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Political Assassinations: Primary Prevention in Representative Democracies

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Abstract. This article describes a social psychological approach to decreasing the probability of some political assassinations.

One characteristic of a representative democracy is that formal political leaders are elected by its citizens and also chosen by those leaders who are elected. Thus, when a political leader is assassinated, there are at least three deaths: that of the leader; of the leader's unique politics (style and substance); and of a fragment of the democracy's body, heart, and soul. So it behooves the entire populace of a representative democracy to take preventive action against political assassination. Not only are there legal, moral, and ethical reasons for action, but the very existence of the polity is at stake.

Both through social science research and journalistic accounts, one can quickly conclude that the motives for political assassination are many. Common ones include financial gain, ideological fervor, acting out (the externalization of internal psychopathology), and feelings of low self-esteem. This article deals only with the last motive.

Assassins with low self-esteem often are lonely, have unsatisfactory personal relationships (when they have personal relationships at all), believe they have little effect on the world, and have been largely unsuccessful in life based on their own standards. They begin to believe that their only chance of "being somebody" is to kill someone successful and powerful. (What separates people with these psychological characteristics who choose to become assassins from those who don't involves yet other psychological characteristics as well as social, cultural, and environmental ones. These characteristics will be the subject of a future IBPP article.)

In today's representative democracies, the threat to political leaders from the low self-esteem assassin is growing. First, assassins can establish intense vicarious and virtual relationships with the successful and powerful--e.g., political leaders--through the mass media. These relationships are one-way: assassins' whole emotional lives may be tied up in them, while to leaders the relationships don't even exist. These relationships also are often volatile, and assassins are quick to develop a sense of specialness, of entitlement, and of being slighted through leaders' lack of reciprocity. The last may be the proximal factor precipitating assassination. Second, democracies' concern for balancing individual and collective rights and responsibilities often leads to less than optimal security strategies and tactics to protect political leaders. Related to this concern for balance is the need of democratic leaders to be "close to the people" both to better understand what the people need and to better get elected. This may involve plunging into crowds to shake hands and kiss babies and holding unexpected and spontaneous dialogues with potential voters to manifest being "one of the people," thereby violating security procedures. Third, a strong case can be made that the interaction of peoples' needs for human and civil rights with feelings of alienation that may be becoming exacerbated in an era of increasing globalization is creating a large cast of self-perceived nobodies looking to be somebody. (See previous IBPP articles such as "Political Psychology and Globalization" (1(13)) and "Virtual Reality Technology and Mental Health: Comments on the Medicine Meets Virtual Reality 5 International Conference" (1(10)).)

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So what would be an optimal approach to minimize the threat from low self-esteem assassins? The key would be to minimize the intensity of the nexus of motives: to introduce satisfactory relationships, to decrease loneliness, to increase a sense of success and being somebody. How can this minimization occur? (1) Increase a sense of community throughout the democracy via the mass media. This could involve engendering a greater sense of responsibility among citizens for each other, greater desires for voluntarism, and greater tendencies for social courtesy in daily life. (2) Develop and enforce clear-cut legal requirements--among mental health professionals, other health care givers, and all other citizens-- to report individuals who verbalize intent to harm formal political leaders. Reporting would not lead to any sort of mandatory arrest or incarceration but to monitoring and assessing--at the lowest level of coercion and intrusion possible--the assassination risk of the suspect. (3) Establish close cooperation among law enforcement and social service personnel to establish relationships, minimize noxious stressors, and maximize life satisfactions for the low self-esteem assassin--thereby reducing the motives underlying the potential threat. Most often this would involve less the provision of material assets and more the intangibles of respect, shared interests, and personal involvement. (4) Within acceptable political parameters, appropriately modulate the intensity and frequency of a number of variables empirically linked to aggression--such as the presence of or access to weapons.

Through applied social psychology in conjunction with competent law enforcement practices, the threat to life and the life of the polity from at least one type of political assassin may be decreased. (See Angermeyer, M.C., & Matschinger, H. (1995.) Violent attacks on public figures by persons suffering from psychiatric disorders: Their effect on the social distance towards the mentally ill. European Archives of Psychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience, 245, 159-164; deMause, L. (1995.) Shooting at Clinton, prosecuting O.J., and other sacrificial rituals. Journal of Psychohistory, 22, 378-393; Dervin, D. (1995.) On target. Journal of Psychohistory, 22, 394-398; Rustin, M., & Rustin, M. (1994.) Coups d'etat and catastrophic change: Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. British Journal of Psychotherapy, 11, 242-259.) (Keywords: Assassination, Conflict, Control, Intelligence, Perception Management, Social Cognition, Typology.)