

THE PRESIDENTIAL ASSASSINS: A CONFIRMATION OF ADLERIAN THEORY¹

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The assassination of Robert F. Kennedy, brother of President Kennedy and candidate for the presidential nomination of the Democratic Party, on June 4, 1968, resulted in the establishment on June 10, 1968, of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. The magnitude of the task confronting the Commission led to the recruitment from the legal and academic professions of various "task forces" whose responsibilities were to summarize existing knowledge on the causes and prevention of violence, to accelerate ongoing research, and to undertake new investigations.

Of particular interest to psychologists is the Task Force report, *Assassination and Political Violence* (7), with its section on the psychology of presidential assassins (pp. 62-73). This analysis drew largely upon: (a) a paper by Dr. Lawrence Z. Freedman, Department of Psychiatry, University of Chicago, a consultant to the Task Force; (b) a book by R. J. Donovan entitled, *The Assassins* (5); and (c) a series of journal articles by Donald W. Hastings, Department of Psychiatry and Neurology, University of Minnesota (6).

Although neither the members of the Task Force, Donovan, nor Hastings developed their analyses around any special theoretical or systematic point of view, their conclusions are a striking confirmation of Adler's theoretical position, both in general (3) and in particular as applied to crime and delinquency (1, 2).

Basically the Task Force analyzed the available information on the following nine assassins or attempted assassins:

Richard Lawrence (Andrew Jackson)	John N. Schrank (Theodore Roosevelt)
John Wilkes Booth (Abraham Lincoln)	Giuseppe Zangara (F. D. Roosevelt)
Charles J. Guiteau (James A. Garfield)	Oscar Collazo & Griselio Torresola (Harry S. Truman)
Leon F. Czolgosz (William McKinley)	Lee Harvey Oswald (John F. Kennedy)

¹Although it is beyond the scope of this account to compare Adlerian and other possible interpretations of the psychodynamics of presidential assassins, it is worthy of note that the analysis presented here is in no way contradictory to a series of accounts of presidential assassins by Hastings (6), and an analysis by Rothstein (10) of a number of institutionalized patients whose offenses involved threats against the president. The interested reader is also referred to a cross comparison of Freudian, Adlerian, and Jungian points of view in a study of Lee Harvey Oswald (8).

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Sirhan Bisha Sirhan, assassin of Robert F. Kennedy, was not included, since he was not a presidential assassin and was, moreover, on trial at the time of the preparation of the report. However, his inclusion would have strengthened rather than weakened the Task Force's conclusions, since his physical and personality characteristics closely parallel those of the individuals included in the study.

COMPOSITE PORTRAIT

Following is a composite portrait of the men who killed or tried to kill eight presidents.

Objective inferiorities. All assassins were white males who were either foreign-born or whose parents were foreign-born. They were short and slight of build. Booth, the tallest, was five feet eight inches in height and weighed 160 pounds. The others ranged downward in size to Zangara who was five feet tall and weighed only 106 pounds (5, p. 6).

Birth order. Among the seven assassins for whom we have birth-order data, two were only children, three were the youngest children in their families; one, Booth, was the ninth youngest in a family of ten; and only one, Czolgosz, was a middle child.

Broken homes. Six of the assassins came from broken homes, with the father either absent or unresponsive to the child. Booth was an illegitimate child whose father did not marry his mother until John was thirteen. Guiteau's mother died when he was seven, Czolgosz's mother when he was twelve. Schrank's father died when he was a child; the mother remarried, leaving Schrank to be reared by an aunt and an uncle. Zangara's mother died when he was two. Oswald's father died just after Lee Harvey was born; the mother remarried, the marriage ending in divorce.

Inferior social and sexual adjustment. Almost all the assassins were described as "loners"—individuals who had difficulty making friends of either sex, but especially who had poor and transitory relations with women. All were unmarried or had obviously unsuccessful marriages. Booth is an apparent exception having been gregarious with men and particularly attractive to women. However, in retrospect he appears to have been promiscuous with women, and his most lasting relationship was with a prostitute. His relationships with male friends were marred by outbursts of braggadocio, quarrelsomeness, and occasional violence. The significance of Collazo's and Torresola's exception will be discussed later.

Poor work record. None of the assassins, Collazo and Torresola again excepted, held a job one to three years prior to the assassination, although there was no evidence of physical disability. Two years before his attempt on Jackson, Lawrence, a competent house painter, stopped working and moved in with a sister. Booth developed a hoarseness (psychosomatic?) which greatly curtailed his acting schedule during the year prior to his attack on Lincoln. Guiteau, Schrank, Czolgosz, and Zangara had been steady workers but lost interest in their vocations after becoming interested in the causes which led to the assassinations. Oswald, too, was unable to keep a job after returning from Russia and lacked a well-developed sense of responsibility to his family.

Fanaticism. All the assassins were zealots for causes—individualistic, political, or religious—but in any case were unable to participate with others in their pursuit. Booth identified with the cause of the South, hoping by his murderous act to save the Confederacy by disrupting the Federal Government, even though Lee had already surrendered. Guiteau identified with the Stalwarts, a conservative wing of the Republican Party, but was rejected by its members when he offered to work for the Party. Schrank became obsessed with the dangers of a third-term presidency and so attempted to murder Theodore Roosevelt to prevent his election for a third term. Czolgosz and Zangara took as their cause the vindication of the poor and the downtrodden. According to their own testimony they had no personal hatred for their targets, but their attacks were the culmination of anger and resentment for the heads of state in general whom, they felt kept the poor working classes as underdogs. Lawrence, although obsessed by imagined personal grievances against Jackson, nevertheless focussed on his veto of the Charter of the United States Bank. He did not join any political action group, although many Americans were violently critical of Jackson. Finally, as is well known, Oswald attempted to join Communist groups in Russia and the United States only to be rejected by them (5, 9).

Again, Collazo and Terresola are the exceptions. They worked together as members of a small group of New York City revolutionaries, mostly immigrants from Puerto Rico who sought its independence from the United States and believed that the assassination of President Truman would strike a blow for Puerto Rican freedom. They also showed no grandiosity as all the others did.

Grandiosity. Finally, even though the commission did not note

it as a characteristic, the assassins expressed great ambition, vanity, and ideas of grandeur, taking it upon themselves to correct single-handedly the major wrongs of the world as they saw them.

Guiteau is quoted as having told his bride that "the world owed him a living" (5, p. 23), and for the assassination of President Garfield he chose the more expensive of two weapons because "he thought his most lasting relationship was with a prostitute. His relationships it would look handsome in a museum some day" (5, p. 42). Richard Lawrence suffered from delusions of grandeur, claiming a distant relation to Richard III of England. The boyhood chums of Lawrence nicknamed him King Dick because of his air of superiority (5, p. 64).

Czolgosz reported after the attack on McKinley, "I thought it wasn't right for any one man to get so much ceremony. I saw a great many people there saluting him, bowing to him, paying homage to him, and honoring the President" (5, p. 100).

Booth, failing as an actor because of hoarseness, and compared unfavorably with his older brother, often babbled about how "famous" a man could become by shooting Lincoln (5, p. 117). His choice of Ford's Theater and his leap onto the stage after the attack on Lincoln were deliberately dramatic acts calculated to insure his "fame." He had often boasted that when he left the stage for good he would be the most famous man in America (5, p. 219).

Schrank, according to the police report published after his attempt on Theodore Roosevelt, considered himself a man of heroic stature whose deed was paralleled by the generalship of Joan of Arc and other national saviors (5, p. 146).

Zangara felt that life had dealt him a raw deal. He envied capitalists, army officers, heads of state and other privileged classes. He detested playmates whose families were better off than he. One of his early memories was of himself as a seven-year-old boy shoveling dirt by the side of a road, filled with envy for a group of children passing by in a carriage on their way to school (5, pp. 150-151). And at the solemn moment of his electrocution he looked around the death chamber and inquired, "No cameramen? No movie to take a picture of Zangara?" (5, p. 168).

Finally, we have Oswald's search for status and fame—the writing of an "historic diary" in Russia, attempting to compile a history of the Russian factory worker (a task for which he was totally unqualified), his prediction that in twenty years he would be "prime minister," and his statement after his arrest that he knew his rights, and could handle his defense himself (9).

Consistent with their ideas of grandeur, none of the assailants showed the least remorse for his act, as indicated by the Task Force report and other analyses.

INTERPRETATION

If we correlate the common characteristics of the assassins against Adler's general theory of personality dynamics, it is clear that they validate the theory at a number of significant points.

Inferiority feelings. Starting with the fact that the assassins were short and slight in build we have the suggestion that their neurotic or psychotic arrangements or life styles were rooted, in part, in inferior physiques and organ systems—systems which Adler emphasized (3, pp. 222, 284) as important in the ontogenesis of inferiority feelings. Being foreign-born or of foreign-born parents would further increase the probability of the development of increased inferiority feeling by one so inclined.

Birth order and pampering. It will be recalled that among the seven assassins for whom we have birth-order information two were only children, three were youngest, and one was the ninth among ten. Both only and youngest children tend to be pampered, as Adler pointed out (3, pp. 380-381). Pampering means giving the child everything and doing everything for him, poor training for independence, for making social contributions, and for developing self-esteem.

Of the assassins about whose childhood we have the most information, Booth and Oswald (8), there seems to be little doubt that they were pampered, in spite of the peculiar circumstance of Booth's parents' irregular marital arrangements and Mrs. Oswald's otherwise overbearing personality.

Underdeveloped social interest. The characteristic of being a "loner" is obviously the converse of being a fellowman in Adler's view, an individual with a highly developed degree of social interest. While it is important to recognize that the failure to develop social interest may result in various forms of alienated, neurotic behavior, crime is one of them if combined with a high degree of activity. "What we really understand by crime is an intentional injury of others for one's own advantage" (4, p. 255). Or as Adler puts it in another connection: "We find that the goal of the criminal is always to be superior in a private and personal manner. What he is striving for contributes nothing to others. He is not cooperative. Society needs of its members, we all need of each other, a common usefulness, an ability to

cooperate. The goal of a criminal does not include this usefulness to society; and this is the really significant aspect of every criminal career" (2, p. 200).

No implication is intended here that the assassins were career-type criminals or recidivists. Nevertheless, in the eyes of the law they did commit a major crime—the greatest crime of all, the destruction of another human being for which they showed neither guilt nor remorse. Moreover, it is significant that their crimes (with the exception of Collazo and Terresola) did not even have the excuse that they were the instruments of organized political fanaticism or extremism, carrying out the orders of a revolutionary group.

Failure in the three life problems. According to Adler everyone is confronted with three life problems—friendship, occupation, and love and marriage (3, pp. 131-133.) Not only were the assassins loners in the ordinary social sense, most of them were also unable to develop meaningful relationships with women, to which the failure of their parents to form meaningful relationships with each other and with their children probably contributed. Similarly, the assassins, except Truman's assailants, were failures at their vocations. They either quit working altogether or were unable to hold steady employment. It seems appropriate to point out that the assassins failed not at merely one of the life problems but that they failed at all three.

Superiority complex. We have seen how the assassins grew up under circumstances which are likely to generate strong feelings of inferiority and that they failed in life's three major problem areas. How can failure and inferiority be reconciled with the grandiose ideas and behavior characteristic of the assassins?

Adler's term for grandiosity was "superiority complex," a pattern which represents a way of compensating for intense feelings of inferiority. "If we inquire into a superiority complex and study its continuity, we can always find a more or less hidden inferiority complex" (1, p. 27). Adler saw each behavioral act as a movement from a past inferiority to a future superiority, the two complexes, therefore, representing the two poles of the movement. "In an inferiority complex we are interested in the beginning, while in a superiority complex we are most interested in the continuity, in the progression of the movement itself. Moreover, the two complexes are naturally related. We should not be astonished if in the cases where we see an inferiority complex we find a superiority complex more hidden" (1, p. 27). In other words, the more intense the inferiority

feelings, the higher the goal set by the individual by way of spurious compensation. What higher spurious goal then to kill the head of a great state?

THE EXCEPTIONS

In the composite portrait of the assassins, two of the nine, Oscar Collazo and Griselio Torresola, have consistently been the exceptions. They did not come from broken homes, they were able to hold their jobs, and Collazo, the leader of the pair, was a married man. They did not, moreover, pursue their cause as loners but were active members of a revolutionary organization, and, in fact, attempted jointly to assassinate President Truman. They did not, finally, display extreme ideas of grandiosity characteristic of the other assassins.

We must now face the question as to whether the rule must be forfeit to the exception. Logically any theory ought to be able to explain an exception as well as the cases which support it. The traditional way to handle exceptions is to ignore them—as in fact the Task Force report does in this instance. Significantly, Adlerian theory is fully capable of making the exception support the rule.

First of all, in differing from the others in possessing a better work record and in the absence of ideas of grandiosity, Truman's assailants show greater normality, which according to Adler is a function of social interest, connectedness, and cooperation. Indeed, Hastings considers them the only two of the nine assassins who were not suffering from overt mental disorders (6, p. 94). That they embarked on their deed not singly but together is obviously further evidence of their ability to cooperate. Moreover, they were members of a small revolutionary group. Thus, their cause was not a purely private one as was true of the others.

Even though Collazo and Torresola are less deviant than the other assassins, it must be pointed out that, according to Adler (3, p. 449), groups are also to be judged by their degree of social interest, their ultimate interest in the general goals of mankind, and the reasonableness of the group's special goals. From this viewpoint the group to which Collazo and Torresola belonged cannot be rated highly. To conspire to assassinate the president of a democratically governed country like the United States cannot be reconciled with highly developed social interest.

This suggests that even the act of assassination is not an absolute but is to be judged "according to the degree of social interest which is expressed in it" (3, p. 449). The assassination of a democratically

elected leader can actually be carried out only for private reasons even if these are shared by a group. It attracts the pseudo-heroes described above or the members of fanatic groups. Such acts differ sharply from the assassinations of the world's tyrants which, by contrast, have typically attracted men with a highly developed sense of duty to mankind in general and to their nations in particular.

SUMMARY

The report of the Task Force on Political Assassination to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence (1969) found that their nine white male subjects were all zealots, foreign-born or had foreign-born parents; tended to be short and slight; to come from broken homes; to be loners, unmarried or marriage failures; and to be unable to work steadily. Not noted in the report but obvious from the content was a common characteristic of grandiosity. Each of these aspects is part of Adler's understanding of the criminal personality, and we have shown how they all fit together to form a picture of the dynamics of the assassin. Even the cases of the two exceptions among the assassins can be understood in terms of these dynamics. Thus the salient characteristics developed and described by the Task Force independently of Adlerian theory, confirm it strikingly.

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