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# JOURNAL OF STRATEGIC SECURITY

## BOOK REVIEW

### Political Assassinations and Attempts in US History: The Lasting Effects of Gun Violence Against American Political Leaders

**MICHAEL MARTINEZ**

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J. Michael Martinez resides in Monroe, Georgia and serves as corporate counsel for a manufacturing company. He also serves as a part-time faculty member for Kennesaw State University and the University of Georgia. He is the author of a dozen previous books, including *Terrorist Attacks on American Soil: From the Civil War Era to the Present* (2012), and *The Greatest Criminal Cases: Changing the Course of American Law* (2014).

This latest work will appeal to readers across several disciplines. History, Political Science, Psychology, and Criminology are among those that come immediately to mind. The book also has implications for individuals who work in Protective Service Operations for obvious reasons. Perhaps less apparent to the casual reader are the lessons for those who seek to recruit assets in the fields of intelligence or counterintelligence. Understanding the sometimes subtle motivations of individuals who have assassinated or attempted to assassinate political leaders in the United States is a useful tool in all these types of operations.

Most individuals probably have no real idea how many political assassination attempts have been plotted and put into effect with various results in the United States. Many people may remember the U.S. Presidents who were assassinated, but there were a number of other attempts against political leaders, some successful, others only partially so. Nine American presidents have been targeted while in office. Andrew Jackson was the first U.S. political figure to have been officially recognized as the target of an assassin. Due to the widespread impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction, most people know the basic outlines of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, and may recall the successful attempts on James A. Garfield, and William McKinley. Some may recall the failed attempt on the life of President Harry S. Truman, which occurred while the White House was undergoing extensive renovation and he was residing in Blair House in 1950. Almost everyone is aware of the basic circumstances surrounding the murder of John F. Kennedy in 1963. In addition, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Ronald Reagan were all targeted by would be assassins.

A review of the violence against American political leaders reveals Franklin D. Roosevelt being targeted when he was President-Elect, but not yet sworn in, in 1933. Three presidential candidates were targets, Theodore Roosevelt, Robert F. Kennedy, and George C. Wallace were all shot while campaigning for votes. Of course, other figures in politics have been targeted. Martinez counts eight governors, seven U.S. senators, nine members of the U.S. House of Representatives, eleven mayors, seventeen state legislators, and eleven judges who have been victims of political assassinations or attempts. This does not count the shooting attempt on several U.S. House members practicing on a ball field recently.

Martinez has reviewed and documented all the assassinations and attempted assassinations addressed in this book in complete detail. He has classified the assailants as actors in five groups based on an analysis of the motivation of each offender. Type 1 Actors are those who are rational and understand the political purpose of their actions. The Type 1 category includes John Wilkes Booth, who sought to disrupt the functioning of the Federal Government and force a negotiated settlement with the Confederate States of America. He intended to do this by kidnapping President Lincoln, but as he realized time was short, he moved on to assassination as a method to remove key government officials, including the president, to bring about his desired political result. Sirhan Sirhan had disturbing characteristics, as Martinez points out, but his major motivation for killing Bobby Kennedy was Kennedy's pro-Israel position which Sirhan felt was not in the best interest of the Arab states.

Actors in the Type 2 category are described by Martinez as having an ego-driven need for recognition which overrides any political consideration. These people see themselves as unimportant and want to become important by killing a well known figure. J. Michael Martinez offers a good rationale for placing Lee Harvey Oswald in this category. In addition to the killer of JFK, several other individuals, including John Hinckley, who tried to shoot President Reagan, fall into this classification. Martinez does not believe these actors have to be mentally impaired in any way, except for such low self-esteem issues they will literally kill for attention.

Type 3 Actors are disturbed and isolated to the point of feeling no empathy or emotion at the taking of a human life. They would be classified as sociopaths because they lack any ability to feel what we would consider normal emotions or empathy. These are people who kill for economic gain or for some revenge motive. Martinez places Charles V. Harrelson, father of actor Woody Harrelson, in this category for his role in the assassination of Federal Judge John A. Woods, Jr. He also places Arthur Bremer, who tried to kill Presidential candidate George C. Wallace, in the Type 3 grouping. The author's analysis and reasoning for placing Bremer as a Type 3 Actor makes for very interesting reading.

Type 4 Actors are how most people probably see a political assassin. They are mentally or emotional impaired and are not in firm touch with reality. As J. Michael Martinez points out, the irrational thinking of these type killers creates a difficult situation for anyone with a rational mind to try and understand their motivation or predict their behavior in advance. Richard Lawrence has the dubious honor of being the first person in United States history to try to kill a president. After his attempt failed his behavior in court—shouting out that he was the King of England, and other evidence of a disturbed mind—resulted in him spending the rest of his life in a mental

institution. In our recent past, U.S. representative Gabrielle Giffords was seriously wounded and a number of people died or were also seriously injured as the result of Jared Lee Loughner trying to kill her at a political gathering in Arizona. After extensive examination of the offender it is impossible to know why such a loner, who felt alienated from all society, decided that Congresswoman Giffords was responsible for his misery. He remains in the Federal Medical Center in Rochester, Minnesota and hopefully will never be released.

The last classification, the Type 5 actor, is what the author refers to as the “miscellaneous” or “other” motives which may involve more than one of the motives in Types 1 through 4, or may be unknown. Martinez again does an excellent job of looking at the details of these offenders and explaining why each falls into this category rather than one of the other four. William J. Goebel had been a political force in Kentucky for some time and was shot down outside the capitol by an unknown assailant. He lingered for several days and was in fact sworn in as governor before he succumbed to his wound. No one ever discovered who shot him or what the motive was behind the shooting. Historical evidence suggests the killing was related to politics, but it may remain an unsolved mystery. Much has been written about the killing of Governor Huey P. Long in Louisiana. He was shot and killed by Dr. Carl Austin Weiss in the state capitol building in 1935. Dr. Weiss’ father-in-law, Judge Benjamin Henry Pavy, and Long were bitter political enemies, but Governor Long’s bodyguards fired at least 61 bullets into Weiss so that we will never know exactly why he determined to leave a successful life and a young wife behind and shoot Long.

As these brief examples indicate, the research of the author and the documented facts behind the various assassinations and attempts are fascinating. J. Michael Martinez does an excellent job of relating the history of each act, each primary victim, and each offender. He then offers very thorough explanations for the reasons he placed each offender in a particular category. In his Afterword Martinez states that he does not believe stricter gun laws would have prevented any of these events. He also recognizes that there are limits on what we can do with the current technology and the state of our mental health field to identify and treat possible offenders.

Professionals and others who read this work may decide there is little or no way, other than luck or providence, to stop a determined assassin who does not care if he or she is killed or captured as a result of the act. However, a review of the author’s work does suggest some actions may be beneficial. Also, a better understanding of the psychology of the different types of offenders may be useful in heading off threats. I recommend this book in the highest possible terms to professionals and those interested in the disciplines I mentioned in the opening of this review.