

American Assassins

J. Reid Meloy and Molly Amman

© 2024. All Rights Reserved.

July 29, 2024

For the past twenty years, we have been consulting on cases and researching attackers of public figures. Ms. Amman is now a retired profiler from the FBI Behavioral Analysis Unit, and Dr. Meloy is in the private sector as a forensic psychologist. In the course of our work in both the United States and Europe, we have learned much about such individuals, and think our studies may help contextualize the recent attempted assassination on July 13, 2024. We offer no commentary on that particular case because it is currently evolving. It is critical that we allow the FBI to conduct a thorough, meticulous investigation. This will take time. However, there are things about assassins and attackers we can say without injecting speculation and conjecture into the national discourse.

Public figure attackers, particularly in the US, are generally not motivated by an ideology or a political belief. If there is any political or social commitment, especially today, it is likely a mishmash of contradictory thoughts, what has been termed “salad bar” or “cafeteria” beliefs. The Swedish Security Service calls this “copypaste” ideology.

There is no demographic profile of such individuals, although they are often young males. This finding, of course, has no predictive value but is clearly evident in public figure assassins going back in our lifetimes to the assassin of John F. Kennedy, and ranging forward to the 20-year-old who attempted to assassinate former President Donald Trump in Pennsylvania.

The majority do not have a history of psychiatric diagnosis or treatment. This does not mean that they do not have mental or emotional problems—of course they do—but it reinforces an important point: it is a mistake to *automatically* attribute such behavior to a psychiatric condition that is obvious and treatable. The assassin of Robert Kennedy in 1968 was diagnosed with schizophrenia by the defense doctors, but not by the doctors retained by the prosecution. Likewise, the attempted assassin of Ronald Reagan in 1981—despite being found legally insane by the jury—was consistently diagnosed with a narcissistic personality disorder during his decades of hospitalization and is now living peacefully in the community. We don’t know about the attempted assassin of George Wallace in 1972 because he refused all psychiatric evaluations throughout his entire incarceration. He was released in 2007 after 35 years in custody.

They are also likely to have a violent or nonviolent criminal history.

But they are unlikely to be fame seeking. The only US public figure attacker in our study from 1995-2015 who appeared to be seeking notoriety was the assassin of Gianni Versace in Miami in 1997.

What else do we know?

Public figure attackers are not the cunning and brilliant predators we see in the movies. “In the Line of Fire,” although an exciting portrayal of an assassin by John Malkovich, does not reflect reality. Their lives are typically not going well, with multiple social, familial, and financial problems. But we still have not yet zeroed in on the thoughts and behaviors of such assassins. What distinguishes them from all other people?

Assassins do not “snap.” They move on an operational pathway toward violence, usually beginning with an intensely personalized grievance that is often focused upon the target, although political targets do change, and culminating in a decision to be violent. Within this early period before the actual assassination, the individual will fixate on his target. For example, we know the assassin of Robert Kennedy decided he would kill him five months before the act because he continuously wrote in his diary, “RFK must die.” He was a Palestinian, and felt deeply betrayed because Kennedy had voted as a US Senator to sell Phantom fighter jet bombers to Israel in January 1968. This decision to assassinate, usually months in advance, will then lead to research, planning, and preparation to carry out an attack, with choice of weapons and tactics key in these final stages. Often with a public figure, especially national political figures, there is a probing of the boundaries, a testing of security, to see if access is possible. If not, the assassin will often change the timing or even the targeting of his attack. In a recent case in which one of us served as an expert witness, the mass attacker of the Capitol Gazette newspaper in Annapolis in 2018 first targeted the judges that had ruled against him in his defamation suits; but he changed targets several years before his attack when he saw he could not safely penetrate the courthouse security. He instead killed four journalists and a sales assistant in the worst violent attack on our First Amendment in the history of the United States. Sadly journalists, often public figures because of their reporting, are at high lethality risk if attacked since they have virtually no security protecting them.

Along this pathway to violence, pioneered by the work of Robert Fein and Bryan Vossekuil at the U.S. Secret Service thirty years ago, other behaviors are apparent.

The would-be assassin typically will not directly warn his target or law enforcement beforehand, most likely to enhance his odds of success. What he will do, however, is tell third parties of his plans, most often through social media postings or comments to others in cyberspace. We used to look for comments to family or friends, but now the gift to those of us who do threat assessment is that would be attackers have generally poor operational security online—they have got to tell someone given the excitement surrounding their secret planning. We call this leakage.

Finally, the pathway to violence is often accompanied by a new, dark identity: American assassin. Emotionally they feel better about themselves because they now have a purpose, a plan, and a secret. After a short life marked by failure, their self-esteem has dramatically risen because of the tragic event they are about to perpetrate. They have often studied previous assassins, and in their grandiose fantasies assume a place among a pantheon they have come to admire. Even if the likelihood of their own death is now foreordained.

Attacks on public figures in the United States are rare. We found that there were, on average, three per year over the past several decades. But the threat of attacks on political figures currently is considered extremely high, and the agencies responsible for their safety depend on the public for their eyes and ears. Despite our tendency to minimize or deny the possibility of such horrible events, we implore everyone to immediately report any concerning communication to law enforcement so a tragedy can be averted. We are the protective shield of the political leaders who serve us, and violence has no place in our democracy.