

Assassination has
been utilized as a
political tool



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Introduction

Assassination has been utilized as a political tool since the beginning of recorded history, marking, altering, or determining the course of events through murder. Even today, assassination and its forms, including terrorism, continue to plague most nations throughout the world. Additional acts of violence, such as ethnic tensions and coups, executions, and civil wars, continue to frequent societies and political systems in the 21st century. Unique to assassinations, whether or not the act is successful does not always reflect failed consequences; all too often, attempted assassinations are equally impactful as complete, or deadly, assassinations.

Assassinations and assassination attempts, particularly upon heads of state, are often highly ranked in terms of political violence and significance.

Besides affecting or killing the victim, assassinations have direct consequences upon critical political institutions and the targeted individual's nation as a whole. As studied and discussed by political theorists and analysts, assassinations and assassination attempts of important political figures have far-reaching political and societal repercussions. Obviously affecting the targeted government or nation, the sudden and unexpected murder of a head of state or high-ranking official not only interferes with a nation's political effectiveness, but also promulgates terror and unrest within a government. Most significantly, assassinations and attempts to assassinate often disturb or change the focus of domestic and foreign policy within a nation.

As previously mentioned, terrorism is closely related to assassination and no discussion on the latter would be complete without a discussion of the

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former as well. Besides an obvious systematic and deliberate act of murder, terrorism can also be referred to as either a mass assassination, or a terroristic assassination. Terrorism, according to one source, is “ assassinations contrived to create a fear sufficient to destroy a whole system. Terrorism implies a movement whose objective can only be achieved by repeated assassinations over relatively long periods of time, for fear dissipates when pressure is relaxed or exercised intermittently. Similar to assassinations, terrorism has plagued and continues to plague many (if not most) nations, often resulting in political chaos or upset. Furthermore, as with assassinations, terrorism is also saturated with politics; however, unlike assassinations, terrorism is employed through strategy, fueled by religious or ecological motives, and carried out with the ultimate goal of power. Although united by a common denominator, murder, the conceptual differences between assassinations and terrorism are profound and worth separate examination, for the purpose of this study.

The Concept of Assassination

The violent act of assassination is defined as the murder of a (most likely) political, royal, or public individual. The term is derived from the order of the Assassins, which was an 11th and 12th century Muslim sect that advanced its political goals by murdering high-ranking officials. The origin of the word is *assassiyun*, Arabic for fundamentalist, from the word *assass*, foundation. The suicide squad of the Assassins, which was a militant arm of the Islamic Isma'ili sect, was founded by Hassan Sabah and operated from the Alamut cliff top fortress in the Elburz Mountains of Persia, now known as northwestern Iran.

The Assassins, according to legend, were called hashishiyun, “ smokers of hashish,” by their enemies as the hashish was believed to be the source of their visions—which commanded their violent acts. Marco Polo even wrote of the sect and an impregnable fortress in the mountains of Persia when detailing an account of his travels.

However, although the term assassination was not defined until the Muslim sect materialized in the 11th century, their method or tool of political murder had been in use since as early as 900 B. C. The ancient Greeks and Romans did not have a word that corresponds with our word assassination. “ A killing was simply a means to an end; its moral significance depended entirely on the nature of the person killed” [*italics original*]. An individual who killed a public figure was either a murderer or a tyrannicide, and the latter term was a synonymous word for “ liberator,” one who freed his country. According to Cicero, some of the most celebrated figures in Greek and Roman history were tyrant-killers. Brutus, who murdered Caesar, was born of a long line of tyrant-killers. Undeniably, assassins make history.

The Concept of Terrorism

For the purpose of being thorough, it is worth examining the earliest uses of the word terror. The word terrorist first appeared in modern politics in the French Revolution, when revolutionists occasionally applied the term to their actions. The revolutionists characterized terrorism as “ good” when implemented against individuals deemed to be enemies of virtue and modernity, according to one source. Eventually, upon the defeat of the Frenchman Robespierre and his military force in 1794 (known as the Reign of Terror), the term terrorist became a pejorative. Thus, although the term

initially was meant to conjure or reflect what “ good” a government could do to achieve and ensure the acceptance of a revolution, within a century and a half, the term had evolved into an evil principle of terror. Russian communist Vladimir Lenin acted upon the belief that “ the purpose of terror is to terrorize,” and his orders during the Russian Civil War are reflective of how terrorism can be utilized as an instrument of states.

As with assassinations, terror tactics have afflicted or been a part of societies since the beginning of time. However, terrorist campaigns, defined as “ the prolonged, systematic use of terror to secure a political objective, [have been] by comparison, conspicuously rare, and the true terrorist enters history late.” As previously referenced, the first example of terrorism can be seen in Medieval Islam with the Ismaili sect. The instances of terrorism thereafter multiplied, resulting in almost every country in the world having experienced an act of terrorism. Ultimately, the development of modern terrorism is too complex to be detailed here, but for the purposes of this study, it is worth noting that terrorism evolved immensely in both strategic and tactical principles in the twentieth century—emerging as the most wielded tool for political murder.

Problem Statement

Without a doubt, assassinations and terrorism, whether successful or unsuccessful, remain one of the most devastating acts of political violence. The fact that the United States and other world-renowned democracies have not been immune to these two types of violence, assassinations and terrorism, illustrates the very severe nature of the problem. The various assassination attempts that have been made against leaders (primarily

presidents) within the United States is indicative to onlookers (or speaks) of a national security issue—opening up questions of vulnerability or enticing a violent act. Essentially, any violent attack against a president or his nation disturbs the social and political stability of the targeted country. Regardless, the impacts of these acts of violence ripple across the world and are felt by other nations, whether directly or indirectly. A critical analysis of the available body of information and related discussion portrays assassinations (complete and attempts) and terrorism as violent acts which not only have the inherent ability to heighten national security, but also interfere with the foreign policy of the United States. The fragile balance that exists between the United States and other world nations, particularly the Middle East, also exemplifies the latter.

Research Objectives

This thesis/study seeks to evaluate the impact of political assassinations within the United States, as well as the impact of terrorism in the United States. The specific objectives include the following:

1. To evaluate the consequences of political assassinations upon policy*
2. To examine the consequences of terrorism or terror tactics upon policy
3. To compare and contrast the impact of both violent acts, assassination and terrorism, upon the United States

Hypothesis

In addition to impacting the timing of political action in the United States, the assassinations of presidents and public figures such as civil rights leader Martin Luther King and Black Muslim leader Malcolm X has had the effect of catalyzing public concern and activating the politicization of major policy

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issues. In essence, broadening support and paving the way for major policy initiatives. Furthermore and most significantly, this study posits that although both assassination and terrorism have been of major consequence within the United States, the brutal act of terrorism has had the greater impact than all U. S. assassinations combined.

Terms and Functional Definitions

For operational terms and concepts, the following functional definitions were employed in this study:

The victim is defined as the intended target of the assassination or act of terrorism.

The method is defined as the weapon of assassination, or the tactic employed in an act of terrorism.

The result is focused upon the intended victim.

The impact is focused upon the effect of an assassination or terrorism upon policy

The venue is to identify the location of an assassination or terrorist attack.

The assailant is defined as the individual or individuals who planned, carried out, or ordered an assassination or act of terror. For example, an accomplice would also be identified as an assailant.

The motive represents the reasoning, when known, of why a victim was targeted by either assassination or terrorism.

In this study, policy change is meant to reflect the different judicial, executive and legislative decisions that were made after each act of assassination or terrorism.

The following terms are used repeatedly throughout this study:

Assassination is defined slightly different according to various sources, but is universally agreed upon as being the sudden, premeditated murder of a political figure, due to the victim's perspective, prominence, or some combination of the two. Many sources classify an attempted homicide as assassination, so for the purposes of uniformity, this study shall follow the same classification. However, the realm of attempts does not include written or verbal attempts, stalking of a victim, or mass demonstrations. The latter actions are more often, depending upon the situation, characterized as foundational or threshold acts to assassinations rather than as acts of assassination alone of themselves. Generally, assassination is defined as the murder of a public figure by an assailant who aims solely at the death of the victim. For further clarification, a historical event can be described to showcase the employment of terms within an assassination situation. Guiseppe Zangara, for example, attempted to assassinate Franklin D. Roosevelt in Miami, Florida, but hit and killed Anton Cermak, the Mayor of Chicago instead. This example illustrates how the latter event is classified as an assassination attempt upon the President and the murder, not assassination, of Anton Cermak—a bystander victim.

In this study, terrorism is defined according to a definition that has remained sound for over a quarter-century: "[T]he deliberate and systematic murder,

maiming, and menacing of the innocent to inspire fear for political ends.”

The latter definition was proffered by analysts in 1979 at The Jonathon Institute at Jerusalem (a conference on international terrorism) and has been widely employed by scholars and analysts since then. While other definitions exist, all agree that terrorism is the use or threat of use of murder to infuse fear. Contrary to assassinations, victims of terrorism are not always specific targets.

For the purposes of effectively analyzing the true impact of assassinations on policy in the United States, assassinations of only those individuals in political public life were considered for this study.

Literature Review

The violent act of assassination has been commonly presented as the premeditated execution of an important political, religious, or social figure. Contrary to regular homicides, assassinations strategically target important individuals who maintain a prominent position of power and influence in society. In addition, such acts are motivated by clearly defined objectives. For instance, victims can be assassinated for political, economical, or ideological reasons. In the case of complete and attempted assassinations against American presidents, another category of motivation exists: revenge. The majority of presidential assassinations within the United States fall within this category, with the act most often being the work of an unstable, lone assailant and politically aimless. To the assailant, their victim is seen as an obstacle in the realization of a personal goal or established agenda. Although any individual can be the victim of an assassination, the available body of literature that was surveyed for this study depicts political leaders as

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a high-risk group. Undeniably, the political aspect of assassination has often been depicted as the most complex dimension of the violent act. Politically motivated assassination, regardless of whether an attempt or successful, is always considered an act to murder political leaders. A crucial defining characteristic of these political assassinations is their fundamental objective to advance political interests.

The underlying assumption of every assassination is that political figures are individuals upon whom huge responsibilities rest, such as the ability to implement major domestic and foreign policy decisions. For illustration, the presidencies of John Eisenhower, Richard M. Nixon and John F. Kennedy were particularly viewed by the communist world dictatorial regimes to be an obstruction in the advancement of the United States' political and socioeconomic interests. As seen after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack upon the United States, President George W. Bush declared a "war on terror" policy that remains in effect today, although it has changed dramatically with the introduction of current President Barack Hussein Obama and his administration. But notably, the act of terrorism on September 11 led to a policy in which suspected terrorists within and outside the United States were to be tracked and dealt with accordingly.

Throughout history, the key targets of political assassination have included Mahatma Gandhi of India, Fidel Castro of Cuba, and Patrice Lumumba of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Within the United States, the first attempt to murder a political figure through assassination occurred in 1835, when Richard Lawrence attempted to assassinate President Andrew Jackson. Since the nineteenth century, a handful of U. S. presidents have been the

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victims of this type of political violence. Included within this group are Presidents Abraham Lincoln, James Garfield, William McKinley, and John F. Kennedy. Their deaths have continued to be a topic of unparalleled debate amongst political analysts, scholars, and the general public, due to the concerns that assassination poses to the security of political figures, particularly a president, of the United States. Although as previously mentioned, the majority of assassinations and assassination attempts against U. S. presidents have been classified as random, politically aimless acts committed by a lone individual, the general contention is that they were well-planned and executed. The latter results in the prevalence of conspiracy theories, which contend that within the realm of U. S. assassinations, each act was meticulously planned by individuals working together and with a defined motive in mind. Instead of classifying one factor as the primary cause of assassination, conspiracy theories posit that such violent acts stem from numerous factors. For example, many conspiracy theorists believe that Lee Oswald, the murderer of President John F. Kennedy, was functioning as a component of a network of conspirators.

The Politics of Murder: Assassination in the United States

The act of assassination can be described as one of the oldest techniques to perpetuate the politics of power. The phenomenon of assassination in the United States has received increased attention in the 20th century, with having only received notable research and attention since the infamous trio of assassinations in the tumultuous 1960s. Nevertheless, the available body of information and research reveals that assassination dates back to when civilization and the concept of formal governments became an entrenched

aspect of society. The murder of kings such as Gedaliah and Julius Caesar can perhaps be termed as the earliest assassinations to be recorded in history.

However, within the context of the United States, the act of assassination became markedly more common in the 19th century. Such acts of political violence were not expected to happen. The rationale behind such a mentality was due to the United States being a democratic state whose executive authority was responsible and responsive to the will of the popularity majority. Thus, between 1789 and 1835, when the first assassination attempt occurred, no significant protection details (on behalf of either federal or local enforcements agencies) were dedicated to U. S. presidents. Perhaps this rationalistic and optimistic mentality regarding human nature and America's system of government serve as an explanation for why the politics of assassination have been largely under-explored until the 20th century.

For extended periods, prominent political leaders continued to underestimate the threat that assassination posed to U. S. presidents. William H. Seward, who served as Secretary of State under Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Jackson, once remarked, "Assassination is not an American practice or habit, and one so vicious and so desperate cannot be engrafted into our political system. This conviction of mine has grown so strong since the civil war began. Every day's experience confirms it." Ironically, only three years after making the latter statement, President Lincoln was assassinated in what appeared to be a carefully constructed plot. And the optimistic Seward barely survived an assassination attempt on <https://assignbuster.com/assassination-has-been-utilized-as-a-political-tool/>

himself during the murder of Lincoln. It can be posited that Seward's expressed certainty regarding assassination was not unique unto himself, but rather demonstrative of the general mentality of the U. S. populace as well. President James McKinley solidified this rationalistic viewpoint when he declared, "Assassination can no more be guarded against than death by lightning; and it is best not to worry about either." Sadly, McKinley would later regret his overconfidence in a morally sound and rational society—an admirable trait, but one that enabled his death.

The Politics of Assassination CHANGE TITLE!

While the murder of any political leader of a society is going to have repercussions upon said society, the assassination of a president precipitates significant social and political transformation. In the past, the assassination of a political head was viewed as an appropriate method to eradicate oppressive tyrannical leadership. However, in today's societies, such acts of violence are hardly condoned as an ideal strategy for catalyzing political change, nonetheless positive political change. Conversely, assassination attempts and assassinations have the impact of destabilizing social and political structures, as the murder of a president or highly-ranked political leader is regarded as particularly detrimental to social and political harmony. Despite the reality of assassination and widespread acknowledgement of its threat, negligible attention has been given to the impact of such acts, particularly upon domestic and foreign policy and the American way of life.

The available body of research postulates that assassinations and assassination attempts upon U. S. presidents and political figures have had considerable social and political consequences. Political analyst Sheldon

Appleton maintains that the “ impact of assassinations on America and the world is incalculable.” He also posits that the assassination of President John F. Kennedy was arguably the most outstanding act of violence in terms of (American) societal impact. However, it must be noted that in regards to assassinations, Appleton’s argument does hold water; but in regards to acts of violence upon American soil, it can be argued that the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, resulted in the greatest impact upon society. Other political analysts have concluded that presidential assassinations activate a crisis in areas that are related to authority. Furthermore, it is agreed upon that presidential assassinations have the effect of triggering countermeasures, particularly those that elicit changes in the arena of presidential security. Such beliefs are not unfounded, as presidential assassinations inevitably result in negative consequences due to the extreme importance of the office of the president. Thus, assassinations are likely to spark significant social and political upheavals, even demonstrations, strikes and riots. However, such reactions to an assassination can be described as minor in comparison to other manifestations. One political analyst states: “ Beyond these relatively minor reflections of domestic malaise, the sudden and violent death of a leader may also embolden dissatisfied groups to push for greater political change, in extreme cases leading to coups, revolution, and even civil war.”

Interestingly, factors that play a role in the influence of an assassination can also serve to mitigate its social and political impact. Political analysts Iqbal and Zorn report recent empirical data that notes that “ assassinations are less likely to occur in systems that provide a regular, institutionalized means

of leadership turnover.” They also state that a nation’s political structure and its method of executive turnover to be instrumental in the reaction of said political system’s reaction to an assassination. Simply, nations such as the United States, who have a “ regular and (mostly) nonviolent” executive turnover, will inevitable react differently to assassinations than countries that do not. Ibaqal and Zorn also analogically postulate that assassinations create a “ power vacuum” within a political system—of which the suction strength will vary dramatically from nation to nation depending upon the strength of the targeted political order. It can be argued that within the context of the United States, the strength

(or impact) of a power vacuum—implemented through assassination—would be notably weaker than

Methodology

In completing the objectives of this study, the various aspects underlying the topic of political assassination and terrorism, particularly within the context of the United States, were explored. More specifically, this study follows the various presidential assassinations and acts of terrorism that have occurred since the 19th century. Crucial information regarding the consequences of these violent acts was collected and analyzed, with the goal of making appropriate deductions.

The information that was required to properly address the objectives of this study was primarily collected from online academic resources, both secondary and primary, as well as various works by political science or historical scholars. This method enabled the acquirement of information that

was relative to the impact and nature of political assassinations and terrorism in the United States. The information collected was directive in achieving the objectives of the study and provided thorough analysis of the subject of inquiry. The principal technique used in assembling information related to assassination was content analysis, whereas the subject of terrorism received not only the latter approach but was researched from primarily post-2000 dates. A qualitative approach was utilized to determine the relevance of gathered materials, with said approach taking into consideration the strengths of the arguments presented, as well as their weight. To guarantee the authenticity of arguments and their conclusions, only accredited sources were considered or used. These included books, peer-reviewed political science or history journals, and former studies completed on the subject of either assassination or terrorism. The hypothesis that was previously advanced was tested against the articulations of researchers and scholars, with the objective of achieving a consistent and valid conclusion for this study. A qualitative method was implemented to interpret and analyze the data gathered. This enabled individual analysis of the various instances of political (primarily presidential) assassinations and acts of terrorism in the history of the United States. While doing so, both contrasting and concurring opinions and conclusions expressed by analysts and scholars were considered.

The primary expectation in this study is that both political assassinations (attempts or complete assassinations) and terrorism have not only impacted the society and social conscience of American society, but also empowered the adoption of sweeping policy changes. The latter claim will be realized

through examination of the response and reaction of society and the political class after a violence act of assassination or terrorism. To consider the impact of assassinations, this study discusses the attacks against U. S. presidents since 1865. The core factor of interest is the degree of policy changes and transformations that took place after an act of violence, beginning first with assassinations, and then acts of terrorism. In this study, policy change is meant to reflect the different judicial, executive and legislative decisions that were made after each act of violence. The various events that took place after each assassination or act of terrorism were reviewed, with special attention given to how each event influenced U. S. domestic or foreign policy. The underlying premise in the various instances of assassination and terrorism is that each violent act had significant political repercussions, but that of these two types of acts, terrorism has achieved the greatest impact.

1. Edelman, Murray, and Rita James Simon. " Presidential Assassinations: Their Meaning and Impact of American Society." *Ethics*, 35, no. 2 (1969), p. 199.
2. Rapoport, David C. *Assassination and Terrorism*. Toronto: T. H. Best Printing Company Limited, 1971, p. 3.
3. Harmon, Christopher C. *Terrorism Today*. (2nd ed). New York: Routledge, 2008, p. 5.
4. Laucella, Linda. *Assassinations: The Politics of Murder*. (1st ed). Los Angeles: Lowell House, 1998, p. xi.
5. *Ibid* xi
6. Rapoport, p. 7.

7. Harmon, p. 4.
8. Ibid 4
9. Lacquer, Walter. *The Age of Terrorism* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1987), p. 11, citing French dictionaries of the 1790s.
10. Harmon, p. 4-5.
11. Rapoport, p. 45.
12. CITATION NEEDED
13. Rapoport, p. 43.
14. This study acknowledges that assassination attempts have been and possess the ability to influence policy in the United States, both foreign and domestic. Such instances are not completely disregarded within this study, but for the purposes of the study, not all attempts are examined. It is also acknowledged that monitoring national security and suppressing public anxiety and fear play a role in the assimilation and release of information regarding threats and attempts (assassinations or other violent acts) against political leaders, particularly the President. Thus, due to the latter and the lack of a full, or complete, release of information regarding assassination attempts, proper analysis is rendered impossible or faulty.
15. Defining danger, p. 1 FINISH LATER
16. Heaps, Willard A. *Assassination: A Special Kind of Murder*. New York: Meredith Press, 1969, p. 5, citing the New International Encyclopedia.
17. Laucella, p. 128
18. Harmon, p. 7.

19. Ibid 32; Harmon posits that not only is terrorism a challenging term to define, but one which possesses many gray areas. However, the definition that was a result of the conference in Jerusalem “clarifies much of what is white and much of what is black. One must not demand more of a definition than what the nature of its subject allows,” he concludes.
20. Further extrapolation upon the classification of assassinations is to follow in this study.
21. Goldberg, Alfred. Conspiracy Interpretations of the Assassination of President Kennedy: International and Domestic . Security Studies Paper, Los Angeles: Ford Foundation, 1968, p. 2.
22. Ibid p. 2
23. Edelman, Murray, and Simon, p. 199.
24. Crotty, William S. “ Presidential Assassinations.” Society, 35, no 2 (1998), p. 99
25. CITATION NEEDED
26. Kingsbury, Robert. The Assassination of James A. Garfield (Library of Political Assassinations). (1st ed). New York: Rosen Publishing Group, 2001, p. 93
27. Ibid 184
28. Crotty, p. 18.
29. U. S. Department of State. The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln and the Attempted Assassination of William H. Seward and Frederick W. Seward V2 1867). New York: Kessinger Publishing, Llc, 2008, p. 102
30. Kingsbury, p. 5
31. Crotty, p. 109

32. Appleton, Sheldon. "The Polls-Trends: Assassinations." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (2000), p. 495
33. Appleton's argument does take acts of terrorism into account, but considering the date of his publication, 2000, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 are obviously not considered. It is not illogical to thus conclude that his argument has been rendered faulty, or outdated, due to the series of events that have occurred since 2000—but his points regarding assassination remain valid.
34. Edelman and Simon, p. 199
35. Iqbal, p. 387
36. Ibid, p. 387
37. Ibid, p. 388
38. Due to the overwhelming prevalence of information regarding terrorism, only the most current and balanced works and online journals were utilized in this study. Furthermore, due to the moral sensitivity of the subject of terrorism and its often-unavoidable religious connotations, only language that spoke to the impact or consequences of terrorism was studied.