

CRS Report for Congress

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Direct Assaults Against Presidents, Presidents-Elect, and Candidates

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Summary

Direct assaults against Presidents, Presidents-elect, and candidates have occurred on 15 separate occasions, with five resulting in death. Ten incumbents (about 24% of the 42 individuals to serve in the office), including four of the past six Presidents, have been victims or targets. Four of the ten (and one candidate) died as a result of the attacks. This report identifies these incidents and provides information about what happened, when, where, and, if known, why. The report will be updated and revised if developments require.

Concerns about the safety of Presidents have existed throughout the history of the Republic, beginning with George Washington in 1794, when he led troops against the Whiskey Rebellion in Pennsylvania.¹ The intervening years have witnessed a variety of

¹ For background information and citations, see: U.S. Congress, House Select Committee on Assassinations, *Report: Findings and Recommendations*, H.Rept. 95-1828, Part 2, 95th Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington: GPO, 1979); U.S. Department of the Treasury, *Background Information on the White House Security Review* (Washington: Department of the Treasury, 1995), pp. 51-101; U.S. National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, *Final Report* (Washington: GPO, 1969), pp. 122-124; James E. Kirkham, et al., *Assassination and Political Violence: A Report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence* (Washington: GPO, 1969), p. 22; U.S. President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy, *Report* (Washington: GPO, 1964), pp. 504-515; James W. Clarke, *American Assassins: The Darker Side of Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); Frederick M. Kaiser, "Presidential Assassinations and Assaults: Characteristics and Impact on Protective Procedures," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 11, Fall 1981, pp. 545-558, and "Origins of Secret Service Protection of the President: Personal, Interagency, and Institutional Conflict," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 18, Winter 1988, pp. 101-128; Philip H. Melanson, *The Secret Service* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2002); *Facts on File Yearbook*, 1994, p. 877, and 1995, p. 361; "Police Shoot Man Near White House," *Washington Post*, Feb. 8, 2001, pp. A1, A10; extensive press coverage of the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center, along with the possible targeting of the White House or Capitol, on September 11, 2001, including *U.S. News and World Report*, Special Report, Sept. 14, 2001, pp. 17-27, and *Newsweek*, Extra Edition [Sept. (continued...)]

incidents of actual and potential harm to Presidents (as well as immediate family members and other high-ranking officials). These situations have included illegal entries onto the White House grounds; incidents of violence and conflict near the President's residence or where he was visiting; unauthorized aircraft flying near the White House and, in one instance, a plane crashing into the building; schemes to use airplanes to attack the White House; other threats of attack, including bombings and armed assaults; feared kidnaping and hostage-taking; assassination plots; as well as immediate, direct assaults against Presidents.² In addition to incumbents, Presidents-elect and candidates for the office have been subject to assaults or threats.

This report identifies assassinations of and other direct assaults against Presidents, Presidents-elect, and candidates for the office of President.³ There have been 15 such attacks (against 14 individuals), with five resulting in death. The first incident occurred in 1835, when a would-be assassin's pistol misfired; the most recent occurred in 2005, when a would-be assassin in Tbilisi, Republic of Georgia, tossed a grenade (which did not explode) at the platform where President George W. Bush and the Georgian President were speaking. The tally of victims reveals the following:

¹ (...continued)

12, 2001], p. 32; and press coverage in 2005 and 2006 of an incident involving President George W. Bush in Tbilisi, Republic of Georgia.

² Illustrative of these are: apprehension about President Madison (and his wife) being taken hostage, when British troops invaded Washington, DC, in 1814; rocks thrown at President Tyler by an intoxicated painter; fears of kidnaping and assassination of Abraham Lincoln, beginning with his journey to Washington, DC for the inauguration in 1861; shots fired at President Lincoln by Confederate troops, when he was observing a battle between them and Union forces stationed at Fort Stevens; allegations of a possible kidnaping of President Cleveland's children, along with unknown intruders at his summer vacation property, in 1894, while at the same time he was threatened by Colorado gamblers who had traveled to Washington, and separately, by sympathizers of Coxe's Army, who wanted to "remove" Cleveland from office; stalking of President Nixon, by the same person who later, in 1972, shot presidential candidate George Wallace; a planned airplane attack on the White House, which literally never got off the ground, because the pilot (and would-be assassin) was killed before the craft was airborne, in 1974; a car, driven by a man wired with explosives, crashing through the White House gates, also in 1974; discovery of a truck containing explosives outside a building that was being used as the "mobile White House," when President Clinton was visiting Belfast, Northern Ireland's capital; a shooting incident outside the White House fence on February 7, 2001, in which the assailant, who was wounded, was charged with assaulting a federal officer; and on September 11, 2001, an aborted attempt to use a hijacked commercial airliner possibly to crash into the White House or the Capitol, as three other airplanes had been used to attack the Pentagon and the World Trade Center in New York; along with hundreds of threats yearly against the President, his family members, and high-ranking officials.

³ Speculation had long existed that President Zachary Taylor, who was a foe of extending slavery, was poisoned by pro-slavery conspirators in 1850, a suspicion arising in part because his symptoms at the time of his death resembled those of arsenic poisoning. A 1991 laboratory analysis of Taylor's remains, however, found only minuscule levels of arsenic, which could not have caused illness, let alone death. The conclusion of the forensic anthropologist who conducted the examination was that President Taylor died of natural causes, perhaps from contaminated food he had eaten or possibly from the treatments — cathartics and laxatives — he received for gastroenteritis and acute diarrhea. See William R. Maples and Michael Browning, *Dead Men Do Tell Tales* (New York: Doubleday, 1994).

- Of the 42 individuals serving as President, ten (or about 24%) have been subject to actual or attempted assassinations. Four of these ten incumbents — Abraham Lincoln, James A. Garfield, William McKinley, and John F. Kennedy — were killed.
- Four of the past six Presidents have been targets of assaults: Gerald R. Ford (twice in 1975), Ronald W. Reagan (in a near-fatal shooting in 1981), William J. Clinton (when the White House was fired upon in 1994), and George W. Bush (when an attacker tossed a grenade, which did not explode, towards him and the President of Georgia at a public gathering in Tbilisi, in 2005).
- Two others who served as President were attacked, either as a President-elect (Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933) or as a presidential candidate (Theodore Roosevelt in 1912, when he was seeking the presidency after being out of office for nearly four years).
- Two other presidential candidates — Robert F. Kennedy, who was killed in 1968, and George C. Wallace, who was seriously wounded in 1972 — were also victims, during the primaries.
- In only one of these 15 incidents (the Lincoln assassination) was a broad conspiracy proven, although such contentions have arisen on other occasions.⁴ Only one other incident involved more than one participant (the 1950 assault on Blair House, the temporary residence of President Harry S Truman); but no evidence of other conspirators emerged from the subsequent investigation or prosecution.
- Of the 15 direct assaults, 11 relied upon pistols, two on automatic weapons, one on a rifle, and one on a grenade. All but two of the attacks (both against Gerald Ford) were committed by men.
- All but one of the 15 assaults occurred within the United States.

The following table identifies the direct assaults on Presidents, Presidents-elect, and candidates for the office of President. It specifies the date when the assault occurred, the victim, his political party affiliation, the length of his administration at the time of the attack or whether he was then a candidate or President-elect, the location of the attack, its method and result, and the name of the assailant, along with the professed or alleged reason for the attack.

⁴ Regarding the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the 1964 Warren Commission inquiry concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. U.S. President's Commission, *Report*, p. 22. A 1979 congressional investigation determined, however, that the President "was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy. The Committee is unable to identify the other gunman or the extent of the conspiracy." House Select Committee on Assassinations, *Report*, p. 1. In addition, a conspiracy was initially suspected in President McKinley's murder, in 1901, because his assailant was a self-described "anarchist," the designation applied to assassins of European leaders in the same time period. Extensive investigations by the U.S. Secret Service, as well as Buffalo and New York State law enforcement agencies and prosecutors, however, found no evidence that McKinley's assailant was aided by anyone else.

Direct Assaults on Presidents, Presidents-Elect, and Presidential Candidates

| Date | Victim | Political Party | Length of Administration at Time of Attack, Candidate, or President-elect | Location | Method of Attack and Result | Assailant and Professed or Alleged Reason |
|------------|--------------------|--------------------------|---|----------------|-----------------------------|---|
| 01/30/1835 | Andrew Jackson | Democrat | 5 years, 11 months | Washington, DC | Pistol, misfired | Richard Lawrence, declared insane; said Jackson was preventing him from obtaining large sums of money and was ruining the country |
| 04/14/1865 | Abraham Lincoln | Republican | 4 years, 1 month | Washington, DC | Pistol, killed | John Wilkes Booth, killed before being captured; loyalty to the Confederacy; revenge for its defeat; pro-slavery stand |
| 07/02/1881 | James A. Garfield | Republican | 6 months | Washington, DC | Pistol, killed | Charles Guiteau, convicted; disgruntled office-seeker and supporter of opposition faction in Republican Party |
| 09/06/1901 | William McKinley | Republican | 4 years, 6 months | Buffalo, NY | Pistol, killed | Leon F. Czolgosz, convicted; anarchist ideology and class antagonism |
| 10/14/1912 | Theodore Roosevelt | Progressive (Bull Moose) | Candidate (had been President from 1901-1909) | Milwaukee, WI | Pistol, wounded | John Schrank, declared insane; had vision that McKinley wanted him to avenge his death |

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|------------|-----------------------|-----------------|---|-----------------|--|--|
| 02/15/1933 | Franklin D. Roosevelt | Democrat | President-elect, 3 weeks prior to inauguration | Miami, FL | Pistol, bullets missed the President-elect (but fatally wounded Chicago mayor Anton Cermak standing nearby) | Giuseppe Zangara, convicted of murdering Cermak; hated rulers and capitalists |
| 11/01/1950 | Harry S Truman | Democrat | 5 years, 6½ months | Washington, DC | Automatic weapons, shots fired at Blair House, then the temporary residence of the President, who was inside and unharmed (but a White House police officer was killed and two others wounded) | Oscar Collazo, convicted of the murder of the police officer and attempted murder of the President and the two wounded policemen, and Griselio Torresola, killed at the scene; both espoused Puerto Rican independence |
| 11/22/1963 | John F. Kennedy | Democrat | 2 years, 10 months | Dallas, TX | Rifle, killed | Lee Harvey Oswald, killed before trial; motive unknown |
| 06/05/1968 | Robert F. Kennedy | Democrat | Candidate and U.S. Senator | Los Angeles, CA | Pistol, killed | Sirhan Sirhan, convicted; opposed candidate's stand on Israeli-Arab conflict |
| 05/15/1972 | George C. Wallace | Democrat | Candidate and Governor of Alabama | Laurel, MD | Pistol, wounded | Arthur Bremer, convicted; motive unknown |
| 09/05/1975 | Gerald R. Ford | Republican | 1 year, 1 month | Sacramento, CA | Pistol, misfired | Lynette Alice Fromme, convicted; member of extremist "Manson family" |

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|------------|--------------------|-----------------|---|------------------------------|--|---|
| 09/22/1975 | Gerald R. Ford | Republican | 1 year, 1½ months | San Francisco, CA | Pistol, missed target | Sara Jane Moore, convicted; asserted goal of bringing about “the upheaval of needed change,” revolutionary ideology |
| 03/30/1981 | Ronald W. Reagan | Republican | 2½ months | Washington, DC | Pistol, wounded | John W. Hinkley, Jr., found not guilty by reason of insanity; committed to a mental institution |
| 10/29/1994 | William J. Clinton | Democrat | 1 year, 9 months | Washington, DC | Semi-automatic assault rifle, shot at White House while President was inside | Francisco M. Duran, convicted of attempted assassination on April 4, 1995 |
| 05/10/2005 | George W. Bush | Republican | 4 years, 4 months | Tbilisi, Republic of Georgia | Grenade thrown at President Bush and Republic of Georgia President at a public gathering; attacker convicted of attempted assassination (and killing a police officer when the attacker was arrested later); motive unknown. | |

Source: Kirkham, et al., *Assassination and Political Violence*, p. 22; Kaiser, “Presidential Assassinations and Assaults,” p. 547; *Facts on File Yearbook, 1994*, p. 877, and *1995*, p. 361; and 2005-2006 press coverage of the incident in Tblisi.