

Assassination: As American as Apple Pie?

By Mel Ayton

In every campaign [it has been determined] that there have been people—for lack of a better word—stalking candidates with ill intent.

Eljay B. Bowron
Director, Secret Service, 1993-1997

There have been notorious, as well as unknown, assassination attempts, plots, and threats against incumbent US presidents throughout American history, from George Washington to Barack Obama.

Much less well known is that there have been numerous assassination attempts, threats and plots against men and women running for the presidency, as well as holders of and candidates for the office of vice president. Many of these plotters, fortunately, changed their mind at the last second when confronted by tight security. But some would-be assassins nearly succeeded.

The Secret Service investigates literally hundreds of assassination threats against candidates during presidential election cycles, and also threats to assassinate vice presidential candidates. Since the agency steadfastly refuses to discuss protective intelligence and methods, no one will ever know for sure though how many plots have been thwarted. One presidential candidate, John Schmitz, once likened the Secret Service to a lighthouse: “you don’t count the ships they save.” Former agent Joseph Petro has opined about the “many times” an attacker was waiting to strike but then aborted his or her mission because of the heavy bodyguard protection around a candidate.[\[1\]](#)

Many potential assassins have possessed the “means, motive and opportunity” to carry out their act but their plans have been foiled before they could gain any proximity to the candidate. Other armed threateners have gained proximity to their targets and have been in a position to attack. An “attempted assassination,” therefore, can be defined as an armed individual who has approached a presidential candidate with ill intent or waited for an opportunity to kill a candidate even if they have been foiled at the last minute by stringent security or other circumstances. Many would-be assassins who fall under this category are well-known and include the men who shot presidential candidates Robert Kennedy and George Wallace. However, little-

known to the general public are the attempts to kill vice presidents, and presidential candidates such as Barry Goldwater, Ted Kennedy, John Lindsay, Eugene McCarthy, George H.W. Bush and Gary Hart.

Vice Presidents

A general assumption exists that no one has ever attempted to assassinate a sitting vice president, on the grounds that the holder of this office has no real political power and a low profile. An assassin would preferably go after the person with the real power: the president.

Yet at least two attempts to assassinate a vice president have been documented. One involved Abraham Lincoln's vice president, Andrew Johnson (in concert with a simultaneous attack on the president). The other was on Woodrow Wilson's running mate, Thomas Marshall.

John Wilkes Booth's co-conspirator, George Atzerodt, was given the task of killing Johnson, but he never attempted to carry it out. Instead, he got drunk in a hotel bar while the conspiracy against Lincoln, along with his secretary of state, William Seward, proceeded. Had the entire plot unfolded successfully, the president pro tempore of the Senate, Lafayette Foster, a Republican from Connecticut, would have become president. (Booth's plan was to decapitate the head of the US government and his executive successors).

The second incident involving a vice president occurred on the evening of 2 July 1915 when Eric Muentner, an anarchist who opposed US support of the allied war effort, broke into the Senate chamber. He placed dynamite around Vice President Thomas R. Marshall's office door and set it with a timer. Muentner was later apprehended and confessed.^[2]

There is compelling evidence of at least three more attacks on vice presidents: that list—Charles W. Fairbanks (under Theodore Roosevelt), Hubert H. Humphrey (Lyndon Johnson), and most recently, George H.W. Bush (Ronald Reagan).

After President William McKinley's assassination in 1901, then-Senator Fairbanks became an outspoken advocate for banning anarchists from entering the country. He said in one speech, "The anarchist stands as the personification of the destroyer [I]t certainly is consistent with the spirit of our constitution to protect ourselves against anarchism by federal action of a drastic character."^[3]

Fairbanks himself then became a target. The attempt occurred in Flint, Michigan in June 1905, the year he became Roosevelt's vice president. He was there to lay the cornerstone for a new federal building, in a ceremony attended by about 2,000 people.

Fairbanks had been speaking for 20 minutes when 32-year-old James McConnell, later described variously as a "blacksmith" and "anarchist," forced his way through the crowd until he reached Fairbanks's side, all the while holding a revolver concealed in his hip pocket. Four police detectives caught the would-be assassin and "choked him into submission."

The crowd reacted angrily. Soldiers from a nearby army base in Fort Wayne shouted "lynch him." As the confrontation between the crowd and the police escalated McConnell reportedly pleaded with the arresting officers to protect him. After the incident Fairbanks continued with his speech, apparently unfazed. Meanwhile McConnell found his courage again in

the police station. He told officers “his [McConnell’s] time would come soon; that he would yet be able to carry out his purpose and assassinate the vice president.”^[4]

At the time there was no federal statute under which McConnell could be prosecuted, so he was charged with disorderly conduct. Flint police found the anarchist had been stalking Fairbanks beginning in Chicago. Fairbanks said he had been unaware that an attempt had been made on his life and, according to contemporary accounts, “treated the matter lightly.”^[5]

There were three attempts on the life of Hubert Humphrey when he was vice president. During a visit to Australia, a mentally-ill man armed with a pistol gained proximity to the vice president but changed his mind at the last second. During a visit to then-South Vietnam, Viet Cong guerrillas targeted Humphrey while he was attending the swearing-in ceremonies for President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and Vice President Nguyễn Cao Kỳ. Humphrey escaped unharmed.^[6]

The most serious attempt occurred in 1965 during a visit to Louisiana.

Humphrey had been invited to speak in Baton Rouge by a friend, Victor Bussie, head of the Louisiana AFL-CIO. The date set was 9 April 1965, at the Jack Tar Capitol House Hotel. As Humphrey arrived, a gunman stood up and reached for a revolver that he had concealed under his coat. Federal agents subdued him and led him out a kitchen door. A second would-be assassin was also arrested and removed from the ballroom; when agents searched his car, they found a gun. There was a third man on the assassination team but he had left before Humphrey arrived. The plotters were questioned but never charged on the grounds of insufficient evidence.

Lastly, in 1988 as Vice President (and also presidential candidate) George H.W. Bush shook hands with campaign supporters in Owensboro, Kentucky, David Russell took photographs of him and came within 40 feet of Bush while armed with a .45-calibre handgun. After the rally he wrote a threatening letter in which he said he would kill Bush unless the vice president dropped out of the race. Russell was later arrested by Secret Service agents at his home; the judge who heard the case observed that Russell “obviously intended to carry out his threats.”^[7]

Presidential Candidates

While Bush qualifies as a vice president who faced mortal danger, there are many instances of planned attacks because of the other hat Bush was wearing: that of presidential candidate.

Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater was the Republican nominee in 1964. The GOP standard bearer lost in a landslide to Lyndon Johnson, carrying only six states: Alabama, Arizona, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi and South Carolina, while winning less than 39 percent of the popular vote. Eleven years later Goldwater revealed an encounter with a would-be assassin armed with a rifle. He had been told about it by one of his bodyguards. “I had one threat,” Goldwater recalled, “from a man with a rifle someplace in Ohio but they (his protective detail) talked him into waiting until my plane took off.”^[8]

Four years later, following the assassination of presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy, the atmosphere of violence that it (along with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination) exemplified threatened still another candidate: Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy, who had been vying with Kennedy for the Democratic nomination. He was visiting St. John’s University

in Collegeville, Minnesota, where he once taught, for rest and recuperation. McCarthy, whose Secret Service codename was “Snowstorm,” had been physically affected by the tragedy. One friend said the senator felt “guilt” over having taunted RFK during the campaign. Another aide, though, allegedly heard McCarthy say that Kennedy “brought it on himself” by expressing support for Israel.[\[9\]](#)

While dining with the faculty one night, McCarthy got into an argument with one of the teachers, an unnamed monk. The monk was carrying a concealed revolver and tried to attack McCarthy with it as their disagreement escalated. He was restrained by the senator’s Secret Service detail which President Johnson had ordered for all the remaining candidates.[\[10\]](#)

The threatening political environment in 1968 not only affected Democrats, however.

Since his election as New York’s mayor in 1965, John Lindsay had been touted by the media as a future presidential candidate. In June 1968, a week after Kennedy’s assassination, Lindsay was confronted by an armed stalker when the mayor appeared on the steps of City Hall for an outdoor ceremony. A police officer noticed Carlos Alberto Valle had a knife protruding from his belt. The officer pulled the knife out and arrested the would-be assassin. Valle was sent to a mental institution, and no charges were made against him.

Nine months later, Valle called the local offices of the FBI and Secret Service and threatened to kill a newly elected president, Richard Nixon. In 1981 he would threaten to assassinate President Reagan.[\[11\]](#)

The last surviving Kennedy brother was an obvious target after 1968, especially when he too entered the presidential arena.

On 28 November 1979, after Senator Ted Kennedy had announced he intended to mount a challenge to the renomination of incumbent President Jimmy Carter, it was only by chance that he avoided assassination. Susan Osgood, a deranged woman armed with a knife, entered his Senate office. She was a 38-year-old woman who lived in Boston, and had attended Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts. Coincidentally, one of her classmate Esther Newberg, one of the so-called “boiler room girls,” a group of young women who had worked on Robert Kennedy’s campaign and attended the infamous cook-out on the night of the Chappaquiddick drama.

Osgood had a long history of personality disorders and had been hospitalized for schizophrenia at various hospitals in New York, New Jersey and New Hampshire. She had also attempted suicide three times. But she was released once doctors found she was not dangerous to herself or others. According to her mother, Anne, Susan had no apparent interest in politics or the Kennedys, although after the event the *Boston Globe* reported that notes found in her apartment indicated she was a supporter of President Carter and Vice President Walter Mondale.

On the day in question Osgood entered Kennedy’s Senate office in the Russell Building shortly before 10 AM. One of Kennedy’s receptionists, Mary Ann Mikulich, said, “I was sitting at my desk when a woman came in with a big hunting knife, just yelling at the top of her voice. She didn’t say anything.” Joseph Meusbarger, one of several Secret Service agents on duty in Kennedy’s office, grappled with Osgood and was able to subdue her but not before he suffered a light cut on his left wrist. Kennedy, who had been working in a nearby office, was not informed of the attack until Osgood had been handcuffed and taken away. He praised “the obvious courage” of his Secret Service detail.[\[12\]](#)

Osgood was arraigned in federal court and remanded to St. Elizabeth's psychiatric hospital until April, 1980, when she was transferred to a District of Columbia jail. She steadfastly refused to explain why she had attempted to attack Kennedy. She did, however, inform jail staff that, as a Christian Scientist, she would not accept medical or psychiatric treatment or examination.[\[13\]](#)

Ted Kennedy's second serious brush with death came a year after Osgood's attempt. In December 1980—four months before he attempted to assassinate Ronald Reagan—25-year-old John Hinckley arrived in the reception room of Kennedy's Senate office. He sat down in a wooden armchair and when he was approached by a secretary, he told her he, “. . . wanted a moment with the senator.” When advised the senator had a busy schedule that day, Hinckley said he was in no particular hurry and would wait. Later it turned out Hinckley was armed with a revolver and planned to shoot Kennedy the moment he saw him.

After waiting three hours Hinckley gave up and left. On 31 March 1981 he shot Reagan as the president was leaving the Washington Hilton Hotel, in an attack that was nearly fatal.[\[14\]](#)

During the 1984 presidential campaign, Colorado Senator Gary Hart was the target of a number of plots, including one serious attempt that nearly succeeded.

Hart was in San Francisco to meeting with his rival for the Democratic nomination, former Vice President Walter Mondale. Hart was planning to leave the St. Francis Hotel shortly before they were to rendezvous at the nearby Le Méridien Hotel. A Secret Service agent on Hart's detail noticed a pistol protruding from a “knapsack-type device” being carried by a 25-year-old man named Robert Carlson. When challenged Carlson ran away; however, agents and police caught up with him, pushed him down on the ground, and searched him. They found a loaded .38 revolver in his backpack. Carlson was arrested and charged with carrying a loaded firearm and concealed weapon. The incident involving Hart happened not far from the 1975 attempted assassination of then-President Gerald Ford.[\[15\]](#)

Growing More Frequent?

An attack on a presidential candidate or vice president is commonly perceived as an irrational and deranged action. Ergo, the would-be assassin must be mentally ill. In most cases, however, mental illness is not a primary precipitating cause. The threats or attacks are the result of a desire to achieve political goals, act out some perceived personal grievance, or vent anger and/or satisfy a grudge. To be sure, almost all would-be assassins have some type of psychological or emotional disturbance that could be categorized as “mental illness.”[\[16\]](#)

Even for those attackers diagnosed as having a pronounced mental illness, like Susan Osgood or Deborah Butler, their attacks were a means to call attention to themselves. Their illnesses generally did not prevent them from rationally planning the attacks. In fact, the presence of a mental illness did not necessarily mitigate the influence of their political belief system as conscious motivation for the crime.

Some people may question whether heightened security measures for presidential candidates are appropriate in a democratic society. But in such societies, the term “citizen” is consistent with the idea of being part of a political system that is “ruled by the people,” and taking measures for the personal security of political leaders benefits the entire citizenry. The cost

of protecting them may seem high (though not in comparison to other public expenditures), and nonetheless crucial to a democratic society.

The protection of presidential candidates is a two-way street, however. Whilst further funding should heighten safety it is also incumbent on candidates to avoid the type of reckless behavior during campaigns variously exhibited by candidates such as Lyndon Johnson, Robert Kennedy and George Wallace.

There have been many more assassination threats and attempts against vice presidents and presidential candidates than the public has generally been aware of. Given that threats against congressmen and congresswomen have been growing exponentially in recent years, the issue of greater concern than ever. It can be argued though that failure to take the necessary steps will inevitably exacerbate the problem. If violence against leading politicians becomes more successful, it will become routine.

This article is adapted from Mel Ayton's [*Protecting the Presidential Candidates—From JFK to Biden*](#), published by Frontline Books in 2021. It is the third in his series of books about presidential protection, following *Hunting The President—Threats, Plots and Assassination Attempts—From FDR to Obama* (2014), and *Plotting To Kill The President—Assassination Attempts From Washington To Hoover* (2017).

[1] Brad Koplinski, *Hats in the Ring* (Bethesda, MD: Presidential Publishing, 2000), 494; Joseph Petro with Jeffrey Robinson, *Standing Next To History: An Agent's Life Inside The Secret Service* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2005), 23.

[2] *The Ogden (Utah) Standard*, 15 July 1915.

[3] Scott Miller, *The President and the Assassin: McKinley, Terror, and Empire at the Dawn of the American Century* (New York: Random House, 2011), 310.

[4] "Man Attempts to Shoot Fairbanks—Blacksmith Tries To Kill Vice President Before Vast Michigan Throng," *Butler, Michigan Weekly Times*, 15 June 1905.

[5] *Ibid.*, and "Fairbanks Attacked By Anarchist," *San Francisco Call*, 8 June 1905.

[6] Stephen Spignesi, *In the Crosshairs: Famous Assassinations and Attempts from Julius Caesar to John Lennon* (Franklin Lakes, NJ: New Page Books, 2003) 52; Jerry Parr with Carolyn Parr, *In the Secret Service: The True Story of the Man Who Saved President Reagan's Life* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2013), 102

[7] "Man Given 22 Months for Bush Threat," *Kentucky New Era*, 17 May 1989.

- [8] US Senate, Committee on Appropriations, *Review of Secret Service Protective Measures*, Hearings, 94th Congress, 1st Sess., (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office 1975), 46.
- [9] David Greenberg, “After the Assassination: How Gene McCarthy’s Response to Bobby Kennedy’s Murder Crippled the Democrats,” *Slate*, 4 June 2008.
- [10] Dominic Sandbrook, *Eugene McCarthy: The Rise and Fall of Postwar American Liberalism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 206; see also Kathleen Hughes, *The Monk’s Tale: A Biography of Godfrey Diekmann, O.S.B.* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 293.
- [11] [United States v Carlos Alberto Valle](#), 9 December 1982, Justia.com.
- [12] B. Drummond Ayres, Jr., “[Woman Wielding a Hunting Knife Subdued in Kennedy Senate Office](#),” *New York Times*, 29 November 1979.
- [13] [Osgood v. District of Columbia](#), 5 July 1983, Justia.com.
- [14] David Lester, *Good Ted, Bad Ted: The Two Faces of Edward M. Kennedy* (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publishing Group, 1993), 197.
- [15] [People v. Carlson](#), 24 June 1986, Justia.com.
- [16] J. Reid Meloy, Lorraine Sheridan, Jens Hoffmann, eds., *Stalking, Threatening, and Attacking Public Figures: A Psychological and Behavioral Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 69.