr. M’Kinley,” *New York Times*, September 9, 1901 [ProQuest]; “Ex-Senator McBride’s View,” *New York Times*, September 9, 1901 [ProQuest]; “Texas Denounces Anarchy,” *New York Times*, September 11, 1901 [ProQuest]; “Sorrowing Jews Pray for the Dead,” *New York Times*, September 15, 1901 [ProQuest]; “Scenes of Mourning in City Churches,” *New York Times*, September 16, 1901 [ProQuest]; “Grief is Manifest throughout the City,” *New York Times* [ProQuest];

In his first message to Congress, President Theodore Roosevelt announced his support for a law that would ban anarchists from entering the country. He excoriated anarchists, saying,

The Anarchist is a criminal whose perverted instincts lead him to prefer confusion and chaos to the most beneficent form of social order. His protest of concern for workingmen is outrageous in its impudent falsity, for if the political institutions of this country do not afford opportunity to every honest and intelligent son of toil, then the door of hope is forever closed against him.<sup>32</sup>

This statement epitomizes the dominant narrative about the McKinley assassination—that it was the philosophy of anarchy and not a concern for the working class that drove Czolgosz to assassinate McKinley. The mobilization of this narrative resulted in the Immigration Act of 1903, also known as the Anarchist Exclusion Act, which banned anarchists (among other groups of supposed undesirables) from immigrating to the United States.<sup>33</sup>

*“Such Acts Are Commonly Stimulated by Forces of Hate and Malevolence”*

Unlike the widely agreed upon narratives that surfaced after the Garfield and McKinley assassinations, many different groups attempted to use the assassination of John F. Kennedy to serve their own political purposes. However, few successfully used it to achieve tangible political change. Americans blamed the assassination on everyone from left-wing communists to right-wing racists. Many prominent Americans said that the assassination resulted from the hatred and extremism that infected American society. They called for their fellow Americans to put an end to this hatred, but this unsurprisingly

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“Senator M’Comas on Anti-Anarchy Laws, *New York Times*, December 6, 1901 [ProQuest].

<sup>32</sup> “President Roosevelt’s First Message,” *New York Times*, December 4, 1901 [ProQuest].

<sup>33</sup> Miller, *President and the Assassin*, 342.

resulted in very little in terms of concrete reform. Others, who blamed the assassination on the pervasiveness of guns and violence in American culture, were somewhat more successful in enacting their calls for change.

The assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, never articulated a motive for shooting Kennedy. He himself was murdered only days after Kennedy and before that happened he maintained that he was a patsy.<sup>34</sup> Some people sought to ascribe to him motives that had no political significance. His wife, Marina, for example, explained her husband's act as a desire for notoriety; she said that he wanted "to do something that would make him outstanding, that he would be known in history."<sup>35</sup> Others claimed that Oswald was insane.<sup>36</sup> Senator Everett Dirksen, Republican of Illinois and the Senate minority leader, said, "Only someone suffering from aberrations of personality and motivated by insane passion would be guilty of the assassination of the great leader of the greatest country on earth."<sup>37</sup> This implied that there was no political significance in the assassination.

However, people across the world did see a motive for Kennedy's assassination—the motivations of their own political enemies, whoever those happened to be. In doing so, they used the assassination to show their political adversaries in a negative light. An extreme example of this phenomenon that shows its pervasiveness were the Lebanese newspapers that blamed the assassination on Zionists because Jack Ruby, who murdered

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<sup>34</sup> Vincent Bugliosi, *Reclaiming History: The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 841.

<sup>35</sup> John W. Finney, "Oswald's Wife Says He Developed 2d Personality," *New York Times*, November 24, 1924 [ProQuest].

<sup>36</sup> Walter Sullivan, "Doctors Question Oswald's Sanity," *New York Times*, November 26, 1963 [ProQuest]; "Oswald, as Boy, Had Mental Test," *New York Times*, December 1, 1963 [ProQuest].

<sup>37</sup> Cabell Phillips, "Senate, Stunned and Confused by Word of the Shooting, Adjourns until Monday," *New York Times*, November 23, 1963 [ProQuest].

Oswald, was a Jew.<sup>38</sup> In the United States, the assassination was most commonly described as a communist plot or the work of white supremacists.

The idea that the assassination was a communist plot stemmed from the fact that Oswald had, at one point, defected to the Soviet Union and was active in pro-Cuba groups upon his return to the United States. Arthur J. Hanes, the former mayor of Birmingham, Alabama, called Kennedy's death "another episode in the long and sordid history of Communistic-left wing policy."<sup>39</sup> He asked, "How much longer will this great and proud nation permit the deadly Cuban-Communist cancer to eat away at the unity and vitality of the nation?" Others specifically blamed the prime minister of Cuba, Fidel Castro. Castro's sister, Juanita, who had left Cuba for the United States, claimed that Fidel "was responsible if only indirectly" for Kennedy's assassination, because his anti-Kennedy rhetoric could easily have influenced a mentally unbalanced, militant, pro-Cuban person like Oswald.<sup>40</sup> Communists, of course, disagreed with the assessment that the assassination was their fault. Representatives of the Communist Party of the United States of America defended communism and claimed that Kennedy's assassination was "the ultimate end of the rise of violence and terror in [the United States] by the racists

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<sup>38</sup> "Texas Is Planning a Public Hearing," *New York Times*, November 26, 1963 [ProQuest].

<sup>39</sup> Claude Sitton, "Racial Hostility Ignored by South," *New York Times*, November 23, 1963 [ProQuest].

<sup>40</sup> Tania Long, "Sister of Castro Assails Him here," *New York Times*, November 21, 1964 [ProQuest].

and forces of the ultra-right.”<sup>41</sup> Their foreign counterparts in Cuba and the Soviet Union voiced similar conclusions.<sup>42</sup>

The idea that the assassination was the work of white supremacists grew from Kennedy’s support (at least in words) for the civil rights movement. Roy Wilkins, the executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), said, “The President’s consistent commitment to and espousal of basic human rights for all earned the undying enmity of frantic and loathsome bigots. We have no doubt that the assassin was motivated by a hatred of the President’s ideals.”<sup>43</sup> David Urey, a law student who identified himself as a supporter of Republican Barry Goldwater, said that Kennedy must have been assassinated on the basis of his support for civil rights because he did not “know how anyone could have strong enough sentiment on another issue to assassinate him.”<sup>44</sup> Rusty Wesson, a man in Birmingham, lent credence to the idea that racist elements hated Kennedy enough to assassinate him when he went on the radio and said, “Mr. Kennedy got exactly what he deserved...I want to say that any man, any white man who did what he did for niggers should be shot.”<sup>45</sup> The idea that

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<sup>41</sup> “Rockefeller and Wagner Order a 30-Day Period of Mourning,” *New York Times*, November 23, 1963 [ProQuest].

<sup>42</sup> “Excerpts from Castro Talk,” *New York Times*, November 25, 1963 [ProQuest]; “Text of the Tass Dispatch on Dallas,” *New York Times*, November 26, 1963 [ProQuest].

<sup>43</sup> “Tributes Cite Loss to U.S. and World,” *New York Times*, November 23, 1963 [ProQuest].

<sup>44</sup> Nan Robertson, “Throng Gathers at White House,” *New York Times*, November 23, 1963 [ProQuest].

<sup>45</sup> Claude Sitton, “Racial Hostility Ignored by South.”

Kennedy was killed for his stance on race was especially popular in less-developed parts of the world.<sup>46</sup>

Many American politicians chose to frame the assassination not as the product of the left or the right, but as a result of the hatred and extremism espoused by both sides. Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Earl Warren, in his eulogy to Kennedy, said, “What moved some misguided wretch to this horrible deed may never be known to us, but we do know that such acts are commonly stimulated by forces of hate and malevolence, such as today are eating their way into the bloodstream of American life. What a price we pay for this fanaticism!”<sup>47</sup> Martin Luther King agreed that Kennedy “was assassinated by a morally inclement climate,” and Mayor Sam Yorty of Los Angeles said, “Maybe the American people will stop and think about the hate groups who encourage this type of thing.”<sup>48</sup>

Such leaders made appeals to the American people to end this hatred. A *New York Times* editorial quoted several of these leaders:

These voices—and thousands of others raised in revulsion, both North and South—afford hope that the country will heed President Johnson’s plea last night “to close down the poison springs of hatred and intolerance and fanaticism.” In the building of this memorial to John F. Kennedy, every American has his important part to play.<sup>49</sup>

Ultimately, though, the crusade against hatred and extremism that followed the Kennedy assassination mostly boiled down to words, not actions.

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<sup>46</sup> “Nasser Says Death Is Humanity’s Loss,” *New York Times*, November 23, 1963 [ProQuest]; “Guianan Recalls Lumumba,” *New York Times*, November 23, 1963 [ProQuest].

<sup>47</sup> “Eulogies Given by Leader,” *New York Times*, November 24, 1963 [ProQuest].

<sup>48</sup> “Kennedy Praised on Civil Rights,” *New York Times*, November 23, 1963 [ProQuest]; “People across U.S. Voice Grief and Revulsion,” *New York Times*, November 23, 1963 [ProQuest].

<sup>49</sup> “Monument to Understanding,” *New York Times*, November 29, 1963 [ProQuest].

Others condemned American society, not for incessant hatred, but for its tolerance for guns and violence. John P. C. Matthews of Princeton, New Jersey, wrote the *New York Times* to denounce the fact that guns were “[i]ncreasingly... a major part of the American way of life.”<sup>50</sup> He argued:

Only when a majority of the people... see guns as tools of evil, not manly but cowardly, not protective but courting destruction, will we have in this country laws... drastically curtailing the manufacture, sale and use of guns (including toy guns) that will make the tragedy which laid us all so low a far less likely possibility.

Advocates of gun control blamed a lack of gun-control laws for the assassination.

Although measures supporting gun control were already being debated in some places at the time of Kennedy’s death, advocates used the Kennedy assassination as a reason to pass these measures swiftly.<sup>51</sup>

“As a direct result of Kennedy’s assassination,” the Democrats in the New York State Senate made gun control one of their top legislative priorities for 1964.<sup>52</sup> Their efforts were successful.<sup>53</sup> Although the main narrative about the Kennedy assassination, that it was the result of hatred and extremism, did not lead to any political reform, the narrative that it was the result of America’s gun culture did create change in limited settings.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> John P. C. Matthews, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, November 30, 1963 [ProQuest].

<sup>51</sup> Philip Benjamin, “City Police Study Tighter Laws for Users of Pistols and Rifles,” *New York Times*, November 27, 1963 [ProQuest]; “Dodd Will Tighten Bill on Gun Sales,” *New York Times*, November 28, 1963 [ProQuest].

<sup>52</sup> Laymond Robinson, “Democrats Plan Albany Program,” *New York Times*, December 20, 1963 [ProQuest].

<sup>53</sup> Laymond Robinson, “New Restriction on Firearms Quickly Voted by State Senate,” *New York Times*, February 20, 1964 [ProQuest].

<sup>54</sup> It can be argued that Lyndon Johnson used the Kennedy assassination as a rallying point for civil rights legislation, which is another instance of the Kennedy assassination

Whether successfully or not, some Americans made an effort to use each presidential assassination to reform some of the greatest political problems of the day. These efforts demonstrate how these Americans imagined the ideal of how their politics might operate at that time. When this political reform was successful, as it was in the cases of the Garfield and McKinley assassinations, these dreams became the political reality.

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being used for political reform. However, this is because Johnson presented civil rights as Kennedy's unfinished legacy, not because Americans blamed the Kennedy assassination on a lack of civil rights. See Sunita Parikh, *The Politics of Preference: Democratic Institutions and Affirmative Action in the United States and India* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 94.

## Chapter Three: Constructing a Legacy

In a world where every American schoolchild knows Abraham Lincoln's name and can recognize his stovepipe hat, whereas James Garfield remains an obscure figure even to many American historians, it is difficult to believe that their contemporaries spoke about them in even remotely similar terms. However, after each presidential assassination, Americans imagined each assassinated president's future place in the American consciousness in parallel ways. They believed that he would achieve some measure of immortality by having a prominent place in history; they declared that his place in history would be on par with other great men; and they invoked language with religious connotations to describe him. Assassination, they believed, ensured a president greatness and immortality.

However, in reality, assassination alone does not secure for its victim a prime space in American historical memory. For James Garfield, assassination has limited how he is remembered today by associating him only with how his contemporaries framed his assassination. His legacy is considered to be civil service reform. For William McKinley, the ascendance of Theodore Roosevelt to the presidency is viewed as his legacy—despite McKinley's many achievements as president, particularly in the realm of foreign policy, and the framing of his assassination as the product of anarchy. For Lincoln and Kennedy, assassination has transformed them into great American symbols whose name, likeness, and words can be used for political and commercial ends. Abraham Lincoln has become a symbol for America itself, and John F. Kennedy a symbol of youth and technological innovation in American politics.

*“He Will Live Forever in the Hearts of His Countrymen”*

Everyone assumes that they live in vital times that will be remembered throughout history. Perhaps for that reason, after every presidential assassination, Americans have presumed that the assassinated president would come to occupy an important place in the nation’s history. They also derived comfort from the fact that, despite his assassination, at least their president would continue to live forever in the nation’s memory. The language Americans used to describe each assassinated president’s place in history is strikingly similar, regardless of how each president ultimately came to be remembered.

Given that Abraham Lincoln is today nearly universally considered to be one of America’s greatest presidents, it should come as no surprise that his contemporaries expressed their belief that Lincoln would become an important part of American history. Following his assassination, the prominent New York lawyer John Graham proclaimed, “All that was of our late President has now passed in to the history of the country.”<sup>1</sup> Not only was Lincoln himself declared historic, but so was his death and everything associated with it. Although Lincoln was not the first American president to die in office, he was the first to be assassinated as opposed to dying of natural causes, and, therefore, the first whose death undeniably had political implications. As such, even the house where he died took on historic dimensions. A *New York Times* reporter expressed his hope that the house where Lincoln died “will long remain as a . . . landmark of American history.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, in another sense, Americans believed that Lincoln was not dead. His assassination had instead guaranteed that he would live forever through his legacy. On this note, the students of Princeton Theological Seminary in Princeton, New Jersey,

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<sup>1</sup> “The National Calamity,” *New York Times*, April 16, 1865 [ProQuest].

<sup>2</sup> “Our Late President,” *New York Times*, April 21, 1865 [ProQuest].

issued a resolution stating that Lincoln “still lives and will ever live in the ‘hearts of his countrymen.’”<sup>3</sup> This remarkably prescient statement continues to describe how Americans think about Lincoln in the twenty-first century.

James Garfield, however, who has failed to successfully secure a place in the hearts of his countrymen, was described in 1881 remarkably similarly to how Lincoln was described in 1865. Some believed that Garfield had earned an important place in history even before he died. The Republican orator Emory Storrs said that if Garfield did not survive his injuries “there will be for all the generations to come enshrined in the heart of this people as a pathetic, sacred, and tender memory the name and the fame of James A. Garfield.”<sup>4</sup> The former senator Joseph E. McDonald, Democrat of Indiana, concurred with this assessment, saying, “If Gen. Garfield was striving for immortality, so far as there can be earthly immortality, he has achieved it, for his name will be among the most highly honored as long as this Government shall last.”<sup>5</sup> There is a bitter and sad irony to these statements, as Garfield has not in fact achieved this sort of immortality. In this vein, former Republican congressman Edwin Einstein of New York City erroneously predicted that “Garfield needs no granite shaft to mark his grave: he will live forever in the hearts of his countrymen,” when in fact physical monuments, as permanent objects, have done a much better job at preserving Garfield’s memory than American hearts.<sup>6</sup>

However, some of Garfield’s contemporaries were skeptical that assassination could really guarantee him lasting fame. Indeed, Garfield had only served as president for six months, three of which, after he was shot by Guiteau, were spent wasting away on his

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<sup>3</sup> “The Obsequies,” *New York Times*, April 22, 1865 [ProQuest].

<sup>4</sup> “A Wise Administration,” *New York Times*, August 4, 1881 [ProQuest].

<sup>5</sup> “Ex-Senator M’Donald on Garfield,” *New York Times*, September 23, 1881 [ProQuest].

<sup>6</sup> “A Hebrew Memorial Meeting,” *New York Times*, September 26, 1881 [ProQuest].

deathbed, so he had very little time to accomplish anything politically. A *New York Times* editorial claimed that “fame built on expectations or on capacity for unfulfilled achievement is evanescent...Nothing but actual deeds can give him a lasting fame.”<sup>7</sup> It correctly predicted: “[Garfield’s] ultimate place in history will be far less exalted than that which he now holds in popular estimation.” Such statements are more in line with how Garfield is thought about today.

At the time of William McKinley’s assassination, many were convinced that he would have gone down in history whether he had been assassinated or not. Unlike Garfield, McKinley did not have the problem of negligible achievements. He was a second-term president who had presided over a successful war, and in fact served longer than any other assassinated president. Father M. J. Levelle of St. Patrick’s Cathedral eulogized that “even if misfortune had not overtaken [McKinley], [he] would have gone down to posterity as one of the greatest Presidents of the United States.”<sup>8</sup> David B. Henderson, the speaker of the house, concurred.<sup>9</sup> However, as with Garfield, such predictions about McKinley do not ring true today. The Reverend R. S. MacArthur of Cavalry Baptist Church’s eloquent statement that McKinley’s name “will shine forever as a star of the brightest lustre in the firmament of American history” overestimated McKinley’s place in American memory.<sup>10</sup>

John F. Kennedy’s contemporaries also believed that he would be remembered forever. His fellow Massachusetts Democrat and the speaker of the house John

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<sup>7</sup> “Garfield and Arthur,” *New York Times*, September 25, 1881 [ProQuest].

<sup>8</sup> “Scenes of Mourning in City Churches,” *New York Times*, September 16, 1901 [ProQuest].

<sup>9</sup> “Demand for Mourning Goods Unprecedented,” *New York Times*, September 15, 1901 [ProQuest].

<sup>10</sup> “Scenes of Mourning in City Churches.”

McCormack announced, “Our country and the entire world will never forget President Kennedy.”<sup>11</sup> Knud Rasmussen of Hamilton, New York, wrote the *New York Times*, “Rarely have immediate events and historic perspective combined to place a leader among the framers of American history as clearly as in the case of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy.”<sup>12</sup> Rasmussen, and others, believed that Kennedy would be immortalized, not just because he was assassinated, but because he left a rich legacy that would stand the test of time.

However, people rarely enumerated what exactly Kennedy’s accomplishments were. Perhaps this is because he did not actually have very many to point to. His successor, President Lyndon B. Johnson said that he “lives on in the immortal words and works he left behind,” but failed specify what those works might be.<sup>13</sup> One exception to this rule was George Dinkle of Waterbury, Connecticut, who explained in a letter to the editor that after Kennedy was shot he had lamented the fact that he would not be able to pass his love of Kennedy down to his three-year-old son.<sup>14</sup> However, he noted:

[A]fter careful reflection I am sure he will not be deprived. He grows in a world safer with a test-ban treaty, our democratic principles strengthened in a Cuba crisis, Latin-American neighbors given new faith in Alliance for Progress. To the young, the old and the Negro the hand of opportunity was extended. How foolish to think that my son will not know John Fitzgerald Kennedy! My son’s growing associations with mankind will be his introduction.

But overall, Americans did not attempt to explain why they believed that Kennedy or his three assassinated predecessors would be remembered. Instead, they insisted that

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<sup>11</sup> John D. Morris, “Speaker Shaken by News of Death,” *New York Times*, November 23, 1963 [ProQuest].

<sup>12</sup> Knud Rasmussen, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, November 29, 1963 [ProQuest].

<sup>13</sup> “Transcript of President Johnson’s Address before the Joint Session of Congress,” *New York Times*, November 28, 1963 [ProQuest].

<sup>14</sup> George Dinkle, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, November 30, 1963 [ProQuest].

assassinated presidents would go down in American memory, whether there were compelling reasons to believe so or not.

*“A Second Washington”*

Another way that Americans tried to secure the legacy of their assassinated presidents was to compare them to other great men in American history. Common objects of comparison were George Washington, who was considered the father of his country, and Thomas Jefferson, who, having written the Declaration of Independence, was considered a primary shaper of American identity. This was also a way to place the assassinated presidents in the pantheon of American history, to say that their names would take on the same significance as those of men who already populated that realm.

After Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, people quickly drew comparisons between him and George Washington. The Reverend James A. M. La Tourette of St. Cornelius’ Church on Governor’s Island said that “next to Washington [Lincoln’s] name will be loved and revered by all the great and good until the morning of the resurrection.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Morris J. Raphall, the rabbi at Congregation B’nai Jeshurun in New York City, thanked God “who had ever watched over the destinies of America and sent to us a Washington and a Lincoln.” Lincoln was considered more than just a great man who deserved to be placed in the ranks of Washington. Americans overwhelmingly considered Lincoln to be a second Washington. As Major General Peck declared, “I firmly believe that [Lincoln] will rank in history, and deservedly too, as a second Washington.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> “The National Mourning,” *New York Times*, April 21, 1865 [ProQuest].

<sup>16</sup> “The National Calamity,” *New York Times*, April 16, 1865 [ProQuest].

It is unsurprising that people compared James Garfield with Lincoln, the only other assassinated president. However, the fact that Garfield was often compared to Lincoln and Washington in the same breath meant that Lincoln really had achieved his place as a great man beside Washington. As the Reverend Dr. David Magie of the First Presbyterian Church in Paterson, New Jersey, said, “The world has placed the name of Lincoln beside that of Washington in its list of great men; now it will place the name of Garfield beside that of Lincoln,” and the *New York Times* claimed that Garfield’s character would “be idealized as that of no other President save Lincoln and Washington have been.”<sup>17</sup> Americans clearly thought that Garfield, too, would be transformed into a great man of American history. As the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher said, “Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Garfield are four names that will ever stand.”<sup>18</sup>

William McKinley, too, was compared to both Washington and Lincoln. Comparisons of McKinley with Garfield, however, are conspicuously absent, suggesting that Garfield had already failed to secure his place in history only twenty years after his assassination. The Reverend Doctor David G. Wylie of Scotch Presbyterian Church prophesized, “[T]he name of William McKinley will be closely associated with those Washington and Lincoln—an immortal triumvirate.”<sup>19</sup> Bishop E. G. Andrews of Ohio concurred:

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<sup>17</sup> “Services in Paterson, N.J.” *New York Times*, September 26, 1881 [ProQuest]; “James A. Garfield,” *New York Times*, September 20, 1881 [ProQuest].

<sup>18</sup> Beecher was the brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe, but was famous in his own right for his political activism. See *American National Biography Online*, s.v. “Beecher, Henry Ward,” by Clifford E. Clark, accessed April 19, 2012, <http://www.anb.org/articles/08/08-00112.html>; “Memorial Services at Peekskill,” *New York Times*, September 23, 1881 [ProQuest].

<sup>19</sup> “Scenes of Mourning in City Churches.”

The years draw on when his name shall be counted among the illustrious of the earth. William of Orange is not dead. Washington lives in the hearts and lives of his countrymen. Lincoln, with his infinite sorrow, lives to teach us and lead us on. And McKinley shall summon all statesmen and all his countrymen to purer living, nobler aims, sweeter faith, and immortal blessedness.

Despite Garfield's failure to make it onto the list of great men, Americans believed that McKinley still would, suggesting that they believed there was something beyond the mere fact that he was assassinated that would secure McKinley a place in history.

Americans also drew connections between John F. Kennedy and several other great men, but particularly strong connections were drawn between Kennedy and Lincoln. These connections often insinuated that Kennedy's stance on civil rights was comparable to Lincoln's actions during the Civil War. The *Sacramento Bee* stated, "[I]n this hour of tragedy we think of another President who 98 years ago was felled by another assassin who had listened to the hate merchants."<sup>20</sup> Many politicians abroad also compared Kennedy's work as president to Lincoln's, including the Argentine foreign minister, Miguel Zavala Ortiz; the president of Bolivia, Victor Paz Estensoro; and the president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah.<sup>21</sup>

Lyndon Johnson also emphasized the connections between his predecessor and Lincoln and made an effort to portray Kennedy as a second Lincoln. He gave a talk about Kennedy at the Lincoln Memorial a month after the assassination that he peppered with lines from the two Lincoln speeches that adorn the walls of the Memorial, the Gettysburg

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted in "Opinions of the Week: At Home and Abroad," *New York Times*, November 24, 1963 [ProQuest].

<sup>21</sup> Edward C. Burks, "The World Impact: Report From Eight Capitals," *New York Times*, November 24, 1963 [ProQuest]; Henry Raymond, "Latins Say Kennedy Instituted New Era in Hemispheric Ties," *New York Times*, November 26, 1963 [ProQuest]; "Nkrumah Hails Kennedy," *New York Times*, November 26, 1963 [ProQuest].

Address and Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address.<sup>22</sup> This speech implied a strong bond between the two presidents. Johnson ended his speech, saying:

[L]et us here...determine that John Kennedy did not live or die in vain, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom and that we may achieve in our time and for all time the ancient vision of peace on earth, good will toward all men.

This echoes the end of the Gettysburg address, where Lincoln exhorts his countrymen to “resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom.”<sup>23</sup> By describing Kennedy in Lincoln's words, Johnson inspires unspoken connections between the two men.

*“In the Temple of American Honor Another Is Written among the Immortals”*

The language that many Americans used to describe their assassinated presidents frequently took on a distinctly religious tone, which was another way of giving their deaths significance. All four assassinated presidents were called martyrs, which implies that they died for a specific cause. However, the causes that they were purported to have died for were often vague patriotic values like freedom. The religious language employed to describe assassinated presidents was, like comparing them to great men, a way to try to make them into national symbols by connecting them to the greatest American ideals. Michael Kammen extensively describes the phenomenon of making civil memory religious; for example, he quotes Thomas Jefferson as saying, regarding the desk where he wrote the Declaration of Independence, “Politics as well as Religion has it's [*sic*] superstitions. These, gaining strength with time, may one day, give imaginary value to

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<sup>22</sup> “Johnson's Memorial Talk,” *New York Times*, December 23, 1963 [ProQuest].

<sup>23</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Address Delivered at the Dedication of the Cemetery at Gettysburg, November 19, 1863” in *Great Speeches*, ed. Roy P. Basler (New York: Dover Publications, 1991), 104.

this relic for its association with the birth of the Great Charter of our Independence.”<sup>24</sup>

By using religious language, American ideals could be elevated to the realm of the sacred.

The religious language that people used about Abraham Lincoln after his assassination associated him with these great American values. Eugene Lawrence, a member of the Sixteenth Ward Union Association in New York City, said that Lincoln was “the martyr to freedom.”<sup>25</sup> The lawyer L. E. Chittenden said that Lincoln “was sacrificed on the altar of his country.”<sup>26</sup> Saying the Lincoln was sacrificed for the American ideal of freedom or for the country itself entangled Lincoln as a man with the United States as an entity. Major General Benjamin Butler said that Lincoln had “gone to that bright land sanctified by the presence of Washington and the patriots of the revolutionary days.” The idea that the heroes of the American Revolution could make something sacred speaks to the almost spiritual quality afforded to the American mythos, and Butler’s statement positions Lincoln within that narrative. James Garfield summed up this placement of Lincoln within the American consciousness by claiming that he would “go down to all time as the great and sacred possession of the American people.”<sup>27</sup>

When Garfield himself was assassinated only sixteen years later, people made similar statements about him. Henry Ward Beecher claimed that Garfield’s death would be a blessing in disguise, saying: “Washington’s life has made his name sacred to us. Yet if he had been martyred his influence would have been still more potent. A hero who

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<sup>24</sup> Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (1991; New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 195.

<sup>25</sup> “The Obsequies,” *New York Times*, April 22, 1865 [ProQuest].

<sup>26</sup> “The National Calamity,” *New York Times*, April 16, 1865 [ProQuest].

<sup>27</sup> “Thirty-Ninth Congress,” *New York Times*, April 15, 1865 [ProQuest].

sacrifices self gives a sanctity to his deeds and makes them more attractive to mankind.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, Americans did in fact see assassination as a ticket into the national mythology of the United States. The *Wilmington Star* in North Carolina proposed that Garfield’s memory would take on an almost angelic quality, saying, “His memory will be surrounded by a halo that otherwise would not have encircled it.”<sup>29</sup>

Americans described William McKinley, too, in religious language used to place him within American mythology. While officiating at McKinley’s funeral, the Reverend O. B. Milligan, an Ohio pastor who had married McKinley and his wife Ida, said “[I]n the temple of American honor another is written among the immortals.”<sup>30</sup> Senator John L. McLaurin, a Democrat from South Carolina, called McKinley “a martyr to envy and hate.”<sup>31</sup> Given the amorphous understandings of what exactly McKinley died for suggests that calling him a martyr was merely a way to make his death seem significant.

Americans also used religious language to describe John F. Kennedy after his assassination. Upon hearing the news of Kennedy’s death, mayor Robert Wagner of New York City said, “President Kennedy has joined the company of the martyrs,” but did not specify what Kennedy was a martyr to.<sup>32</sup> However, even those who identified a cause for Kennedy’s martyrdom spoke only about ambiguous American ideals. The *Chicago-Sun Times*, for example, called Kennedy a martyr “in the cause of democratic government.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> “The Gain in a Martyr’s Death,” *New York Times*, September 26, 1881 [ProQuest].

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in “The Voice of the Press,” *New York Times*, September 20, 1881 [ProQuest].

<sup>30</sup> “Last Rites over the Body of the Martyr President,” *New York Times*, September 20, 1901 [ProQuest].

<sup>31</sup> “Tributes to Mr. McKinley,” *New York Times*, September 19, 1901 [ProQuest].

<sup>32</sup> “Tributes Cite Loss to U.S. and World,” *New York Times*, November 23, 1963 [ProQuest].

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in “Opinions of the Week: At Home and Abroad,” *New York Times*, November 24, 1963 [ProQuest].

The *Courier Journal* of Louisville, Kentucky, claimed that Kennedy had been “sacrificed...on the altar of man’s refusal to live with man,” another broad reason for Kennedy’s supposed martyrdom.<sup>34</sup> Although religious language was employed in an effort to give meaning to the deaths of assassinated presidents, the vague, patriotic terms used to describe their significance did not adequately assert why each president should be remembered.

*The Assassinated Presidents Today: Iconic or Constrained*

Americans initially tried to construct the legacies of each of their assassinated presidents in the same way, but today their legacies are very different. Abraham Lincoln’s legacy has grown beyond his assassination and even his own life. Today Lincoln is a versatile symbol of American patriotism and equality. James Garfield’s legacy, on the other hand, is pigeonholed by the fact that his assassination was framed in terms of the patronage system and civil service reform. William McKinley’s legacy is constrained by his assassination in a different way; Americans today remember him neither for his significant accomplishments in office nor for the fact that his assassination was framed to be about anarchy. Instead, today, William McKinley and his assassination are remembered for being the precursor to Theodore Roosevelt’s presidency. John F. Kennedy’s legacy, like Lincoln’s, extends beyond his assassination. Kennedy has become a symbol of youth and vigor. However, because Kennedy’s legacy is grounded in who he was instead of what he did, his status as an icon is relatively shallow.

Lincoln’s transformation into an icon of American memory began soon after his assassination. On April 18, 1865, the *New York Times* published an article discussing

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<sup>34</sup> Quoted in “Editorial Reaction to Kennedy’s Death,” *New York Times*, November 24, 1963 [ProQuest].

suggestions that Lincoln be buried at Mount Vernon, George Washington's estate.<sup>35</sup> This proposal is absurd from the standpoint that Abraham Lincoln was a person with his own life and past, with family and friends who loved him: it is a proposal to bury a man on the estate of somebody he never knew, far away from his home and family. However, if Lincoln is a symbol of Americana, then the suggestion makes perfect sense because it proposes that two great men be buried side by side to show the spirit and fortitude of the nation. As the article concludes: "[T]he country will find strong and enduring reasons for desiring the place of [Lincoln's] final rest to be beside that of the Father of his Country."

As a symbol for all that is good and right in America, Lincoln's legacy has become useful political tool. People across the political spectrum readily invoke Abraham Lincoln. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, people as diverse as Democratic Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia, California governor and moderate Republican Arnold Schwarzenegger, and conservative attorney general John Ashcroft, have appealed to Lincoln's words and actions.<sup>36</sup>

Comparisons to Lincoln are used to legitimize what may be unpopular opinions. First Lady Laura Bush said that her husband, President George W. Bush, was like Lincoln in that "he didn't want to go to war, but he knew the safety and security of America and the world depended on it."<sup>37</sup> As his vice presidency came to an end, Dick Cheney defended actions like the indefinite detainment of terror suspects by saying that

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<sup>35</sup> "The Tomb of President Lincoln," *New York Times*, April 18, 1865 [ProQuest].

<sup>36</sup> Alison Mitchell, "Lawmakers Begin Push to Give Bush Authority on Iraq," *New York Times*, October 4, 2002 [Factiva]; Randal C. Archibold, "Schwarzenegger Is Forced into a Political Tightrope Act," *New York Times*, February 26, 2006 [Factiva]; Eric Lichtblau, "Ashcroft's Tour Rallies Supporters and Detractors," *New York Times*, September 8, 2003 [Factiva].

<sup>37</sup> Alessandra Stanley, "The First Lady's Influence Is Starting to Reveal Itself," *New York Times*, September 1, 2004 [Factiva].

Lincoln had done worse by suspending habeas corpus during the Civil War.<sup>38</sup> In President Barack Obama's 2012 State of the Union address, he used Lincoln's legacy to bolster his vision for America. Obama claimed he wanted to create government programs that would improve American "manufacturing, clean energy, infrastructure, [and] education" and compared his programs to Lincoln's support for "railroads and land-grant colleges."<sup>39</sup> Although these examples span a variety of issues, they all have the same message: Lincoln would have agreed with me, so it must be okay.

While, despite his assassination, Americans have used Lincoln's legacy to discuss just about anything, the details of the Garfield and McKinley assassinations limit their legacies. Today, Garfield's presidency is referenced only in relation to issues of patronage and civil service. An article about campaign finance in March 2002 said, "Decades of public disgust with the spoils system came to a head in 1881, when a disappointed office-seeker assassinated the new president, James A. Garfield."<sup>40</sup> Similarly, an article about the corrupt lobbyist Jack Abramoff and the potential reforms in the wake of the Abramoff scandal noted, "In the late 1800's everybody knew that campaigns were financed by patronage appointees, but it took the assassination of President James A. Garfield in 1881 by a spurned job-seeker to spur civil service reform."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> "The World According to Cheney," *New York Times*, December 23, 2008 [Factiva].

<sup>39</sup> Jackie Calmes, "Obama Voices Theme of 2 Choices for Nation," *New York Times*, January 26, 2012 [Factiva].

<sup>40</sup> David M. Kennedy, "The Party's Still Not Over," *New York Times*, March 3, 2002 [Factiva].

<sup>41</sup> Michael Waldman, "The End of Influence," *New York Times*, January 6, 2006 [Factiva].

Today people frame Garfield's legacy today in terms of what his assassination was blamed on at that time, but they do not frame McKinley's legacy in terms of anarchy. McKinley's assassination instead has been framed as Theodore Roosevelt's stepping stone to the presidency. This framing stresses the importance of the selection of a vice presidential or lieutenant gubernatorial candidate. People used McKinley's assassination as a cautionary tale in 2008 when New York governor Eliot Spitzer resigned and his lieutenant governor David Paterson succeeded him.<sup>42</sup> Later that same year, people once again referenced the McKinley assassination after seventy-two-year-old John McCain chose the inexperienced Sarah Palin to share the ticket in his bid for the presidency.<sup>43</sup> As the *New York Times* said,

Before she was the Republican nominee for No. 2, Sarah Palin wondered aloud in a television interview: "What is it exactly that the V.P. does every day?" *If fate intervenes, plenty* [emphasis mine]... Vice President Theodore Roosevelt was hunting on a mountain in upstate new York when he learned that President William McKinley, shot eight days before, was dying. On Sept. 14, 1901, at 42, he became the nation's youngest president.

McKinley's assassination and its effect of making Theodore Roosevelt president has defined McKinley's legacy, overshadowing his actual accomplishments.

Like Lincoln, Kennedy's mythologization began soon after his death. On the first anniversary of the assassination, the *New York Times* published an editorial that objected to the way that Kennedy was being turned from a man into a myth. It said, "It is easy—too easy—to remember him as a soberly romantic figure, a political warrior 'without fear and without blemish,' who always rode in triumph through the shouting crowds, with that

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<sup>42</sup> Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "Thinking Twice About the No. 3," *New York Times*, March 16, 2008 [Factiva].

<sup>43</sup> "When the Vice President Really Matters," *New York Times*, September 16, 2008 [Factiva].

winning smile and head held high.”<sup>44</sup> While it acknowledged that “[m]en and nations need heroes,” it contended that the nation was ill served by remembering Kennedy as something he was not. Although Kennedy, like Lincoln, has become a symbol to some extent, his status as a symbol is far more tenuous.

An important aspect of the construction of Kennedy’s legacy was the renaming of places in his honor. The two most prominent examples of this phenomenon, which happened in the weeks following the assassination, were Lyndon Johnson’s renaming the NASA space installation at Cape Canaveral as the John F. Kennedy Space Center and Mayor Robert Wagner of New York changing the name of Idlewild Airport in Queens to John F. Kennedy International Airport.<sup>45</sup> Many other places were renamed for Kennedy, including highways, town squares, and schools.<sup>46</sup> There were even proposals that were never enacted to rename the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, two New Jersey towns, and even the state of West Virginia after Kennedy.<sup>47</sup>

This phenomenon is remarkable because of how swiftly and smoothly important public places were renamed for Kennedy. Common objections to renaming places, like the economic impact and the narrow appeal of a person’s memory were often absent in

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<sup>44</sup> “One Year Later,” *New York Times*, November 11, 1964 [ProQuest]

<sup>45</sup> “Transcript of President Johnson’s Thanksgiving Day Address to the Nation Urging ‘New Dedication,’” *New York Times*, November 29, 1963 [ProQuest]; “Painters Begin Changing Idlewild Signs to ‘Kennedy,’” *New York Times*, December 20, 1963 [ProQuest].

<sup>46</sup> “Road Renamed for Kennedy,” *New York Times*, November 30, 1963 [ProQuest]; Martin Tolchin, “More Changes in Place Names Urged as Kennedy Memorials,” November 30, 1963 [ProQuest].

<sup>47</sup> “2 Towns in Jersey Seek Kennedy Name,” *New York Times*, December 1, 1963 [ProQuest].

cases related to Kennedy.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, some objected to the way that Kennedy-mania swept the country following his assassination. James M. Jutte of Dobbs Ferry, New York, wrote the *New York Times* to say that he was “seriously concerned with the national obsession to change the names of streets, highways, airports, defense projects, and even perhaps, states, to ‘Kennedy.’”<sup>49</sup> He complained in particular about the changing of the name of Idlewild, an airport he used frequently and whose name he likes and was “accustomed” to. However, because of the support of powerful people like Mayor Wagner, the renaming happened anyway, despite associated costs such as the repainting of over 700 signs with the airport’s new name.<sup>50</sup>

Today Kennedy is a symbol of youth, vigor, and innovation in politics. For this reason, people have been comparing Barack Obama, another young, charismatic politician, to Kennedy ever since he first entertained the idea of running for the presidency.<sup>51</sup> The *New York Times* described Kennedy and Obama as being “charismatic 40-something president[s] with an attractive young family and a Harvard pedigree.”<sup>52</sup> Kennedy as a symbol of youth extends to Kennedy as a symbol of technological innovation in politics because of his adeptness at using television to his advantage during his debates with Richard Nixon in 1960. A *New York Times* article discussing new uses of new technology in the 2008 presidential campaign said:

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<sup>48</sup> Owen J. Dwyer and Derek H. Alderman, *Civil Rights Memorials and the Geography of Memory* (Chicago: Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago, 2008), 43, 53.

<sup>49</sup> James M. Jutte, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, December 21, 1963 [ProQuest].

<sup>50</sup> “Painters Begin Changing Idlewild Signs to ‘Kennedy.’”

<sup>51</sup> Anne E. Kornblut, “But Will They Love Him Tomorrow?” *New York Times*, March 19, 2006 [Factiva].

<sup>52</sup> John Harwood, “Yes He Can and He’ll Tell You About It,” *New York Times*, January 12, 2009 [Factiva].

Old media, apparently, can learn new media tricks. Not since 1960, when John F. Kennedy won in part because of the increasingly popular medium of television, has changing technology had such an impact on the political campaigns and the organizations covering them.<sup>53</sup>

Because Obama also has proficiency with the latest technology of his day, this has inspired comparisons between him and Kennedy as well.<sup>54</sup>

No matter how the assassinated presidents are remembered today, their contemporaries imagined that each would one day be considered great. This suggests that assassination did not merely cause Americans to consider the past and present of their political culture—they also envisioned the nation’s political future. This future, in each case, was one where the assassinated president was a lofty example to his countrymen in the vein of great Americans like George Washington or Thomas Jefferson.

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<sup>53</sup> David Carr and Brian Stetler, “Campaigns in a Web 2.0 World,” *New York Times*, November 3, 2008 [Factiva].

<sup>54</sup> Matt Bai, “Pushing the Presidential Message Into the Broadband Age,” *New York Times*, January 25, 2011 [Factiva].

## Conclusion: The Fleeting Power of Assassination in the United States

*“It didn’t mean a nickel, you just shed a little blood, and a lot of people shed a lot of tears. Yes, you made a little moment, and you stirred a little mud. But it didn’t fix the stomach and you’ve drunk your final Bud and it didn’t help the workers and it didn’t heal the country and it didn’t make them listen and they never said ‘We’re sorry.’”*

“Another National Anthem,” *Assassins*

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Throughout history, assassination has left a bloody trail of coups d’état, war, and even genocide. The assassination of Julius Caesar helped end the Roman Republic and usher in the Roman Empire. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand launched World War I. The assassination of Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana triggered the Rwandan genocide. One cannot doubt that assassination has left its mark on world history.

The effects of presidential assassinations in the United States, however, are far less apparent, given that they have not changed the structure of government or set off any major domestic conflicts. Given this lack of obvious consequences, when looking at each assassination individually the best way we have to gauge their effects is the dubious and imprecise tool of speculation. How might Reconstruction have played out differently if Abraham Lincoln had lived? What sort of president might James Garfield have been if he had served more than six months? How might turn-of-the-century foreign policy have been different if Theodore Roosevelt had not become president in 1901? (Or if McKinley had not been assassinated, would Roosevelt even have become president at all?) How would Kennedy have handled issues like civil rights or Vietnam if he had served a second

term? Perhaps this is why assassination in the United States is so gripping—we cannot help but wonder how history might have been different, whether things would have been better, had the assassinations not occurred.

The effects of each individual assassination in the United States are mysterious. We are left wondering: When assassination does not discernibly change history, what *does* it do? How should we understand the contrast between the public's initial feeling of devastation and the fact that the ultimate effects are either unknowable or completely negligible? These questions reveal why it is so valuable to compare all four assassinations. Only through comparisons are we able to see a more complete picture of the meaning of assassination in United States history.

Despite all the questions and uncertainties that exist, we can learn a great deal about the effects of assassination in the United States. Assassination has repeatedly shocked Americans to their very core. It has always resulted in questioning the American system of government and whether it can withstand the stress of the killing of the president. The reactions in the *New York Times* during the chaos following the assassinations and beyond reveal what has been a drastic change in the American conception of republicanism between 1865 and 1963. In 1865, the stability of the republic was attributed to role of the people, but by 1963, the stability of the republic was attributed to the laws and institutions of the American government—and in this sense the study of assassination provides a useful perspective on the changing understanding of the role of government.

Although the media coverage of assassinations cannot, by itself, explain *why* this change took place, it does reveal some of its practical effects. For many years, the

American president walked around unprotected, because guarding the president implied an American hierarchy and an elevation of the president that was contrary to American republicanism. However, as republicanism changed, so did ideas about protecting the head of state. Because presidential security was no longer thought to oppose republicanism and greater protection can help prevent assassination, later assassinations ushered in new security precautions.

Although it is difficult to deduce how each assassination affected society, it is possible to see how society affected each assassination. Comparing all four assassinations reveals that contemporary sources framed each assassination in terms of the political cleavages of the day. Thus, the way that each assassination is understood reflects the political issues at the time. It also shows which political groups had enough power to successfully use the assassination as a tool for mobilization and which ones did not.

Additionally, looking at all four assassinations reveals that assassination does not automatically transform a president into a timeless national icon. Today Lincoln is a symbol of the American nation. He is thought of as a second George Washington, with the memorial built in his honor facing the Washington Monument; and his face adorns the penny and the five-dollar bill. Garfield and McKinley have more limited legacies.

John F. Kennedy's place as a national symbol is far less certain. It has been less than fifty years since his assassination, and many of those who watched the drama of the Kennedy assassination play out on television in their formative years are still alive and influential. The affection for Kennedy that grew in response to his youth and vigor and to his young, attractive family was, to some extent, carried forward by his powerful political family. His younger brother Edward Kennedy was a senator from Massachusetts for

nearly fifty years until his death in 2009, and he was dubbed the “Lion of the Senate” for his imposing legislative accomplishments. John F. Kennedy’s daughter, Caroline Kennedy, is still alive and well known, and he has many nieces and nephews who have entered politics. All of this has undoubtedly played into his continued popularity.

But will Kennedy still be thought of the same way in fifty years? In a hundred? I would personally guess not. As those who were alive in the 1960s die, I believe that his prominence will fade. My parents were approximately the same age on November 22, 1963, as I was on September 11, 2001; and I can see how the Kennedy assassination may have helped shape their worldview as the September 11 terrorist attacks have certainly shaped mine. But I do not think those effects have been passed on to succeeding generations. As the power of the Kennedy clan fades, so will JFK’s prominence as a national symbol. For the first time in decades, no Kennedy sits in the halls of Congress.

Perhaps Kennedy, whose image has been pervasive in twentieth- and twenty-first-century popular culture and who served during the Cuban Missile Crisis when the world was on the brink of nuclear war, will never be as obscure as James Garfield, assassinated before he had any real accomplishments. But he will also probably never be as iconic as Abraham Lincoln. Assassination cannot make a president something he never was.

Presidential assassination in the United States does not significantly alter the government, the politics of the day, or even the reputation of the president who is assassinated. As the musical *Assassins* claims, “Every now and then the country goes a little wrong. Every now and then a madman’s bound to come along. It doesn’t stop the story. The story’s pretty strong.” Assassination is a phenomenon that forces Americans to think about what their country is and what it should be. These reflections reveal that,

even in their darkest times, Americans cherished republican government, dreamed of bettering their nation through peaceful political action, and hoped for a future filled with freedom and other ideals they believed their martyred presidents embodied. However, while assassination may arouse introspection in the short term, ultimately the power of assassination in the United States to actually reconstruct society has been fleeting.

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