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Direct Assaults Against Presidents, Presidents-Elect, and Candidates

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Summary

Direct assaults against Presidents, Presidents-elect, and candidates have occurred on 15 separate occasions, with five resulting in death. Ten incumbents (about 23% of the 43 individuals to serve in the office), including four of the seven most recent Presidents, have been victims or targets. Four of the 10 (and one candidate) died as a result of the attacks. This report identifies these incidents and provides information about what happened, when, where, and, if known, why. The report will be updated and revised if developments require.

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Introduction

Concerns about the safety of Presidents have existed throughout the history of the Republic, beginning with George Washington in 1794, when he led troops against the Whiskey Rebellion in Pennsylvania.¹ The intervening years have witnessed a variety of incidents of actual and potential harm to Presidents (as well as immediate family members and other high-ranking officials). These situations extend to illegal entries onto the White House grounds and the White House itself; violence and conflict near the President's residence or where he was visiting; unauthorized aircraft flying near the White House and, in one instance, a plane crashing into the building; schemes to use airplanes to attack the White House; other threats of attack, including bombings and armed assaults; feared kidnapping and hostage-taking; assassination plots; as well as immediate, direct assaults against Presidents.² In addition to incumbents, Presidents-elect and candidates for the office have been subject to assaults or threats.³

¹ For background information and citations, see U.S. Congress, House Select Committee on Assassinations, *Report: Findings and Recommendations*, H.Rept. 95-1828, Part 2, 95th Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington: GPO, 1979); U.S. Department of the Treasury, *Background Information on the White House Security Review* (Washington: Department of the Treasury, 1995), pp. 51-101; U.S. National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, *Final Report* (Washington: GPO, 1969), pp. 122-124; James E. Kirkham, et al., *Assassination and Political Violence: A Report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence* (Washington: GPO, 1969), p. 22; U.S. President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy, *Report* (Washington: GPO, 1964), pp. 504-515; James W. Clarke, *American Assassins: The Darker Side of Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); Frederick M. Kaiser, "Presidential Assassinations and Assaults: Characteristics and Impact on Protective Procedures," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 11, Fall 1981, pp. 545-558, and "Origins of Secret Service Protection of the President: Personal, Interagency, and Institutional Conflict," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 18, Winter 1988, pp. 101-128; Philip H. Melanson, *The Secret Service* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2002); *Facts on File Yearbook, 1994*, p. 877, and 1995, p. 361; "Police Shoot Man Near White House," *Washington Post*, February 8, 2001, pp. A1, A10; extensive press coverage of the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center, along with the possible targeting of the White House or Capitol, on September 11, 2001, including *U.S. News and World Report*, Special Report, September 14, 2001, pp. 17-27, and *Newsweek*, Extra Edition [September 12, 2001], p. 32; press coverage in 2005 and 2006 of an incident involving President George W. Bush in Tbilisi, Republic of Georgia; and congressional hearings on a security breach at a state dinner at the White House on November 24, 2009, U.S. House Committee on Homeland Security, *The United States Secret Service and Presidential Protection: An Examination of a System Failure*, hearings, 111th Cong., 1st sess, Dec. 2, 2009.

² Illustrative of these are: apprehension about President Madison (and his wife) being taken hostage, when British troops invaded Washington, DC, in 1814; rocks thrown at President Tyler by an intoxicated painter; fears of kidnapping and assassination of Abraham Lincoln, beginning with his journey to Washington, DC, for the inauguration in 1861; shots fired at President Lincoln by Confederate troops, when he was observing a battle between them and Union forces stationed at Fort Stevens, July 11-12, 1864; allegations of a possible kidnapping of President Cleveland's children, along with unknown intruders at his summer vacation property, in 1894, while at the same time he was threatened by Colorado gamblers who had traveled to Washington, and separately, by sympathizers of Coxey's Army, who wanted to "remove" Cleveland from office; stalking of President Nixon, by the same person who later, in 1972, shot presidential candidate George Wallace; a planned airplane attack on the White House, which literally never got off the ground, because the pilot (and would-be assassin) was killed before the craft was airborne, in 1974; a car, driven by a man wired with explosives, crashing through the White House gates, also in 1974; discovery of a truck containing explosives outside a building that was being used as the "mobile White House," when President Clinton was visiting Belfast, Northern Ireland's capital; a shooting incident outside the White House fence on February 7, 2001, in which the assailant, who was wounded, was charged with assaulting a federal officer; on September 11, 2001, an aborted attempt to use a hijacked commercial airliner possibly to crash into the White House or the Capitol, as three other airplanes had been used to attack the Pentagon and the World Trade Center in New York; occasional security breaches of the White House grounds and state functions; along with hundreds of threats yearly against the President, family members, and high-ranking officials.

³ Protection of these individuals, along with others, falls to the U.S. Secret Service (18 U.S.C. 3056), which can call upon other agencies to assist it. This duty began in 1894 with President Cleveland and his family; other specific assignments have been added since then to include vice presidents, immediate family members, former presidents, and

General Findings

This report identifies assassinations of and other direct assaults against Presidents, Presidents-elect, and candidates for the office of President.⁴ There have been 15 such attacks (against 14 individuals), with five resulting in death. The first incident occurred in 1835, involving President Andrew Jackson, when an attacker's pistol misfired. The most recent occurred in 2005, when a would-be assassin in Tbilisi, Republic of Georgia, tossed a grenade (which did not explode) at the platform where President George W. Bush and the Georgian President were speaking. The tally of victims reveals the following:

- Of the 43 individuals serving as President, 10 (or about 23%) have been subject to actual or attempted assassinations. Four of these 10 incumbents—Abraham Lincoln, James A. Garfield, William McKinley, and John F. Kennedy—were slain.
- Four of the seven most recent Presidents have been targets of assaults: Gerald R. Ford (twice in 1975), Ronald W. Reagan (in a near-fatal shooting in 1981), William J. Clinton (when the White House was fired upon in 1994), and George W. Bush (when an attacker tossed a grenade, which did not explode, towards him and the President of Georgia at a public gathering in Tbilisi in 2005).
- Two others who served as President were attacked, either as a President-elect (Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933) or as a presidential candidate (Theodore Roosevelt in 1912, when he was seeking the presidency after being out of office for nearly four years).
- Two other presidential candidates—Robert F. Kennedy, who was killed in 1968, and George C. Wallace, who was seriously wounded in 1972—were also victims, during the primaries.
- In only one of these 15 incidents (the Lincoln assassination) was a broad conspiracy proven, although such contentions have arisen on other occasions.⁵ Only one other incident involved more than one participant (the 1950 assault on Blair House, the temporary residence of President Harry S Truman); but no evidence of other conspirators emerged from the subsequent investigation or prosecution.

persons serving as representatives of the president abroad, among others. For background and further citations, see CRS Report RL34603, *The U.S. Secret Service: An Examination and Analysis of Its Evolving Missions*, by Shawn Reese.

⁴ Speculation had long existed that President Zachary Taylor, who was a foe of extending slavery, was poisoned by pro-slavery conspirators in 1850, a suspicion arising in part because his symptoms at the time of his death resembled those of arsenic poisoning. A 1991 laboratory analysis of Taylor's remains, however, found only minuscule levels of arsenic, which could not have caused illness, let alone death. A forensic anthropologist concluded that President Taylor died of natural causes, perhaps from contaminated food he had eaten or possibly from the treatments—cathartics and laxatives—for gastroenteritis and acute diarrhea. William R. Maples and Michael Browning, *Dead Men Do Tell Tales* (New York: Doubleday, 1994).

⁵ Regarding the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the 1964 Warren Commission inquiry concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. U.S. President's Commission, *Report*, p. 22. A 1979 congressional investigation determined, however, that the President "was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy. The Committee is unable to identify the other gunman or the extent of the conspiracy." House Select Committee on Assassinations, *Report*, p. 1. In addition, a conspiracy was initially suspected in President McKinley's murder, in 1901, because his assailant was a self-described "anarchist," a designation applied to assassins of European leaders in the same time period. Extensive investigations by the U.S. Secret Service, as well as Buffalo and New York State law enforcement agencies and prosecutors, however, found no evidence that McKinley's assailant was aided by anyone else.

- Of the 15 direct assaults, 11 relied upon pistols, two on automatic weapons, one on a rifle, and one on a grenade. All but two of the attacks (both against Gerald Ford) were committed by men.
- All but one of the 15 assaults occurred within the United States.

Specific Incidents

The following table identifies the direct assaults on Presidents, Presidents-elect, and candidates for the office of President. It specifies the date when the assault occurred, the victim, his political party affiliation, the length of his administration at the time of the attack or whether he was then a candidate or President-elect, the location of the attack, its method and result, and the name of the assailant, along with the professed or alleged reason for the attack (if known).

Table I. Direct Assaults on Presidents, Presidents-Elect, and Presidential Candidates

Date	Victim	Political Party	Length of Administration at Time of Attack, or Candidate or President-elect	Location	Method of Attack and Result	Assailant and Professed or Alleged Reason
01/30/1835	Andrew Jackson	Democrat	5 years, 11 months	Washington, DC	Pistol, misfired	Richard Lawrence, declared insane; said Jackson was preventing him from obtaining large sums of money and was ruining the country
04/14/1865	Abraham Lincoln	Republican	4 years, 1 month	Washington, DC	Pistol, killed	John Wilkes Booth, killed before being captured; loyalty to the Confederacy; revenge for its defeat; pro-slavery stand
07/02/1881	James A. Garfield	Republican	6 months	Washington, DC	Pistol, killed	Charles Guiteau, convicted; disgruntled office-seeker and supporter of opposition faction in Republican Party
09/06/1901	William McKinley	Republican	4 years, 6 months	Buffalo, NY	Pistol, killed	Leon F. Czolgosz, convicted; anarchist ideology and class antagonism
10/14/1912	Theodore Roosevelt	Progressive (Bull Moose)	Candidate (had been President from 1901-1909)	Milwaukee, WI	Pistol, wounded	John Schrank, declared insane; had vision that McKinley wanted him to avenge his death
02/15/1933	Franklin D. Roosevelt	Democrat	President-elect, 3 weeks prior to inauguration	Miami, FL	Pistol, bullets missed the President-elect (but fatally wounded Chicago mayor Anton Cermak standing nearby)	Giuseppe Zangara, convicted of murdering Cermak; hated rulers and capitalists
11/01/1950	Harry S Truman	Democrat	5 years, 6½ months	Washington, DC	Automatic weapons, shots fired at Blair House, then the temporary residence of the President, who was inside and unharmed (but a White House police officer was killed and two others wounded)	Oscar Collazo, convicted of the murder of the police officer and attempted murder of the President and the two wounded policemen, and Griselio Torresola, killed at the scene; both espoused Puerto Rican independence
11/22/1963	John F. Kennedy	Democrat	2 years, 10 months	Dallas, TX	Rifle, killed	Lee Harvey Oswald, killed before trial; motive unknown

Date	Victim	Political Party	Length of Administration at Time of Attack, or Candidate or President-elect	Location	Method of Attack and Result	Assailant and Professed or Alleged Reason
06/05/1968	Robert F. Kennedy	Democrat	Candidate and U.S. Senator	Los Angeles, CA	Pistol, killed	Sirhan Sirhan, convicted; opposed candidate's stand on Israeli-Arab conflict
05/15/1972	George C. Wallace	Democrat	Candidate and Governor of Alabama	Laurel, MD	Pistol, wounded candidate along with three others	Arthur Bremer, convicted and imprisoned in Maryland (maximum sentence to 2025); motive not clearly established; released from prison on Nov. 9, 2007, to remain under supervision until 2025
09/05/1975	Gerald R. Ford	Republican	1 year, 1 month	Sacramento, CA	Pistol, misfired	Lynette Alice Fromme, convicted and imprisoned; member of extremist "Manson family"; released from prison in 2009
09/22/1975	Gerald R. Ford	Republican	1 year, 1½ months	San Francisco, CA	Pistol, missed target	Sara Jane Moore, convict, asserted goal of bringing about "the upheaval of needed change," revolutionary ideology; imprisoned; released on Dec. 31, 2007
03/30/1981	Ronald W. Reagan	Republican	2½ months	Washington, DC	Pistol, wounded	John W. Hinkley, Jr., found not guilty by reason of insanity; committed to a mental institution
10/29/1994	William J. Clinton	Democrat	1 year, 9 months	Washington, DC	Semi-automatic assault rifle, shot at White House while President was inside	Francisco M. Duran, convicted of attempted assassination on April 4, 1995; imprisoned
05/10/2005	George W. Bush	Republican	4 years, 4 months	Tbilisi, Republic of Georgia	Grenade, which did not explode, thrown at President Bush and Republic of Georgia President at a public gathering	Attacker convicted of attempted assassination and of killing a police officer when the attacker was arrested later; motive unknown

Sources: Kirkham, et al., *Assassination and Political Violence*, p. 22; Kaiser, "Presidential Assassinations and Assaults," p. 547; *Facts on File Yearbook*, 1994, p. 877, and 1995, p. 361; and 2005-2006 press coverage of the incident in Tblisi.

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