

The good deed of leon czolgosz assassination as a public service essay sample

[Government](#), [Capitalism](#)



American historians have long agreed with Eric Rauchway's central thesis that the assassination of William McKinley in 1901 was a fortuitous event that opened the door to the Progressive Era of the next two decades. Theodore Roosevelt and other Progressives used this assassination by a self-described anarchist immigrant named Leon Czolgosz as a warning that the American political and economic system had to be reformed and become more equitable for the working class or revolution would be inevitable. Roosevelt did "set himself the task of implementing radical changes for conservative purposes", by which he meant that the conditions of the small farmers and working class had to be improved to avoid a socialist revolution or more violent acts like the assassination of McKinley (Rauchway 93). He was not prepared to overthrow the capitalist system, but he knew that the status quo was simply not viable any longer and that reforms had to be passed in order to conserve the social order and save capitalism from itself. Few scholars have made this point as openly as Rauchway or in a book-length study, but the fact is that McKinley's premature demise has never been mourned as some kind of great national tragedy compared to the death of Abraham Lincoln or John F. Kennedy. Perhaps they are not willing to state directly that the assassination was actually a great benefit to the country, as Rauchway does, but they do not regard it as any great loss. Indeed, it is all but forgotten today, and if McKinley is remembered at all it is only as one of a long string of Gilded Age presidents in the late-19th Century who served the interests of big business, Wall Street and the Robber Barons. Czolgosz regarded McKinley as just another political tool hired by the ruling class, but many Progressives shared his views. They also thought that the ordinary

worker was being badly oppressed by capitalism and that almost all the wealth was concentrated at the top, but then again so did Roosevelt and many others who did not approve of his 'direct action' methods. By no means all conservatives learned that lesson, either in the 1920s or over the past thirty years, and predictably the results were very similar to the Gilded Age with its financial crashes, depressions and mass unemployment. Even so, conservative Republicans representing the big capitalist interests were not in power again until they managed to elect Warren G. Harding in 1921, but rather reformers who attempted to make capitalism more humane and stable and the political system more democratic and amenable to popular control.

Leon Czolgosz was the most politically-motivated of the American presidential assassins except perhaps for John Wilkes Booth, and claimed to be an anarchist. This struck home for the ruling class in the U. S. since anarchists had already been blamed for the Haymarket bombing of 1886 and many similar attacks around the world, including the assassinating of Tsar Alexander II of Russia and the Empress Elizabeth of Austria. Their goal was the overthrow of the capitalist class and the state apparatus that it controlled to oppress the workers, and create a new socialist society in which the workers controlled industry. Czolgosz was not insane, although in present-day psychological terms he might be described as being a little on the sociopathic side. Above all else, he was ideological, and his radical, socialist and Marxist views "echoed hosts of critics in the United States and around the world" (Rauchway x). Among those were Edward Bellamy, author of the hugely popular *Looking Backward* that described the socialist utopia of

the future, as well as the Populist farmers in the South and West and the angry and alienated proletariat of the big cities. Like Czolgosz, the ordinary workers and small farmers had been badly “rattled” by the depression that began in 1893, which was the worst in the nation’s history up to that time (Rauchway 166). Even in ‘good’ times their incomes were low compared to the plutocrats and Robber Barons who controlled most of the country’s wealth, unemployment was common and social security nonexistent. Over thirty million immigrants entered the country in 1890-1910, sometimes over one million a year, and even though half of them did not remain permanently in the U. S., millions still struggled in low-paying jobs, trapped in nightmarish urban slums that were being documented by reformers like Jacob Riis (Rauchway 90). Most of them had already been exposed to radical ideologies in Europe, and even though America’s capitalists needed this source of cheap labor, they also feared its potentially revolutionary proclivities. After the William McKinley was removed from the scene, many of America’s ruling elites realized that there might be many more people like Czolgosz in the slums. Perhaps there were large numbers of anarchists or potential anarchist, eager for a chance to kill someone in a top hat, and repression by the police and military might not be sufficient to prevent a revolution. Then as now, there were many guns available to most ordinary Americans, and the police and military were much smaller and weaker institutions than they became in the 20th Century. Various Gilded Age presidents had suppressed the railroad strikes in 1877, the eight-hour day strikes in 1886 and the Pullman strike in 1894, and also tried to divert the attention of the country with an imperialist war in 1898, but not of this had quieted popular

discontent. American capitalists were alarmed by “ each day’s reports of riots, strikes, and proposed new schemes of taxation”, as well as by general public distrust of large banks and corporations (Rauchway 62). Like Theodore Roosevelt they understood that repression was not enough and that some reforms had to be put in place, so after McKinley’s assassination “ they began treating the immigrant working classes differently” (Rauchway x). Theodore Roosevelt was a conservative reformer deplored anarchy or any other kind of radical or revolutionary ideology, but he shared some of the anarchist’s analysis of the ills of American society and the capitalist system. He had never been particularly fond of McKinley (and vice versa), even though he supported him in the 1896 election against William Jennings Bryan and then become his vice president in 1900. From the start, he “ did not like the smell of the men behind the new president”, such as the wealthy Ohio tycoon Senator Mark Hanna (Rauchway 13). In fact, Hanna had called him a “ wild man”, who was too unpredictable and might not remain in the steady political groove of standard Gilded Age presidents (Rauchway 38). McKinley was not one of the wealthy plutocrats in his own right, and Roosevelt knew even better than Czolgosz exactly who they were, but he was just another one of their pleasant, amiable public servants who followed their preferred policies of tariffs, taxes and government aid to industry.

Immediately after the shooting in Buffalo, Roosevelt was privately disappointed to hear that the president seemed to be making a recovery, but fortunately postoperative infection soon set in and he took a turn for the worse. Publicly he deplored the man who had struck down the president and his revolutionary ideology, although in private he expressed sympathy with

some of the demands of the socialists, anarchists and populists.

Nevertheless, he deplored violent, revolutionary acts and “ in Roosevelt’s America, troublesome people deserved nothing as much as a good shooting”, just like the rebels and insurgents in the Philippines (Rauchway 26). At least, he often threatened to have such people shot, although most of the time his bark was much worse than his bite. Even while he condemned anarchists as “ evil” and demanded that they be jailed or thrown out of the country, he also intended to move to political system away from the dead center of the Gilded Age and more toward the modern, social democratic welfare state of the 20th Century (Rauchway 94). In so doing, he was also very careful to distinguish “ unacceptable radicalism from normal progressivism”, particularly in opposing violent strikes and protests as well as assassination of capitalists and public officials like they did in foreign countries (Rauchway 96).

WORKS CITED

Rauchway, Eric. *Murdering McKinley: The Making of Theodore Roosevelt’s America*. NY: Hill and Wang, 2003.