

Assassination in the United States: An Operational Study of Recent Assassins, Attackers, and Near-Lethal Approachers*

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ABSTRACT: This study is the first operational exploration of the thinking and behavior of all 83 persons known to have attacked, or approached to attack, a prominent public official or public figure in the United States since 1949. In addition to data about each attack or near-attack and each subject's demographic and background characteristics, information was gathered about each subject's ideas and actions in the days and weeks before their attacks or near-lethal approaches. Questions were examined about each subject's movement from the idea of attack to actual attack, motives, selection of targets, planning, communication of threat and intent, symptoms of mental illness, and significant life experiences. In every case, the attack or near-attack was the end result of an understandable, and often discernible, process of thinking and action. Implications for protectors, investigators, and researchers are discussed.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, assassination, threat assessment, protective intelligence

Assassination of public leaders has occurred, and been written about, since biblical days. Political murder, assassination, and tyrannicide—and other violence attempted against political leaders—has concerned politicians, police and security experts, scholars, and the public in every age and on each continent.

In the United States, there have been flurries of writing about assassination since Richard Lawrence attacked President Andrew Jackson with two pistols in 1835. Each presidential assassination or assassination attempt has sparked a series of books and articles, both in the scholarly and popular press. The assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy, and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in the 1960s, provoked many efforts to describe and analyze the phenomenon of American assassination. Attempts on the lives of presidential candidate George Wallace, President Gerald Ford, and President Ronald Reagan, in the 1970s and in 1981, have kept this focus alive.

Since 1963, more than 130 reports, articles, and books have been written about assassination and behaviors that were seen as directly related to this form of violence. Added to this number are

the several thousand articles and books about particular assassinations and attacks, such as the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Work on assassination has included studies within and across scholarly disciplines and has involved efforts of historians, political scientists, sociologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, and other social and behavioral analysts (1,2).

However, there is almost no literature about assassination or attacks on public officials and public figures written from a law enforcement perspective. The lack of law enforcement studies about assassination, including those from an operational perspective, seems especially important in light of how police chiefs view this subject. Pontell et al. (3) surveyed 173 police chiefs in the United States and asked them to rate 60 selected offenses in terms of seriousness. Assassination of a public official was seen as the most serious offense.

The United States Secret Service is the (Department of the Treasury) law enforcement agency designated to protect the President, the President's family, the Vice President and family, former Presidents, visiting heads of states, candidates for President during a campaign year, nominees for President and Vice President and their spouses, and certain other national leaders. To aid in fulfillment of its protective responsibilities, the Secret Service has sponsored conferences of experts to investigate the phenomenon of assassination (4).

There are two related components to protection. Protection encompasses a range of functions and services aimed at deterring or stopping an assault on a protected person. For example, uniformed and plainclothes security officers may maintain positions around a protected person. These protectors are prepared to stop an assailant and to shield the protectee from harm. This protection is obvious and observable. The other aspect of protection is discreet and less visible. "Protective Intelligence" seeks to prevent lethal access to a protectee. Protection is most effective if persons and groups with the intention and capacity to mount an attack on a protected person are identified and stopped before they come near a protectee. To gather information and develop knowledge that might aid law enforcement organizations to fulfill protective responsibilities for public officials and public figures and to expand the pool of knowledge about assassins and assassination, the Secret Service has also conducted research related to assassination.

The Secret Service Exceptional Case Study Project (ECSP) is the latest such effort (5). The ECSP is a study of all persons in the United States known to have attacked, or approached to attack, a prominent public official or figure since 1949. The study has focused on the thinking and behavior of attackers and near-attackers in the days, weeks, and months before their assaults or near-lethal approaches. The ECSP is the first study of the known universe of recent American assassins and near-assassins. Previous assassination studies either examined the demographic and psycho-

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logical characteristics of a relatively few assassins or studied persons who made threats but never came close to mounting an attack (1). The Secret Service Exceptional Case Study Project has been a departure from this mode. Unlike studies about threateners, the subject group of the ECSP is *persons who have acted in lethal or near-lethal ways*. Unlike most studies of assassins, the ECSP focuses on the *thoughts and behaviors* of study subjects before their attacks and near-attacks, not only on demographic characteristics or clinical status, or on people who have simply made threats.

Methods

Purposes

The Secret Service Exceptional Case Study Project was developed to generate knowledge useful to both physical protection and protective intelligence functions. The study was designed to be operational. The ECSP did not attempt to explore the root causes of assassination, social factors involved in assassination, the criminal responsibility of assassins and near-assassins, or the treatment needs of mentally disordered persons who attempt to attack a public official or figure.

The fundamental purpose of the ECSP was to gather and analyze information that Secret Service agents and other law enforcement professionals could use to prevent attacks on public officials and figures. ECSP researchers collected data about each attack or near-attack and each subject's demographic and background characteristics, and prior behavior by examining and coding data contained in case files. To go beyond case file historical data, interviews were conducted where information was gathered about each subject's ideas and actions in the days and weeks before their attacks or near-lethal approaches. Questions were examined about each subject's movement from the idea of attack to actual attack, motives, selection of targets, planning, communication of threat and intent, symptoms of mental illness, and significant life experiences.

Seven fundamental questions were developed for the study:

1. How do attackers develop the idea of assassinating a public official or public figure? How does a person move from the idea of assassination to the action of assassination?
2. What motivates people to act violently toward public officials and public figures?
3. How do people who direct violence toward public officials and public figures select their target(s)?
4. What planning strategies are used by people who direct violence toward public officials and public figures?
5. What relationships exist—if any—between threatening to commit violent action and carrying out violent action?
6. What relationships exist—if any—between symptoms of mental illness and assassination behaviors?
7. Were there key life events and patterns in the histories of people who have directed violence toward public officials and public figures?

Population

The population studied in the ECSP was defined as: all people known to have attacked, or approached to attack, a prominent person of public status in the United States since 1949. This definition was chosen for these reasons:

- The study was designed to provide useful information for law enforcement organizations with responsibilities for protection of public officials and public figures.
- Cases were known in which subjects had been apprehended near or approaching public officials and public figures, with weapons, with the apparent intention of attacking.

While subjects who made an approach with weapons and also made threats were included in the study, people who made threats *without* making approaches with weapons were not included. Similarly, people who traveled to visit or who approached prominent persons of public status, and who did not have weapons with them, were not included.

“Prominent persons of public status” were defined as:

- Persons protected by the Secret Service (the President, the Vice President, their families, former Presidents, candidates for President, visiting heads of states).
- Other major federal officials and office holders (cabinet secretaries, members of Congress, federal judges).
- Important state and local public officials (governors, mayors of large cities).
- Celebrities, such as sports figures, and movie, television, radio and entertainment notables.
- Presidents and chief executives of major corporations.

The “Principal Incident” was defined as the most violent of the following types of acts:

- (1) Assassination of a prominent person of public status.
- (2) Attack on a prominent person of public status.
- (3) Approach to a prominent person of public status with a lethal weapon.

Eighty-three subjects were identified from reviews of articles and studies of assassins, review of Secret Service files, consultation with experts, and requests to state and federal law enforcement agencies. These subjects comprise the universe of persons known to have attacked, or to have come close to attacking, a prominent public official or figure in the United States from 1949 to 1996.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study plan involved two kinds of data collection and review. First, all available archival information about each subject was gathered and coded into a 700+ variable codebook. Information gathered and coded included: descriptive, demographic, and historical data about each subject; descriptions of the Principal Incident and the subject's behaviors in the days and weeks before the Principal Incident; the outcome of the subject's attack or near-attack; and facts about the subject's history of interest in and efforts to contact the target of the Principal Incident and other public officials and figures.

Multiple efforts were made to gather information. For each subject, a Nexis search was conducted to gather newspaper and other media information. Fifty-five of the 83 subjects had been subjects of Secret Service inquiry or investigation. For these subjects, considerable information was available. Available information might include police reports, incident reports, mental health and social service reports, and accounts by third parties of the subject's history and behaviors.

For other subjects, information was obtained from law enforcement, private security, prosecutors, courts, probation, correctional institutions, and public records. For example, one-fourth of the subjects had been in the custody of the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Correctional files were reviewed for each of these subjects. In addition, one investigator studied all available books and scholarly articles written about ECSP subjects. In a number of cases, trial transcripts were obtained.

For example, all available mental health records about each subject were gathered and reviewed. Information coded included whether or not the subject had ever been evaluated by a mental health professional prior to their attack or near-attack, hospitalized for a psychiatric evaluation or treatment, or treated on an outpatient basis for a mental health problem. Also coded was any mention in the subject's file of a history of auditory hallucinations, command hallucinations, delusional thinking, action based on delusional beliefs, severe depression, and suicidal threats or behavior.

With the exception of observations about the mental status of the attacker/near-attacker at the time of the attack/near-attack, all mental health information, diagnoses, and conclusions were drawn from case files and represent the work of the investigators, mental health professionals and others involved with the case, not the impressions or conclusions of the researchers.

Each case was coded separately. One of the principal investigators, an experienced mental health professional, coded all 83 cases. Three other study staff members each coded between 25 to 29 cases, and one staff member coded one case. Coding time varied from one to ten hours, depending on the amount of information available.

After a case was coded by two coders, it was reconciled. The coders met to discuss each question. For variables that had been coded differently, the coders discussed the question until they agreed on a response. In the rare circumstances in which the coders could not agree, a third coder was asked to resolve the difference. Reconciliation time varied from one to three hours a case.

The record review enabled aggregate analysis of information about all subjects in the study. All variables were entered into a computerized database and analyzed.

Second, interviews were conducted with living subjects. Interviews permitted in-depth exploration of the subject's ideas, motives, behaviors, and activities in the days and weeks before the attack or near-lethal approach. Ultimately, more than 20 subjects were interviewed, some several times.

Results

Eighty-three individuals participated in 74 Principal Incidents. There were six attacks by groups, involving 16 subjects. One subject mounted attacks on two public figures.

Description of Principal Incident

Table 1 presents the targets and location of the 74 Principal Incidents. Thirty-four of the incidents (46%) resulted in attacks and 40 incidents were near-lethal approaches. Sixty percent of the incidents involved an attack or near-lethal approach on a Secret Service protectee or other federal political figure. The primary target was the President (34%). Most of these Principal Incidents occurred at the home or office (51%) and almost 40% of attacks and near-lethal approaches occurred at "temporary sites," such as rally sites, hotels, or temporary work sites. Handguns were the most common weapons used during a Principal Incident but a num-

TABLE 1—Targets and location of the 74 Principal Incidents (1949 to 1996).

Primary Target	No.	%
President	25	34%
Other Secret Service protectees	14	19%
Members of Congress	5	7%
Federal Judges	4	5%
State and city officials	2	3%
Other national figures	7	10%
Business executives	3	4%
Movie, sports, and media celebrities	14	19%
Location of Incident	No.	%
Home or office	37	51%
Other site (campaign rally, hotel, temporary worksite)	28	38%
Other (approacher was apprehended while traveling to target)	8	11%
Weapons at Time of Incident*	No.	%
Handgun	37	51%
Rifle/shotgun	22	30%
Knife	11	15%
Explosives	6	8%
Airplanes	3	4%

* More than one weapon was used in 16% of the incidents.

TABLE 2—Goals for the Principal Incident (n = 73).

Goals	No.	%
Harm to target as primary goal	44	68%
Attention/notoriety as a goal	25	38%
Suicide as a goal	14	22%

ber of subjects reported that they used knives when they were unable to procure handguns.

Goals and Motives

Table 2 reports the subject's major goals. A number of subjects had multiple goals. For example, subject "TD" wanted to shoot a high ranking federal official. TD also sought to be killed by the official's protectors and hoped that his assassination/suicide would bring attention to the problems of military veterans. Motives—which led the subject(s) to the attack or near-lethal approach—included wishes for notoriety, revenge, idiosyncratic thinking about the target, hopes to be killed, interest in bringing about political change, and desires for money. In more than 40% of the incidents, an idiosyncratic belief, such as a wish to save the world, the desire to bring attention to a perceived wrong, or a longing to achieve a special relationship with the target, appeared to be the subject's major motive. Subjects with these motives were more likely to try to attack a public figure, such as a celebrity, than a person protected by the Secret Service, such as the President. Subjects whose motives were to achieve notoriety or to be killed by law enforcement were more likely to pick a target such as the President.

Description of Subjects

Table 3 presents the characteristics of attackers and near-lethal approachers. There was no single profile of individuals who

TABLE 3—*Characteristics of attackers and near-lethal approachers* (n = 83).

	No.	%
Male	71	86%
White	63	77%
Age range (16–73)	Mean = 35.0	
Single, never married	41	51%
No children	47	61%
EDUCATION		
Less than high school	18	23%
High school/technical school	25	31%
Some college	20	25%
College/graduate school	17	21%
Never served in military	45	58%
EMPLOYMENT		
Unemployed	41	52%
Full-time employed	20	25%
Part-time employed	8	10%
Disabled, retired, or student	10	13%

TABLE 4—*Organizational involvement* (n = 83).

Kind of Organization	Involved at PI		History of Membership		History of Interest	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Militant/radical*	20	25%	22	30%	31	40%
Subjects who acted alone	10	9%	12	14%	21	26%
Religious	9	11%	8	10%	10	13%
Work/union	4	5%	6	8%	7	9%
Professional	4	5%	3	4%	5	6%
Fraternal	3	4%	6	8%	7	9%
Sect/cult	1	1%	1	1%	3	4%

* Fifteen of the 16 subjects who attacked as part of groups were members of militant or radical groups.

engaged in this attack-related behavior. In fact, their ages ranged from 16 to 73 at the time of the Principal Incident. Almost half of the subjects received at least some college education. Near-lethal approachers were more likely to be single and never to have married than were attackers. Women were more likely to be attackers rather than approachers. Subjects who targeted the President or other Secret Service protectees were more likely to be full-time employed than were other subjects.

Organizational Involvement

Table 4 provides information about the subjects' organizational histories. At the time of their assault or near-assault, 60% of the subjects had no known involvement with any organization. Of those who were involved with organizations, several had more than one affiliation.

Fewer than a tenth of subjects who acted alone were involved with militant or radical organizations at the time of their attack or near-lethal approach. But more than a fourth had a history of interest in militant or radical organizations and beliefs. Attackers were more likely to have histories of interest in these groups and of joining than were near-lethal approachers.

History of Criminal Activity and Weapons Use

Table 5 provides information about the criminal activity and weapons use of the subjects including prior arrests and incarcerations. One-fifth of the subjects had been arrested for a violent offense. Fewer than a fourth had ever been arrested for a crime

that involved a weapon. Two-thirds had never been incarcerated, either before or after a trial, before the Principal Incident. About a tenth had served a sentence in a state or federal prison. Most subjects had used weapons, but few had received formal training, other than in military service.

Mental State and Mental Health History

Table 6 presents information about the mental state of subjects at the time of the Principal Incident by the type of subject: attacker or near-lethal approacher. In fewer than half of all incidents, the subject was delusional at the time of their attack or near-lethal approach. Attackers were less likely to be delusional at the time of the Principal Incident than were near-lethal approachers. The mental health history of all subjects is presented in Table 7. While more than 60% of the subjects had had contact with a mental health professional at some point in their lives before the PI, fewer than one-fourth had such contact in the year before their attack or near-lethal approach. Near-lethal approachers were more likely to have had contacts with mental health professionals in the year before the PI than were attackers.

Hallucinations and Delusional Ideas—Few subjects had histories of auditory hallucinations, and very few had histories of taking violent action in response to command hallucinations. Near-lethal approachers were more likely to have histories of delusions than

TABLE 5—*History of criminal activity and weapons use* (n = 83).

History of Arrests	No.	%
No history of arrest as a juvenile or adult	27	34%
One or more adult arrests for a non-violent offense	44	56%
One or more adult arrests for a violent offense	16	20%
One or more arrests for an offense involving a weapon	17	22%
One or more arrests for an offense involving a handgun/shotgun/rifle	12	16%
History of Incarceration		
Never incarcerated	52	66%
Incarcerated only for pre-trial detention	8	11%
Incarcerated after conviction in jail	9	11%
Incarcerated after conviction in prison	9	11%
History of Weapons Use/Interest		
Weapons use (excluding military service)	53	71%
Handguns	45	61%
Rifles and shotguns	37	51%
Knives	15	23%
Bombs, explosives	8	11%
Formal weapons training (excluding military service)	11	19%
Fascination with weapons	23	38%

TABLE 6—*Mental state at the Principal Incident by type of Subject** (n = 73).

Mental State at Time of Principal Incident	Not Delusional		Delusional	
	No.	%	No.	%
Attacker	24	75%	8	25%
Near-lethal approacher	14	40%	21	60%
Total	38	57%	29	43%

* Statistically significant chi-square $p = 0.004$.

TABLE 7—*Mental health history prior to the Principal Incident* (n = 83).

	No.	%
Ever evaluated or treated by a mental health professional	46	61%
Evaluated or treated by a mental health professional in the year before the Principal Incident	16	23%
Ever hospitalized for mental health evaluation or treatment	29	38%
Ever received outpatient mental health treatment	28	39%
History of auditory hallucinations	15	21%
History of violent command hallucinations	7	10%
History of delusional ideas	32	43%
History of delusions involving a relationship with a person they did not know	10	13%
History of nonviolent action related to a delusional idea	23	31%
History of violent action related to a delusional idea	6	8%

TABLE 8—*Despair, depression, and suicidal behavior* (n = 83).

	No.	%
History of serious depression or despair	31	44%
History of suicide threats	29	41%
History of suicide gestures	15	20%
History of suicide attempts	18	24%

TABLE 9—*History of substance abuse* (n = 83).

	No.	%
History of substance abuse	27	39%
history of alcohol abuse	21	32%
history of marijuana abuse	17	25%
history of hallucinogen abuse	10	15%
history of amphetamine abuse	7	10%
history of cocaine abuse	6	9%
history of heroin abuse	4	6%
history of sedative abuse	4	6%
history of other drug abuse	4	6%
History of substance abuse treatment	11	16%

were attackers. Subjects who targeted celebrities were more likely to have histories of having a delusion involving a relationship with a person they did not know (usually the target) than were subjects who targeted public officials. Fewer than 10% of all subjects had histories of acting violently in response to delusional ideas.

Depression and Suicide Thinking and Behavior—Table 8 presents information about subjects' histories of depression or despair and suicidal behaviors. Subjects whose targets were Secret Service protectees were more likely to have histories of suicidal behaviors than were other subjects. Near-lethal approachers were more likely to have histories of suicidal behaviors than were attackers.

Substance Abuse History

Table 9 reports information about subjects' histories of substance abuse. Alcohol was the primary substance of abuse and very few of the subjects had received substance abuse treatment (16%).

History of Harassment and Grievances

Fifty-four percent of the subjects had a history of harassing other persons. Many of these subjects had poor interpersonal skills and

were known to have bothered or badgered other persons. Table 10 presents known grievances at the time of the Principal Incident and the subjects' history of grievances. In two-thirds of the incidents, the subjects had a grievance. Usually grievances concerned the target. Subjects whose targets were the President or other officials protected by the Secret Service were less likely to have grievances than were other subjects, such as those whose target was a judge.

Almost all subjects had histories of grievances and resentments. Consistent with their feelings and motives at the time of the incident, subjects whose targets were the President or other Secret Service protectees were less likely to have histories of grievance and resentment against their targets than were subjects with other targets, such as judges and celebrities. Many subjects had taken action in response to a grievance, such as writing a letter or visiting an office. Few subjects were known to have had histories of acting violently in response to a grievance.

History of Interest in Assassination

Table 11 presents information about interest in assassination. More than 40% of the subjects are known to have had an interest in assassination.

Communications and Threats

Table 12 presents information about the communications and threats of subjects about their targets. Almost two-thirds of the subjects did make an implicit or explicit threat about the target

TABLE 10—*History of grievances* (n = 73).

Grievance at the Time of Principal Incident	No.	%
Any grievance	45	67%
Grievance toward target	38	57%
<i>Of subjects with a grievance: Grievance toward target</i>	38	84%
History of grievances and resentments prior to the Principal Incident	65	97%
Grievance against target of PI	20	34%
Resentment against target of PI	24	41%
Grievance or resentment against a President (other than the target of the PI)	21	37%
Grievance or resentment against a public official	23	38%
Grievance or resentment against a public figure	11	20%
Grievance or resentment against a government agency	26	44%
History of nonviolent action against a target of grievance or resentment	39	63%
History of violent action against a target of grievance or resentment	12	20%

TABLE 11—*Interest in assassination* (n = 83).

	No.	%
History of interest in assassination	32	44%
Talked with others about assassination	17	23%
Read materials about assassination	17	23%
Gathered information about assassination	16	22%
Wrote to or about assassins or assassination	12	16%
Emulated assassins	8	11%
Visited sites related to assassination	4	5%
Other activities (such as watching movies or television shows about assassination, listening to music about assassination, etc.)	13	18%

TABLE 12—*Communications and threats about the target* (n = 83).

	No.	%
History of verbal or written communication about the target	57	77%
Communication to the target	16	23%
Communication to family members	17	22%
Communication to friends	14	18%
Diary or journal	7	9%
Communication to law enforcement	6	8%
Communication to non-target public official or figure	4	5%
Communication to other known or unknown person	36	47%
History of indirect, conditional, or direct threat about target	46	63%
History of direct threat about target	27	37%
History of communicating direct threat about target to the target	3	4%
History of communicating a direct threat about target to target or law enforcement	5	7%

before the Principal Incident. These threats were communicated to family, friends, co-workers, or others known to the target. Sometimes they were written in diaries or journals. Very few subjects communicated a direct threat about the target to the target. Only a tenth communicated a direct threat about the target to the target or to law enforcement authorities.

Planning

In 80% of the incidents, the subjects engaged in planning before their attacks or approaches. Only one of the 34 attackers is known not to have planned his or her attack.

Communications with Mental Health Professionals—Only two subjects are known to have told mental health professionals of their interest in attacking a public official or figure. One subject told mental health staff, shortly after he was hospitalized, about voices telling him to attack a public official target. The subject was reported to law enforcement professionals, who conducted an investigation. In another case, a subject told outpatient mental health staff that he had gone to a rally site for a Presidential candidate with a gun, with the intention of charging the podium and being killed by security staff. The subject reported this information to his treating psychiatrist after he had engaged in near-attack behavior.

Findings

Significant findings about the histories and personal characteristics of attackers and near-lethal approachers include:

- Their ages ranged widely, from 16 to 73.
- Often, they were well educated. Almost half had attended some college or graduate education.
- Attackers and near-attackers often had histories of mobility and transience.
- Most were described as social isolates. But about one-third of the subjects did not appear to be—and were not described as—social isolates.
- Many subjects had histories of harassing other persons.
- Most are known to have had histories of explosive, angry behavior, but only half of the subjects are known to have had histories of violent behavior.

- Few subjects had histories of arrests for violent crimes or for crimes that involved weapons.
- Few had ever been incarcerated in state or federal prisons before their public figure-directed attack or near-lethal approach.
- Most attackers and would-be attackers had histories of weapons use, but no formal weapons training.
- Most attackers had interests in militant/radical ideas and groups, but were not active members of such groups at the time of their attacks.
- Many attackers and near-lethal approachers had histories of serious depression or despair.
- Many are known to have attempted to kill themselves, or known to have considered killing themselves at some point before their attack or near-lethal approach.
- Many subjects had had contact with mental health professionals or care systems at some point in their lives before their attack or near-lethal approach. However, few indicated to mental health staff that they were considering attacking a public official or public figure.
- Attackers were less likely to have histories of delusional ideas and less likely to be delusional at the Principal Incident than were near-lethal approachers.
- Few subjects had histories of command hallucinations.
- Relatively few subjects had histories of substance abuse, including alcohol.

Discussion

How Does a Person Move from the Idea of Assassination to the Action of Assassination?

It seems obvious, and it is true: persons who see themselves as doing well in life rarely attempt assassinations. Almost all American assassins, attackers, and would-be attackers were persons who had—or believed themselves to have had—difficulty coping with problems in their lives. (However, while assassination is rare behavior, the kinds of problems experienced by ECSP subjects were, with few exceptions, neither rare nor extreme.) Each of these men and women, at some point, came to see an attack of a prominent person of public status as a solution, or way out, of their problems. Attack on a public official or figure, in each case was the end result of an understandable, and often discernible, process.

*Cases*³

FT was a lonely, angry young man with few job skills, living with a mother who was ill with cancer and other ailments and who demanded his constant attention. FT was watching a television show about the state gubernatorial election when he suddenly thought “how weird it would be to assassinate the governor.” He then started to read and learn about assassination and assassins and spent the next 18 months preoccupied with selecting and shooting a national leader.

Ruth Steinhagen, although employed as a secretary, believed she had no future, and thought she would be better off dead. Steinhagen became obsessed with Chicago Cubs’ first baseman Eddie Waitkus. She collected clippings about him, went to more than 50 baseball games, wrote many letters to him (which were not answered),

³ Subjects whose cases received significant public attention are identified by name. Incidents which are not publicly known, or which received minimal publicity, are not identified by name and have been disguised to protect the privacy of the subject and the target.

and slept with his picture under her pillow. Steinhagen came to believe that she could achieve her goals of getting in the limelight and of dying by shooting Waitkus.

JD had lost a marriage (and his family), his job, and hope. JD had long been interested in movies about assassination and in weapons. He was driving aimlessly through the Southwest, feeling hopeless, when he began to think that by assassinating the President he would achieve three ends: (1) the country would no longer be taken in the wrong direction; (2) he would no longer be a “nonentity”; and (3) he would be killed, ending his pain and misery.

Sirhan Sirhan had few employable skills and was living at a level far below his expectations. Sirhan was failing at work, at school, and in social life. He began to think that if he shot a national figure whom he believed to be an enemy of the Palestinians—President Lyndon Johnson, Ambassador Arthur Goldberg, or Presidential Candidate (and Senator) Robert F. Kennedy—he could achieve the status he wished for and perhaps even change the situation of the Palestinian people.

FD, although married, steadily employed, and a member of a church singing group, perceived herself as unlovable and as a failure. FD, a history buff, felt unloved by her husband and meanly treated and unappreciated by her demanding boss. She was in some pain from a chronic medical condition. FD began to read about the Civil War and John Wilkes Booth. She developed an interest in the lives of American assassins and read avidly about them. FD came to believe that she was like previous assassins, a “loser.” FD determined to get herself “removed” from society by attacking a prominent public official.

Sara Jane Moore, a woman with considerable intelligence and job skills, found herself caught in a swirl of turbulent social forces and causes in a place (the San Francisco Bay area) and at a time (1975) when there was great tension between political radicals and law enforcement authorities. Moore became a police informant, a fact she revealed to her radical associates. Moore worked and lived in a community and in a political climate where talk of “offing the pigs,” and shooting the President was not uncommon. Moore fastened on the idea of shooting President Ford once she began to believe that her situation as both political radical and police informer was becoming increasingly untenable and possibly dangerous.

Mark Chapman, although at one time a successful child care worker and counselor with the YMCA, believed he was a failure. Chapman became obsessed with being a “nobody,” felt betrayed by cultural figures that he saw as “phonies,” and saw John Lennon as the “biggest phony of all.” In September, 1980, Chapman decided to kill Lennon. This action, he believed, would send a message about phonies, and would bring attention to the book, *The Catcher in the Rye*, which Chapman believed held important lessons for the world.

NN, although once having earned a master’s degree, was debilitated by chronic mental illness, and was living a nomadic, isolated life. NN blamed her declining fortunes on what she perceived as mismanagement of the commodities company that she believed she owned. When the company experienced difficulties, she came to company headquarters with a gun, confronted the president, and killed him.

HJ, an honors college graduate and a public facilities manager, felt constantly harassed and overwhelmed by the voices emanating from what he believed to be a secret, illegal spy satellite program developed by the federal government. HJ’s life, over a course of several years, was overwhelmed by the experience of hearing voices that he believed came from the satellite program. He devel-

oped a strategy he called “brinksmanship” to stop the voices. Over a period of months, HJ bought a number of weapons. He threatened the voices that if they did not leave him alone, he would go to Washington to do harm. HJ believed that each time he made such a threat the voices diminished in intensity. But each time they came back. Finally, at the limits of his patience, HJ decided to travel to Washington to shoot a cabinet officer or other high ranking federal official. This action, he was convinced, would lead to a “Watergate-type” investigation and expose the illegal satellite program.

For FT, Ruth Steinhagen, JD, Sirhan Sirhan, and Mark Chapman, assassination would bring notoriety, recognition, public attention and elevation of their personal status. For FD and Sara Moore, assassination would result in their being taken from situations that they found intolerable. For HJ, assassination would lead to a national investigation of the secret satellite program that he believed was destroying his life. For NN, assassination of the company president would right what she believed to be a series of wrongs done to her.

For these, and other subjects, the path to assassination, from their original idea to the attack or near-attack, had several—or many—steps.

- FT considered attacking several political leaders, and even attended one political rally with a knife, before bringing a gun to a rally for a presidential nominee.
- Mark Chapman traveled to New York to find and kill John Lennon. After spending several days looking for Lennon, Chapman left New York to return to Hawaii, feeling that he no longer needed to kill Lennon. Several weeks later, he again began to feel “compulsed” to kill Lennon and returned to New York.
- HJ debated with himself for months about how to stop the satellite program. He started to drive to Washington on several occasions, but each time turned back when he felt that the satellite voices were diminishing. Ultimately, when the voices continued, HJ traveled to Washington, DC, where he was arrested with weapons and ammunition.

Some persons deliberated about assassination for years before moving into action. Others moved within a period of weeks or months into action. While it is difficult to identify with precision specific precipitants, or triggers, that led subjects to move from *ideas* of assassination to *action*, almost half of the subjects are known to have experienced a major loss or life change in the year before their attack or near-lethal approach. These losses or changes included marital problems and breakups; personal illness, or illness or death of a family member; failure at school, work, or in social relationships; and personal setbacks that precipitated feelings of despair or desperation.

What Motivates Persons to Act Violently Toward Public Officials and Public Figures?

Writers about assassination have more often made *assumptions* about motives than they have explored the actual motives of assassins and near-assassins.

Students of assassination in the U.S. have generally seen assassins and attackers of political leaders either as possessing “political” motives or as being “deranged.” This is a narrow and inaccurate view of assassination. Attackers and near-lethal approachers of public officials rarely had “political” motives. Only one subject who acted alone (Sirhan Sirhan) might be seen

to have a primary political motive or have a primary interest in changing particular government policies. (And even in Sirhan's case, there is considerable evidence to suggest that his primary interest in assassinating Senator Robert F. Kennedy was to achieve notoriety.)

An attacker or would-be attacker with motives that clearly are not "political" is likely to be seen as "crazy." It has often been assumed that mentally ill assailants or potential assailants either have motives that are so irrational that they cannot be understood or have no motives other than their illness. This perspective is also incorrect.

Subjects who were clearly mentally ill often had defined (and technically "rational") motives. For example, HJ, though psychotic, reasoned that if he attacked a high ranking federal official, there would be a major investigation. During that investigation, HJ figured, the illegal CIA spy satellite system that had harassed him would come to public attention. While, in reality, there was no satellite system harassing HJ, had he attacked a senior federal official, there *would* have been a major investigation.

Assailants and near-lethal approachers of public officials and figures have motives that influence their choice of targets and their actions. Sometimes these motives are not obvious and are difficult to ascertain.

Assassins, attackers, and near-lethal approachers had a range of reasons for action, with a subject often having more than one motive. Motives for attacks and near-lethal approaches included:

- to achieve notoriety/fame;
- to avenge a perceived wrong;
- to end personal pain; to be killed by law enforcement;
- to bring national attention to a perceived problem;
- to save the country or the world;
- to achieve a special relationship with the target;
- to make money;
- to bring about political change.

Some subjects are known to have had more than one motive. JD, for example, wanted to kill the president, (whom he believed to be "leading the country in the wrong direction"), to be killed in the attempt, and to gain notoriety (no longer be a "nonentity"). Sirhan Sirhan longed for notoriety and to change United States policy regarding the Palestinians. Lynette Fromme, who tried to shoot President Ford in Sacramento, CA, in 1975, wanted to retaliate against a government she believed had wrongly convicted and incarcerated Charles Manson and to call attention to corporate and government activities that she believed threatened the environment.

How Do Persons Who Direct Violence Toward Public Officials and Public Figures Select Their Target(s)?

Selection of targets was influenced by several factors, including:

- the potential attacker's motives, and
- found or perceived opportunities to attack.

Almost half of the subjects are known to have considered attacking a target other than the one that they finally selected. Most subjects picked *either* public official or public figure targets and did not consider both kinds of targets.

Motives

There is a clear relationship between motive and target selection.

Subjects whose motives were: (1) to achieve notoriety/fame, (2) to bring national attention to a perceived problem, (3) to save the country or the world, or (4) to bring about political change, usually picked targets because of their perception of the target's importance.

John W. Hinckley, Jr.

John Hinckley wanted maximum attention for his actions. Although he visited the offices of a number of major Washington figures during the fall and winter of 1980, Hinckley focused his attention on the Presidency. In the fall of 1980, Hinckley, traveling with a gun, attended campaign appearances for President Carter. After the presidential election of 1980, Hinckley shifted his attention to President Reagan.

EJ

EJ, who had a long-standing alcohol problem, was dismissed from his job of 20 years. His father died around the same time. Soon after, he separated from his wife. EJ became increasingly concerned with the national unemployment problem. He spoke to colleagues and neighbors and wrote to national leaders about the "plight of the American working man." His friends thought he was becoming obsessed with the nation's employment problems.

Several weeks later, waving a revolver, EJ took a number of men and women hostage. He did this at a store near a location being visited by several high-ranking national officials. EJ stated to the hostages that he had acted for the purpose of seeing and talking with a high level official. He was reported to have said: "I want to talk to the [official]. He must do something about the country's unemployment problems. I will kill him if I have to. I know I am going to be punished for this. I may have to do time. I may be killed but maybe someone will benefit from this."

EJ selected the official as his target because he wanted to bring his concerns to high level attention. He released his hostages without causing injury and was arrested. He was convicted and sentenced to prison.

CC

CC believed that God had sent him on a mission to kill the Devil and save the world. He believed the President was the Devil and that other politicians supportive of the President were the "Devil's helpers." Over a period of several years, CC made efforts to approach the President in order to shoot him.

Oscar Collazo and Griselio Torresola

Oscar Collazo and Griselio Torresola were members of the Puerto Rican nationalist movement and were active supporters of Puerto Rican independence. On October 31, 1950, they traveled from New York City to Washington, DC. At approximately 2:20 p.m. on November 1, Collazo and Torresola attempted to shoot their way into Blair House, where President Truman was residing during White House renovations. One Secret Service officer was killed, as was Torresola. Collazo was injured. President Truman was not injured.

Interviewed two days later, Collazo said, "I did not come to Washington to shoot Mr. Truman. I came to Washington to kill the President of the United States." In later years, Collazo spoke

of his and Torresola's hope that their attack on the President would generate international publicity and thereby lead to Puerto Rican independence.

Subjects whose major motive was to be killed or removed from society often chose a target that they saw as well protected.

FD

FD chose the President as her primary target because she wanted to be removed from society and because she believed that the President had the highest degree of protection of any official. FD figured that since the President was so well protected, she would inevitably be stopped before she carried out an assassination. She reported that she hoped to be "subdued, arrested, and removed, possibly for the rest of my life."

For a number of subjects, choice of a target involved several motives.

Arthur Jackson

Living in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1981, Arthur Jackson became intensely interested in the actress Theresa Saldana after seeing her in the movie *Raging Bull*. Jackson decided to kill Saldana both because he desired a special relationship with her and because he believed that murdering her would force the U.S. Government to execute him. Jackson hoped to be executed at Alcatraz Prison, the site of the attempted escape and death in 1946 of Joseph Cretzer, a criminal whom Jackson admired and with whom he felt a special bond.

A subject who wishes to die in the spotlight of national attention might attempt to attack any high ranking public official who is protected and who receives media coverage. For such a potential assassin, personal feelings about a target, or opinions about a target's politics or policies, may not enter into the decision about which target to select for attack. What matters is that armed protectors surround the target and that the assassination attempt will receive media attention.

Conversely, a subject who does not wish—or is not prepared—to risk death, might avoid attacking a public official or public figure known to be well protected. Such an attacker might rule out a situation where his/her escape options would be limited.

Opportunity to Attack

Several subjects chose their targets because the targets happened to be near the attacker or near-lethal approacher at a time when the subject was ready to attack.

OD

OD selected a high level official as a target for assault without knowing the name of his target. OD was preoccupied with the idea that he needed to warn the world of an impending environmental catastrophe. Unsuccessful in his efforts to contact other officials several days earlier, OD assumed that his target was an important person, approached him, and hit him in the jaw in the presence of television cameras. He attacked the official because the target was standing near a public building in Washington, DC and was being interviewed by television reporters.

And a number of persons became targets of assassins and attackers because they happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

PV

PV traveled to a movie studio in Los Angeles (after killing three persons in a bagel store in another state) in order to kill a famous actor. Frustrated by his inability to find the actor, suicidal, and believing that if he killed the two security guards at the studio gates, he would go to heaven, PV went up to each guard and shot him in the head.

Overlap Between Public Official Targets and Celebrity Targets

Only one person whose primary target was a public official considered attacking a celebrity. One subject whose primary target was a celebrity is known to have considered attacking a public official. It may be that attackers and near-attackers of public officials and those who select celebrity targets are fundamentally different sets of persons.

What Planning Strategies Are Used by Persons Who Direct Violence Toward Public Officials and Public Figures?

Attackers and near-attackers evinced a range of sophistication and attention in their planning. Some subjects planned their attacks with great care; others gave only slight or superficial attention to planning. Still others tried to plan but were thwarted by security provided for their targets.

Despite sometimes thoughtful planning efforts, few attackers or near-assailants approached the task of assassination with the technical expertise that has been presented in popular culture images of assassins. Few subjects manufactured their own weapons, used esoteric substances, such as poisons or chemical agents, or developed complex or elaborate schemes or ruses to outwit a target or his or her protectors.

Comprehensiveness of Planning

With some exceptions, the most careful planners were the subjects whose motive was money.

Charles Harrelson

Charles Harrelson assassinated Federal Judge John Wood, Jr., in 1979. Harrelson studied the routines of Judge Wood, whom he was hired to kill. Harrelson considered shooting Judge Wood on several occasions. He attacked the judge early in the morning when Judge Wood was leaving his home for work and shot him in the back with a high-powered rifle.

Joseph Corbett

Corbett observed and analyzed the lifestyle and habits of business executive Adolph Coors III for several years before he attempted to kidnap him. Foiled initially when Coors and his family moved to a new home, Corbett drew back, watched, and developed new plans. On a February morning in 1960, Corbett used his car to block a one-lane wooden bridge that Coors had to cross on his way to work. The would-be kidnapper confronted Coors with a gun. Coors resisted, Corbett fired, and Coors was killed. Corbett fled to the East Coast where he abandoned his car, then traveled to Toronto. He was arrested in Vancouver, British Columbia, in October 1960. A tip from a reader of *Reader's Digest Magazine*, which had published an "the FBI is looking for this man" article, led to Corbett's capture.

Group attackers generally planned their assassinations with some care.

The "Order": Robert Jay Matthews, Bruce Pierce, David Lane, Jean Craig, Richard Scutari

Members of the Order, a right-wing group led by Robert Matthews, spent several months preparing to assassinate controversial Denver talk radio host Alan Berg in 1984. Jean Craig traveled from Idaho to Denver and spent several weeks surveilling Berg and learning about his schedule and travel patterns. David Lane and Bruce Pierce made at least one trip to Denver before the assassination to plan the attack. The group also planned and executed their escape after the attack.

Escape Plans

Fewer than a quarter of the subjects are known to have developed escape plans. No subject whose primary target was the President is known to have had an escape plan. Subjects whose target was the President often assumed—or hoped—that they would be killed or captured after an attack.

In all, almost one-third of the subjects are known to have wished to die or expected to die or be killed in their attack or near-lethal approach. These persons included the three subjects who used airplanes as weapons, one subject who planned to detonate explosives to kill a President-elect, and several subjects whose primary motive was to be killed.

What Relationships Exist—If Any—Between Threatening to Commit Violent Action and Carrying Out Violent Action?

Much literature on assassination links threateners and attackers, as if the two categories are one. The assumption of many writers is that those who *make* threats *pose* threats. While some threateners *may* pose threats, sometimes those who *pose* threats *do not* make threats. The problem of linking threateners and attackers is illustrated in an often cited study of eleven psychiatric patients at the Medical Center for Federal Prisoners in Springfield, MO, whose offenses involved threats to the president (6). This report was entitled "Presidential Assassination Syndrome," although *no assassins, attackers, or near-lethal approachers* were included among the eleven men in the study. Each of the subjects had simply made verbal or written threats to harm the president.

By contrast, fewer than a tenth of all the assassins, attackers, and near-lethal approachers communicated a direct threat to the target or a law enforcement agency. *No assassin or attacker communicated a direct threat about their target to the target or to a law enforcement agency before their attack or near lethal-approach.*

While few subjects delivered explicit threats to their targets or to law enforcement officials, attackers and near-lethal approachers were not completely secretive about their aims and intentions. Almost two-thirds of the subjects are known to have made some threat *about* their targets in the days, weeks, and months before their attack or near-lethal approach. Attackers and would-be attackers usually expressed their intentions, either by letting someone know or by writing notes, letters, or journals that described their thinking and state of mind. Some subjects told family members that they intended to attack the target; others mentioned their aims to co-workers or friends; still others kept detailed journals in which they recorded their hopes and plans.

While few family members are known to have been told directly or specifically about plans for attack of a public official or public

figure, some potential assailants indicated to family members that they were intending harm. Ruth Steinhagen apparently mentioned the idea of harming Eddie Waitkus to family members, who dismissed it as idle talk. Lee Oswald made his wife take his picture while he held a rifle, dressed in combat clothes, shortly before he attempted to kill General Edwin Walker in April 1963. After learning from media reports that Walker was not injured by his attack, Oswald also communicated to his wife his disappointment that he had missed hitting Walker with his bullet.

Other subjects communicated their interests in harming public officials or figures to associates or co-workers.

Still other subjects kept journals, diaries, or notes that indicated, or gave strong clues about, their intentions.

OV

OV was a professional who had been fired from his government job after his security clearance was revoked for psychiatric reasons. He appealed his dismissal and was unsuccessful.

OV developed the idea that he was "World President." He believed that national, state, and county officials had committed crimes. OV frequented the halls of Congress and tried to make appointments with public officials, including senior officials in the Administration.

One afternoon, a person sitting in a Congressional Hearing Room to observe a hearing noticed that the man sitting next to her had a pistol in his open briefcase. The gun was reported to the police, and OV was arrested. In his possession were letters indicating that he, as "World President," had sentenced national, state, and county officials—including the chair of the committee holding the hearing—to long prison terms.

The idea that the persons who pose the greatest risks to public officials and public figures are those who make explicit threats is a myth. People make threats for a variety of reasons: to intimidate, to coerce, to express anger, to bring attention to themselves, to get help, to force a change in their circumstances, to warn before they act, to be stopped.

But why would a person who genuinely desired to succeed in an attack send or call a threat to the target before mounting an attack? FT was asked why he did not send a threat letter before he brought a gun to the Presidential nominee's rally. "If I had sent a letter," he said, "the police would have come and arrested me. I didn't want to be stopped then."

What Relationships Exist—If Any—Between Symptoms of Mental Illness and Assassination Behaviors?

Many writers about assassination in the United States have asserted or assumed that American assassins have been mentally ill. Some say that mental illness is the *cause* of assassination. Others argue that mental illness is a key factor in understanding assassination behavior.

The logic of arguments that most, if not all, American assassins have been mentally ill and that mental illness is a key factor—or key cause—in assassination flows from four starting points.

One is the assumption that assassination in the United States—particularly of the President—is inherently an irrational act. Historically, in most societies the primary goals of assassins of national leaders have been to remove certain persons or elites from power and/or to bring down the government in order to install other persons/elites into positions of power. Assassination of one (or several) national leaders in a constitutional democracy that has

separate and equal branches of government will not achieve these political goals.

Assassination of national leaders in the United States, therefore, will not achieve the traditional political goal of changing those in control of the government. Thus, assassination in the United States is not a “rational” political act. To this manner of thinking, those who attempt assassination in the U.S. cannot have rational goals and must—by definition—be mentally ill.

The second starting point for those who assert that American assassins have been mentally ill are reports (often incomplete) about the ideas and behaviors of a few assassins. For example, Richard Lawrence, who attacked President Jackson in 1835, was reported to believe that he was King Richard III of England and that he was entitled to a large sum of money from the federal government. Other attackers, such as John W. Hinckley, Jr., were reported to be mentally ill. Since some assassins have been mentally ill, this argument suggests, most (if not all) assassins and attackers are likely to be similarly deranged.

A third reason that many consider assassins and attackers to be mentally ill stems from the nature of the act itself. Reasonable people abhor the thought of assassination. It is hard to accept the idea that a few persons might see assassination as an acceptable way to resolve their problems and to achieve their goals.

Fourth, with rare exception, trials of assassins and attackers of national leaders and celebrities in the past 30 years have featured testimony by mental health professionals to the effect that the defendant was suffering from mental illness at the time of his/her attack and should not be held criminally responsible. Since each of these defendants was observed committing the attack—and therefore did not have an alibi defense—the only defense available in most cases was that of the defendant’s mental status at the time of the crime. The trials of Sirhan Sirhan, Arthur Bremer, Sara Jane Moore, Mark Chapman, John Hinckley, Robert Bardo, and Francisco Duran brought forth such testimony. Although only John Hinckley was found to lack criminal responsibility by reason of mental illness, the idea that assassins are mentally ill has been broadcast repeatedly to millions of Americans.

In fact, fewer than half of American assassins, attackers, or near-lethal approachers since 1949 who chose public officials or figures as their primary targets exhibited symptoms of mental illness at the time of their attacks or near-lethal approaches. Certainly, some attackers and near-attackers have suffered from delusions and other symptoms of serious mental disorder. But the belief that almost all assailants and near-assailants of public officials in the United States are mentally ill—and that mental illness, therefore, is a major factor in assassination—is incorrect. It is also misleading, in that it may obscure the fact that the great majority of persons suffering from mental illness are no more likely to attempt assassination than are other citizens.

This is not to deny that a greater percentage of American attackers and near-attackers have been mentally ill than the general population. But while considerations of mental illness are critical in determination of criminal responsibility after an attack has occurred, these concerns are less relevant for those with responsibilities to prevent attacks. It is a mistake to automatically assume that in each case, or in the vast majority of cases, that focus on the presence or absence of mental illness is critical in determining the risk of violence to a public official or figure that a given individual may pose.

From an operational perspective, focus on mental illness may not be useful in preventing assassination. Effective attempts at assassination require careful thinking and planning. To prevent

attacks, investigators may be better served by attending to the motives, thoughts, and behaviors of assassins than to the question: is this subject mentally ill? It is operationally significant that almost all assassins, attackers, and near-lethal approachers, whether or not they were mentally ill, utilized rational thought processes as they considered their targets and planned their attacks.⁴

Contacts with Mental Health Professionals

To be sure, three-fifths of the assassins, attackers, and near-lethal approachers had in fact been evaluated or treated by a mental health professional at some point before their attack or near-lethal approach. These contacts ranged from several meetings with a counselor during adolescence for disturbed behavior to years of care for chronic mental disability. Two-fifths of the subjects had been hospitalized at least once for psychiatric reasons. These hospitalizations ranged from brief admissions, for suicidal threats or gestures, to longer stays for treatment of psychotic disorders.

But fewer than one-fourth of all subjects had been in contact with a mental health professional in the year before their attack or near-lethal approach. And no subject is known to have communicated his or her interest in attacking a public official or figure to a mental health professional in the year before the Principal Incident.

Some subjects did suffer from major mental illnesses. Others had episodes or patterns of disruptive, self-destructive, or upsetting behavior that had triggered contact with mental health professionals. No attacker or near-lethal approacher was a model of emotional well being. Almost all had psychological problems. But relatively few suffered from serious mental illness that directly affected their assassination behaviors. And all could think clearly enough and were sufficiently organized to mount an attack or make a near-lethal approach to a prominent person of public status.

Delusional Ideas

More than one-third of the subjects appeared to hold delusional ideas at the time of their attack or near-lethal approach. But only a small number of subjects were prompted by voices ordering them to kill, or mounted attacks for reasons that, when examined carefully in the context of the subject’s thinking, appear obviously irrational. Even these subjects were capable of planning.

Motives of delusional subjects included: to achieve notoriety/fame; to avenge a perceived wrong; to end personal pain or to be killed by law enforcement; to bring national attention to a perceived problem; to save the country or the world; and to achieve a special relationship with the target. Subjects whose primary targets were celebrities (and whose motives often were to develop a special relationship with the target) were more likely to be mentally ill than subjects whose targets were public officials.

No subjects whose motives were to effect political change or to get money were delusional at the times of their attacks or approaches.

Reliance on ideas that “mental illness causes assassination,” or “assassins are mentally ill,” may block and cloud analysis that can lead to clearer understanding, and perhaps prevention, of assassination attempts. Assuming that the risk pool of potential assassins includes all or most persons who suffer from mental illnesses is

⁴ For more discussion of this issue and operational guidelines concerning threat assessments, the reader is referred to “Protective Intelligence and Threat Assessment Investigations: A Guide for State and Local Law Enforcement Officials” (7).

both impractical and inaccurate. (In some ways, such thinking is similar to assuming that since many American assassins have been white male loners, the risk pool for assassination consists of white male loners.)

Mounting an attack on a person of public status requires preparation and planning. It is far more productive—and ultimately, more accurate—to examine the thinking that leads a person to see assassination as an acceptable, or necessary action, and to attend to behaviors that may precede an attack, than to simply label assassins and assassination as “irrational” or “crazy.”

Were There Key Life Events and Patterns in the Histories of Persons Who Have Directed Violence Toward Public Officials and Public Figures?

It would be easy to conclude that attackers and would-be attackers are troubled persons, with histories of pain, interpersonal difficulties, losses, and failures. No subject who acted alone was living an exemplary life, as defined by success in both work and family spheres. Many, if not most, subjects had great difficulty building and maintaining consistent relationships in their lives, let alone mutual and intimate relationships. Few subjects had histories of continuing job performance and achievement.

But it would be inaccurate to dismiss these attackers and near-attackers as inadequate, unaccomplished losers, or simply to look among “losers” to find those who may pose a threat. Almost half of the subjects had attended some college. Two-fifths of the subjects had been married. One-third were parents. Several had completed tours of military service. One subject had earned a Bronze Star for valor in combat. One subject had attended law school. Another had attended medical school. Two had served as college professors. One was a retired police officer. Another had retired from the postal service. Another had served as a firefighter and as an elected official. Several others had worked as engineers.

What does seem clear for almost all subjects was that their attack or near-lethal approach occurred after a period of downward spiral in their lives. A tenth of the subjects are known to have had a major illness or accident that affected their behavior in the 12 months before their attack or near-attack. A fifth are known to have lost a significant person or relationship in that 12-month period. And almost a quarter are known to have suffered a significant failure or loss of status that affected their behavior. Significantly then, almost half of attackers and near-lethal approachers are known to have experienced an accident/illness, loss of relationship, or failure/loss of status that influenced their behavior in the 12 months before their violent or potentially violent actions.

For many subjects, one or several severe situational stresses appeared to trigger the process of thinking and action that led to assassination behavior.

Implications

Findings from the Secret Service Exceptional Case Study Project have implications for protectors, investigators, and researchers concerned with “targeted violence,” situations in which there is an identified (or identifiable) target and an identified (or identifiable) perpetrator.

Protective Investigations

Perhaps the major overall finding of the study is that *many, if not most, attacks, on public officials and public figures are potentially preventable*. Persons intending to mount attacks follow paths to

their attacks. They often engage in “attack-related” behaviors, that is, discernible activities that precede an attack. They may demonstrate interest in previous assassins and assassination attempts. They are likely to communicate their intentions to others or to keep a journal or diary about their thinking and activities. Similar thinking and analysis may hold true for persons who engage in “stalking” behaviors and for those who commit certain kinds of workplace violence.

Very few attackers and near-lethal approachers communicated explicit threats to their targets or to law enforcement authorities. This finding does not suggest that investigators should ignore threats that are sent or spoken to or about public officials or public figures. Some persons who make threats do so in order to be stopped. They may perceive a lack of response to a threat as “permission” to proceed. Many persons have been prevented, or deterred, from taking action because of a prompt response to their threatening communications.

The finding that attackers did not communicate explicit threats to their targets does suggest, however, that attention should be directed toward identifying, investigating, and assessing persons whose behavior indicates that they might pose threats of violence, whether or not they communicate direct threats to their targets or to authorities.

Disciplined investigators who approach their work with thoroughness, healthy skepticism, and common sense, can develop information and evidence which strongly suggests that a given subject of concern *does or does not pose* a risk of violence against a given target(s) (7).

Research

Researchers might conduct other studies of “targeted violence” that use a behavior-based perspective similar to that used in the ECSP, with the goal of aiding investigators to intervene to prevent targeted violent attacks (8). For example, researchers could examine the perspectives and behaviors of persons who have engaged in stalking, workplace violence, and other targeted violent crimes.

Only rarely have researchers of violence or criminal behavior started by collecting a sample of perpetrators of violent actions and then worked backward to understand the thinking and behavior that preceded the offenders’ attacks. For example, most published research on “stalking” examines demographic and psychological *characteristics* of persons charged with the crime of stalking. Few of these subjects are likely to have attacked their targets. Persons who stalk, *and then attack and injure or kill their targets*, are more likely to be charged with assaults or homicide than with the crime of stalking. Researchers who wish to gather information that may help to prevent stalking behaviors should identify subjects who have attacked targets, and then examine the ideas and activities that led to the attacks.

Ultimately databases should be developed that permit comparison of the pre-incident thinking and behavior of persons who attempt or carry out different kinds of targeted violent attacks.

Conclusion

This paper has presented information about American assassins, attackers, and near-lethal approachers. A related publication based on this work suggests guidelines for organizations and individuals with protective and protective intelligence responsibilities (7).

An assassination attempt is the *end result of a process* of thinking and behavior. Many attackers and near-lethal approachers move

through life on a path that leads them to consider assassination of one or another prominent person of public status as an acceptable—or even necessary—way to improve their situations or resolve their problems. These persons are often relatively bright and/or well educated. They may appear to be socially isolated, but they often look, dress, and act in ways that do not readily distinguish them from others.

At some point—often after a life crisis—attackers and near-lethal approachers begin to see the idea of assassination as acceptable and desirable. They may gather information about previous assassins, take special interest in one or more potential public official/figure targets, and/or begin to view assassination as a way to achieve their objectives, such as becoming famous or notorious, being removed from society, or getting killed. Some write about their ideas and activities, in a journal or diary. Others tell friends, family, or colleagues—but usually not the target—about their thoughts and intentions.

Persons who continue along the path to attack often carefully consider how to carry out an attack. They may travel to visit an office, home, or temporary visiting place of a target. Their travels may take them far from home. Many with an interest in the President visit the White House on their journey toward attack. Attackers and near-lethal approachers may practice with a weapon they have chosen for assassination. They may try to learn about security arrangements, and see the presence (or absence) of security as a deterrent (or as an opportunity).

Attackers and near-lethal approachers often consider more than one target, ultimately choosing a target for attack after concluding that an opportunity for attack exists and that an attack on the chosen target is likely to fulfill their goals. But many of these persons have mixed feelings about actually attacking. Some, who feel propelled to move along the path to assassination, search for reasons why they should not attack, and are stopped from mounting attacks by the belief that they will not be successful.

Some prospective assassins think about—and plan for—escaping after their attack. Others approach their assassination attempts with the expectation they will be killed, or, for the *purpose* of being killed.

Few attackers or near-lethal approachers possessed the cunning or the bravado of assassins in popular movies or novels. The reality of American assassination is much more mundane, more banal, than assassinations depicted on the screen. Neither monsters nor

martyrs, recent American assassins, attackers, and near-lethal approachers engaged in pre-incident patterns of thinking and behavior. Understanding these patterns of ideation and action may permit those with protective responsibilities to prevent future attacks.

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