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Plotting to Kill the President

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PLOTTING TO KILL THE PRESIDENT

Assassination Attempts from
Washington to Hoover

MEL AYTON

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PREFACE

New Revelations

Plotting to Kill the President is a corrective to the many history books and biographies that have ignored or overlooked numerous threats American presidents have faced; some serious enough to have placed the chief executive within a hairsbreadth of assassination. Many stories within this study have remained largely hidden from the public; some are buried in newspaper archives and others in government reports, presidential memoirs, bodyguard memoirs, Secret Service agents' memoirs, Library of Congress records, National Archives documents, and presidential libraries.

From the time of America's first president there have been groups of organized plotters or individuals, acting out of personal or political reasons, who have been determined to assassinate the chief executive.

During the period covered by this book, three American presidents were assassinated (Abraham Lincoln, James Garfield, and William McKinley) and, according to official publications, only one other president, Andrew Jackson, survived an assassination attempt.

Plotting to Kill the President addresses these historical events but also reveals the numerous never-before-told incidents when the president's life was put in danger, including stories of attempted stabbings, shootings, and bombings.

Unknown to the general public, most of America's presidents have survived "near lethal approaches" in which would-be assassins have

breached the president's security but the assassination attempt has been thwarted, either by presidential guards, White House guards, White House doorkeepers, Secret Service agents, or local law enforcement officers. As the *Minneapolis Journal* stated in 1901, "There are more of the . . . dangerous cranks than the public ever hears anything about."¹

Most of the would-be assassins researched for this book were individuals bent on achieving infamy. A central and overriding motive for many presidential assassins and would-be assassins has been a craving for notoriety after living a life built on constant failure. The assassins believed their acts would propel them into the history books and they would be recognized as important people.

Plotting to Kill the President reveals many previously unknown or little-known assassination attempts against American presidents that have occurred from the inception of the republic to the time of the Great Depression. Most shocking are the revelations about the assassination attempts against Presidents Arthur, Hayes, Cleveland, Harrison, Roosevelt, Taft, Wilson, and Hoover, which are revealed here for the first time. Chester A. Arthur was the victim of two assassination attempts. The first attempt was made at the Butler Mansion in Washington DC, and the second attempt occurred at the White House. A gunman stalked President-elect Hayes and plotted to kill him during the inauguration ceremonies at the Capitol. Harrison and Cleveland were the victims of previously unknown assassination attempts by lone gunmen. A serious assassination plot to kill William McKinley was hatched four years before his actual murder in 1901. A plot to blow up William Howard Taft's train was foiled by local law enforcement officers, and a gunman stalked Taft with the intention of killing him. A man who had stockpiled bombs, dynamite, and nitroglycerine in his hotel room in Hoboken, New Jersey, confessed he was plotting, along with fourteen others, to assassinate Woodrow Wilson. In 1919, an insane man, armed with a .32-caliber pistol, stalked Wilson, intending to kill him and "save the world."

The assassination attempt against former president Theodore Roosevelt by John Schrank, in 1912, is widely regarded as the only serious assassination attempt Roosevelt suffered. However, the commonly accepted notion among presidential historians that Roosevelt was never the victim of an assassination attempt while in office is now seriously

undermined. There were at least three occasions when armed assassins breached the president's security, placing Roosevelt within seconds of assassination. Two attempts to kill him were made at his summer home and one attempt occurred at the White House.

Many presidents, including Grover Cleveland and Chester Arthur, conspired with their White House aides to conceal from the public the true natures of their illnesses. In Cleveland's case, he believed public knowledge of his cancer would be harmful to the perilous state of the nation's economy. In Arthur's case, he kept his illness, Bright's disease, from the public because he was concerned about public confidence.

Plotting to Kill the President also reveals that, at least since the time of Lincoln's assassination, presidential aides and friends conspired to cover up numerous assassination attempts against American presidents. In 1901 a "clerical employee" at the White House told a newspaper reporter, "Few persons realize how vital a subject at the White House the possibility of presidential assassination always has been. Of course, nothing of this discussion gets out except in the cases where a shot is actually fired or some other overt act committed which startles the country. Of the larger number of seemingly suspicious cases that, whether alarming or not, are nipped in the bud, little is ever known."²

White House guard William Henry Crook noted in his memoirs, "Episodes of [violent behavior] were a frequent occurrence in the White House. We dealt with them quietly and they rarely got into the newspapers."³ The plot to assassinate Rutherford B. Hayes during his inauguration was "kept from the public" by "his request."⁴ Even before he became president, Ulysses S. Grant was the subject of assassination attempts and his reaction was to tell his aides to keep them secret, as he believed it would lead to further attacks.⁵

The assassination attempts against Grover Cleveland were covered up partly due to the intervention of Henry T. Thurber, the president's secretary during his second term. President Cleveland's aides believed publicity would only inspire copycat attacks. Following an assassination attempt in New York in 1892, shortly before Cleveland's election to a second term as president, New York Police Superintendent Thomas J. Byrnes and Cleveland's doctor, Joseph D. Bryant, conspired to keep the incident a secret. However, the details of the assassination attempt were

revealed by a doctor friend of Bryant's who attended the president when he was attacked. An acclaimed journalist of his time, Frank G. Carpenter, of the *Deseret Weekly*, wrote, "Through Dr. Bryant and Superintendent Byrnes the matter was kept out of the papers and today no one but the president and his most intimate friends know the exact facts of the case."⁶

Additionally, a statement that Henry Thurber made a few years before his death in 1904 partly supports the claims of a cover-up. "Nobody will ever know," Thurber said, "the extent of my efforts to protect President Cleveland unless he should be assassinated."⁷

In Benjamin Harrison's case, the president was unaware of the plot to kill him as, according to U.S. Secret Service chief John S. Bell, the president's aides and political friends kept the incident from the president and were sworn to secrecy. Supportive evidence of the cover-up resides in the discovery by this author that the president's private secretary, Elijah Halford, had been lying when he told the press that the assassination story was false.

During Theodore Roosevelt's administration, William Loeb, secretary to the president, also attempted to cover up assassination attempts. In September 1903, he said that Henry Weilbrenner's attack on the president had the effect of "arousing all the mental freaks" that held the president responsible for "everything that happens" and that it was for this reason that "many frustrated attempts upon the life of the president [were] kept secret."⁸

In October 1903, Loeb met with Secret Service chief John E. Wilkie about how the agency could effectively carry out its protection duties. Loeb announced his intention to suppress every fact in connection with the arrest of "cranks" at the White House. Loeb also said he would "make trouble" for any police officer or Secret Service agent who failed to observe his orders in this respect. The diktat was extended to the Washington police force. The *Washington Times* stated, "The police authorities have decided not to give out reports of cranks or insane persons who have been hanging around the White House for the possible purpose of injuring the president."⁹ A newspaper report of 1897 stated, "The policemen and doorkeepers at the executive mansion do everything in their power to suppress news of cranks."¹⁰

However, in an open democracy like that of the United States, it was

often difficult to keep many attempted assassination stories from the public, especially when reporters often spent a good deal of their time in the White House front-door vestibule and were able to observe the efforts of White House doorkeepers in keeping mentally unstable individuals or political fanatics from attempting to approach the president. Additionally, personal papers and diaries kept by presidential secretaries, obscure government reports, and newspaper archives have confirmed the efforts made to hide the risks presidents have always taken when carrying out their duties.

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CHAPTER 1

Guarding the Early Presidents

[There is] a solid layer of savagery beneath the surface of society, unaffected by the superficial changes of religion and culture.

—Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*

No man who ever held the office of president would congratulate a friend on obtaining it. He will make one man grateful and a hundred men his enemies, for every office he can bestow.

—John Adams

At the founding of the United States, Americans were proud that their chief executive was not surrounded by an armed guard or the presence of regal trappings. They saw Europe as a place where monarchs and dictators feared their subjects and required armed protection when they exited their palaces. Americans believed in the exceptional nature of their government, and to accept protection for the president would be to acknowledge that America was no different from the despotic regimes in Europe.

America's leaders also feared they would be perceived as having erected barriers between themselves and the people if they chose to have bodyguards. A children's primer that was popular during the Civil War illustrated American "exceptionalism" with reference to how the president was protected:

How are emperors and kings protected?

By great troops of guards; so that it is difficult to approach them.

How is the president guarded?

He needs no guards at all; he may be visited by any persons like a private citizen.¹

The nature of presidential protection in the early nineteenth century was therefore virtually nonexistent. Although the early presidents were at times the objects of abuse and received numerous threatening letters, they did not, on the whole, take the threats seriously and moved about freely without protective escorts.

The American republic and its leaders were, from the beginning, split on the issue of how the American president should interact with his constituency. Although George Washington and Thomas Jefferson shared a view of where the capital of the new American republic should be located, they had very different opinions about the nature of the presidency. Should the president act as a king or a commoner? By 1791, for example, Washington came under severe criticism for his receptions at the White House, which were described as “monarchical.” However, the first president believed that sumptuous state ceremonies enhanced respect for the new republic among other nations.² Jefferson, on the other hand, was “careful in every particular of his personal conduct to inculcate upon the people his . . . unwillingness to admit the smallest distinction that may separate him from the mass of his fellow citizens,” according to a British diplomat.³

An early dispute about the role of the “first citizen” centered on the chief executive’s new home. The original plans for the new city of Washington DC called for a “presidential palace” five times the size of the building we now know as the White House. The plan reflected the Federalist Party’s monarchical idea of the presidency. Federalist Party leaders argued that Americans wanted their president to act as a kind of elected king, set apart from the people. The republican opposition, led by Jefferson, despised any notion that the president should act as a monarch or that he should live in a home with aristocratic airs like the European monarchs. Jefferson’s political principles sought to deflect the aristocratic and elitist attitudes of the Federalists and portray instead the

openness and liberty that was associated with the common American. Jefferson's Democratic-Republican Party (as it was then known) characterized the Federalist position as unbefitting a true democracy based on equality and a classless society. A modest way of living, they believed, reflected the spirit of the age. "Kings live in parks," they argued, and "presidents live on streets."⁴ (In 1800, Jefferson was elected, in part, by publicizing fears about the Federalists' "monarchical aspirations."⁵)

Because the Democratic-Republicans considered the idea of a presidential palace antidemocratic, they rejected any effort to deny public entry to the "People's House," and access was, from the beginning, a security problem. Even while the White House was being built, the public wandered in and out without being challenged. In Jefferson's time, and for generations afterward, citizens used the White House grounds for picnics, walks, and even public fairs.

Foreign travel for a president was also considered to be against the ideals of the nation because citizens were fearful that their president might be seduced into imitating the ways of European monarchy if he visited their palaces.⁶ As well, the idea of stationing guards in and around the White House was considered wholly inappropriate to the nation's character. However, although the American people and their leaders prided themselves on the absence of a royal guard at the White House, it gradually became imperative that some form of security should be installed. Unruly visitors and office seekers, who were taking up the president's time, mandated it. Beginning in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, increasing restrictions on public access to the White House were imposed, due largely to concerns for the personal security of the president and his family.

However, for a century after John Adams first moved into the White House, the protection of the mansion and its residents remained a relatively minor concern, except during wartime. As time passed, various combinations of police officers, guards, and soldiers furnished security for the president's home.

Until early in the twentieth century, security for the president at the White House consisted mainly of guards in civilian dress. In addition to the guards, a doorkeeper was assigned to maintain watch in the entrance hall. John Adams, John Quincy Adams, and Andrew Jackson

were against it. James Monroe was in favor of the security.⁷ Although the doorkeeper was not armed, he always had firearms close to hand. It was not until the Tyler administration that a permanent company of guards was established to protect the president and the White House.

The arguments about how the president should live and how the White House should be secured soon extended to how the president's person should be protected. Today, protection is seen as a form of "legitimacy." In the time of the founding fathers, the idea of a bodyguard was viewed as a weakness. Citizens were also concerned that the introduction of a Praetorian Guard in the style of ancient Rome might embolden the president to use it as a standing army against his opponents.

From the beginning, American presidents wanted to avoid the martial displays that were common in other countries when it came to protecting a head of state. The aim was for a president to lead an independent life that simple citizenship secured, going and coming just like every other American—walking abroad, strolling through the streets, driving with his family and unattended by guards or detectives. The presidents also believed that America was different from European nations and therefore should not fear that one of its citizens would kill their democratically elected leader.

The absence of any fear for the president's safety also resided in the fact that the country had only a small population. The year Jefferson entered the White House, the population of the United States was 5,308,473, nine-tenths of which resided east of the Alleghenies.⁸ Eighty percent of the population lived in the countryside, and the absence of public transport for the common man resulted in only a small number of people who could travel to meet with the president.

The early presidents also did not go electioneering, as the public considered it unseemly. This meant that the president did not place himself in harm's way by exposing himself to danger in large crowds. It was indeed a paradox. The American people did not want their president acting like a king, but neither did they want him campaigning like an ordinary politician.