

Deep in the Historical Abyss: The Assassinations of Presidents Garfield & McKinley and Why They Have Become Less Memorable in the Minds of the American Public

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*Wrapped him a handkerchief 'round his gun,
said, 'Nothing wrong about what I done.
Some men have everything and some have none'.¹*

In the history of the United States of America, four Presidents have been fatally wounded by the gunfire of an assassin. While the assassinations of Presidents Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy have gained ultimate infamy, the murders of Presidents James A. Garfield and William A. McKinley have fallen far from the memory of the American public. Their assassinations remain lost in the abyss of historical analysis, housed in the bottom of the iceberg of Presidential assassinations throughout American history. Even history students have little recollection that these assassinations ever occurred and history textbooks unjustly offer tiny blurbs to present their realities.² The question itself is rather puzzling; historians and scholars have simply taken little time to acknowledge the existence of these assassinations in American history.

Barely more than one hundred years since the Garfield and McKinley assassinations, the fact still remains that these men of high political standing were shot and died as a result. Presidential assassination attempts have been successful only *four* times in more than two centuries of United States history. Yet for the most part the public

¹"The Ballad of Czolgosz," *Assassins*, music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, 1990.

²Based on a class survey of history undergraduates at Western Connecticut State University performed in 2010, only 5% knew Garfield had been assassinated, while 15% knew that McKinley had been assassinated. Furthermore, modern history textbooks like *America: Past and Present* consistently offer each assassination only one sentence to describe the circumstances of each event.

has little memory of these. The immediate public reaction to the assassinations was characterized by a catastrophic emotional response. However that elicitation has proven far from consistent over time. Why exactly does most of the American public forget about these events? Why do historians rarely delve into this question? Why have the assassinations practically disappeared from the American narrative? All three of these questions are worthy of a deeper look.

James Abram Garfield, the twentieth President of the United States of America, was assassinated on July 2, 1881. He was shot at Washington's Baltimore & Potomac Railroad Station by Charles J. Guiteau, a disgruntled office-seeker. For the most part the latter statement is all that generally appears in modern American history textbooks used at the collegiate level.³ Garfield lingered for two-and-a-half months. The President died on September 19, 1881, of infected wounds he sustained after one of Guiteau's bullets stubbornly lodged near his spine.⁴ His fight against death was viewed as a sad tale. It was the story of a family man who was the victim of an insane action. People closely related with his children and wife who were suffering through the pain of watching him get better and worse intermittently. All could relate to the experience of losing somebody.⁵ When the President's funeral train arrived in Washington D.C., "[the] populace stood with bowed heads and tearful eyes as the President was borne back" to the Capitol. It was the same place he was inaugurated as President just six months earlier.⁶ Garfield's battle was real to the American public and culminated in his untimely death.

³See Footnote 2.

⁴Ira Rutkow, *James A. Garfield* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 128.

⁵Eyal J. Naveh, *Crown of Thorns: Political Martyrdom in America from Abraham Lincoln to Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 85.

⁶"The Nation's Dead Chief," *New York Times*, September 22, 1881.



As the public waned in agony and outcry, Charles Guiteau was perceived to be an insane man, looking to divide and destroy the country. People wanted swift and harsh judgment, but his trial surprisingly lasted for two-and-a-half months.⁷ The trial was complete with painfully monotonous testimony and an attempt by the prosecutor to get Guiteau to acknowledge that he had indeed committed a crime and was, therefore, guilty.⁸ However, Guiteau claimed God, “the deity”, chose him specifically to remove the President as “an absolute necessity...for the good of the American people.”⁹ Despite delaying what appeared to be the inevitable, Guiteau was sentenced to death and hanged on June 30, 1882.¹⁰

⁷E. Hilton Jackson, “The Trial of Guiteau,” *The Virginia Law Register* 9:12 (April 1904): 1028.

⁸E. Hilton Jackson, “The Trial of Guiteau,” *The Virginia Law Register* 9:12 (April 1904): 1028-1030.

⁹“Excerpts from the Trial Transcript: Cross-Examination of Charles Guiteau,” from Douglas O. Linder, *Charles Guiteau Trial: An Account*, University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law, <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/guiteau/guiteauhomelite.html> (accessed January 26, 2010)

¹⁰Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Trial of the Assassin Guiteau: Psychiatry and Law in the Gilded Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 225.

Guiteau's motive for the crime stems back to the heated fight for the Republican Party Presidential nomination prior to the election of 1880. At the Republican National Convention in Chicago, James A. Garfield emerged as a dark horse candidate on the thirty-sixth ballot, beating out front-runner Ulysses S. Grant.¹¹ While running for office during the summer of 1880, Garfield was suffering under the pressure of New York Republican Party boss and U.S. Senator Roscoe Conkling, who had a noteworthy team of Stalwarts that were still upset about the outcome of the Convention.¹² Furthermore, Conkling desired specific Cabinet and federal appointments for New York politicians and allies of his.¹³

After Garfield supposedly made a deal with Conkling and his followers to give them a share of his hypothetical Cabinet by electing friends of the posse to powerful positions, Conkling became more willing to campaign for the future President and support him publicly. However, once elected, Garfield went back on the supposed deal that was made with the Conkling gang and chose their archenemy Half-breed James G. Blaine for what was presumed to be the most powerful Cabinet position, Secretary of State. With Conkling's temper fuming over almost all of Garfield's appointments, Garfield decided to make a bold move. He used the powerful economic position of Collector of the Port of New York, "the most visible patronage post in America", to nominate another Half-breed, William Robertson. Conkling felt his men were entitled to that position and strongly desired retention of it so that he could indirectly have control of "millions of dollars in tariffs"; Conkling attempted to use the Senate to push off the

¹¹Kenneth D. Ackerman, *Dark Horse: The Surprise Election and Political Murder of President James A. Garfield* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2003), 121.

¹²As described in Kenneth D. Ackerman's book, "Stalwarts" were supporters of Ulysses S. Grant for President at the 1880 Republican National Convention, while "Half-breeds" represented those who supported James G. Blaine for President.

¹³James C. Clark, *The Murder of James A. Garfield: The President's Last Days and the Trial and Execution of His Assassin* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 1993), 26-29.

nomination process until the next session.¹⁴ When a Committee on Conciliation was called in to mend fences between the two bickering sides, Conkling ultimately saw the writing on the wall and shockingly resigned from the Senate, along with New York junior Senator, Tom Platt, just prior to the Senate's confirmation vote for Robertson's nomination.¹⁵

The political turmoil in the Senate frustrated Stalwart Charles Guiteau, who was still badgering a variety of high political officers for the position of Consulship to Paris, which he believed he was guaranteed because of the part he played in securing Garfield's election. Guiteau had previously met Vice President Chester A. Arthur at the New York Republican State Committee office and had delivered a speech he wrote, entitled "Garfield Against Hancock",¹⁶ to a crowd at a Thursday night-gala in New York City during the 1880 Presidential campaign.¹⁷ Guiteau felt rightfully entitled to a federal post during Garfield's Presidency, based on all of his support and eagerness to campaign. Guiteau never got that position and was apparently frustrated by the increasing political tension between Garfield and the Stalwarts and his inevitable rejection of the Consulship position by Secretary of State, James G. Blaine. Upon this supposed rejection and an implantation of a whim from God, Guiteau saw it as his duty to unite the Republican Party and become its savior by "removing the President" of the United States.¹⁸

Leon Czolgosz, too, was another man interested in carrying out his duty and saving the country by assassinating President William A. McKinley on September 6, 1901 at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York. President McKinley ultimately died on September 14, 1901 from gangrene poisoning of the pancreas,

¹⁴Ackerman, 62.

¹⁵Ackerman, 299-347.

¹⁶For the actual full-text document, please see "Speech by Charles Guiteau, August 6, 1880," Box 1, Folder 11, Charles Guiteau Collection, Georgetown University Library.

¹⁷Ackerman, 179.

¹⁸"Excerpts from the Trial Transcript: Cross-Examination of Charles Guiteau," from Douglas O. Linder, *Charles Guiteau Trial: An Account*.

arguably a result of unsanitary surgical conditions following the penetration of one of Czolgosz's bullets.¹⁹ Leon Czolgosz was a self-proclaimed anarchist, carrying out what he believed was his duty in removing the most powerful person in office in the United States. He believed that no man should have so much power, when any other man should have so little.²⁰ The true motive for Czolgosz's act came from his anarchist beliefs and the ideals set forth for him by well-known anarchist leader Emma Goldman. Czolgosz claimed that her words set him on fire and that he believed that it would be a good idea to kill the President and "have no rulers."²¹

While Czolgosz may have seen the lack of a President as beneficial, historian A. Wesley Johns described McKinley as "the most popular President since Lincoln."²² This seeming popularity made his assassination quite tumultuous and surprising amongst the American people. There was outcry similar to the response Garfield's death warranted, with the *St. Louis Dispatch* reporting that "not since the death of Lincoln has the sympathy of the whole country...been so spontaneous, general and deep as it is today for the blameless and kindly President stricken down without a warning or cause."²³ In plain terms, McKinley was viewed as a kind, burly, and pleasant individual by the American people and those closest to him.²⁴

Given the well-rounded respect he had gained from the American people, peaceful military times, and a strong economy, President McKinley made the decision to faithfully respond to a previously cancelled invitation to the Pan-American Exposition in

¹⁹Linda Laucella, *Assassination: The Politics of Murder* (Los Angeles: Lowell House, 1998), 87.

²⁰Jeffrey W. Seibert, *"I Done My Duty": The Complete Story of the Assassination of President McKinley* (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, Inc., 2002), 78.

²¹Seibert, 109.

²²Wesley A. Johns, *The Man Who Shot McKinley* (Cranbury, New Jersey: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1970), 17.

²³"The President," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 8, 1901.

²⁴Seibert, 67.

Buffalo, New York.²⁵ While those closest to him, including Secret Service Chief John E. Wilkie, were fearful for the President's life, he decided to take the trip anyway.²⁶ On September 6, he held a ceremony to greet visitors at the Temple of Music and was quietly approached by a man, Leon Czolgosz, with a handkerchief wrapped around his right hand. Two bullets were quickly fired from the gun hidden under Czolgosz's handkerchief; one deflected off McKinley's breastbone and the other pierced through his stomach.²⁷ As those guarding the President rushed to grab the assassin, he was quickly pummeled and attacked by bystanders. Czolgosz was eventually taken into custody and carted off to the local police precinct where he was questioned at great length by detectives, police officers, and government agents. In the meantime, a crowd of thousands began forming outside the police precinct calling for the assassin's head.²⁸ Much like Emma Goldman and the anarchist movement did for Czolgosz, the assassination had lit a fire under people to respond in an absolute riotous fashion.

After the President's death on September 14, 1901, Czolgosz was almost immediately indicted and tried on September 24th. In stark contrast to Guiteau's trial, Czolgosz's lasted a mere eight hours before he was convicted of murdering the President and was quickly sentenced to death by electrocution on September 26th, 1901. Czolgosz met this fate on October 29, 1901, at the New York State Prison in Auburn.²⁹

Why these assassinations have become less memorable in American public memory is a question that can first be delved into by looking at the Presidencies of James Garfield and William McKinley. Garfield remained actively in office for only four months before he was shot, leaving little time for any policy proposal or utilization of

²⁵Seibert, 31.

²⁶Johns, 16.

²⁷Seibert, 56.

²⁸Seibert, 57-84.

²⁹LeRoy Parker, "The Trial of the Anarchist Murderer Czolgosz," *Yale Law Journal* 11:2 (December 1901): 80.

executive authority. The United States was involved in no foreign dispute and his Cabinet was barely even formed by the time he was assassinated; Garfield spent his short Presidency responding to and furnishing federal appointment requests.³⁰ As was portrayed earlier, he spent much of his time feuding with members of the Senate, like Roscoe Conkling of New York, over the decision to elect certain officials. While Garfield did make some bold decisions in his election of federal officials, he had little time to partake in his responsibilities as President otherwise; he was therefore viewed as a weak executive President. Garfield was often perceived as being tied to the whims of the Senate, attempting to loosen himself from its grip. Furthermore, Garfield was President during the Gilded Age, a time mainly remembered as the culmination of the U.S. spinning out of its Reconstruction period following the Civil War and a period that was seen as an attempt to restore good relations between North and South.³¹ A short Presidency, little executive decision, and other political giants attempting to make decisions for the chief executive all overshadowed the Presidents of the early 1880s.

James A. Garfield only actively held power for approximately eight percent of a full term as President; simply, his Presidency was enveloped by the outcome of the Civil War and Reconstruction, the pursuit for “civil rights” amongst Blacks and other groups, and more boisterous and seemingly dominant U.S. politicians grabbing for more power. Furthermore, former President Ulysses S. Grant still held a sweeping popularity and love affair with a large majority of the American populace.³² Emerging as a dark horse candidate for President initially, Garfield was seen as a surprise chief executive in the first place. His assassination simply made way for the status quo in the most powerful

³⁰Rutkow, 65.

³¹David Lindsey, “Rehabilitating the Presidents: Garfield, Arthur, McKinley,” reviews of *The Presidencies of James A. Garfield & Chester A. Arthur*, by Justus D. Doenecke and *The Presidency of William McKinley*, by Lewis L. Gould, *Reviews in American History* 10:1 (March 1982): 72.

³²Ackerman, 19.

executive position in the United States. While it was tragic and captured the hearts of many, his assassination simply fell behind the curtain of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and more actively pursuant political voices.

While Garfield was only President for a technical six-and-a-half months, with one-third of that time spent in a sick bed, William McKinley was a second-term President by the time he was assassinated. According to historians A. Wesley Johns,³³ Jeffrey Seibert,³⁴ and Murat Halstead,³⁵ he was both a popular President and man in general. So if McKinley served for approximately fourteen times as long as Garfield did, engaged in the Spanish-American War,³⁶ and was responsible for the annexation of the Hawaiian Island and the Philippines,³⁷ how did the assassination of this critical and very much alive President vanish from the public's memory so relatively quickly?³⁸ The answer is multi-dimensional in the very least. Yet, in terms of his Presidency alone, the answer rests with one man: his successor, Theodore Roosevelt. As he spoke softly and carried a big stick,³⁹ Roosevelt captured the American eye with quick purchase of the Panama Canal, a publicly well-known athletic and intellectual prowess and a highly imperialistic attitude toward foreign policy.⁴⁰ Roosevelt's Presidency quickly wiped the sorrow from the hearts of the weeping American people and re-captured the idea of what it meant to be an American. While he was not well-liked all around, he still had an effect that was unprecedented in previous years.

³³ Johns, 17.

³⁴ Seibert, 1.

³⁵ Murat Halstead, *The Illustrious Life of William McKinley: Our Martyred President* (1901), 20.

³⁶ Halstead, 151.

³⁷ Samuel Fallows, *Life of William McKinley: Our Martyred President* (Chicago, 1901), 183-195.

³⁸ In Sheldon Appleton's "The Polls—Trends: Assassinations," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 64:4 (Winter 2000): 496, a 1999 APBnews.com/Zogby poll revealed that only 1 percent of those polled chose the assassination of McKinley as the crime that "had the greatest impact on American society in the last 100 years". McKinley's result fell far short of the 11 percent that chose Martin Luther King's assassination and the 36.5 percent that chose the John F. Kennedy assassination.

³⁹ Lewis L. Gould, *The Presidency of Theodore Roosevelt* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1991), 78.

⁴⁰ Gould, 61.

Roosevelt's booming and controversial personality was why he was crammed into the boxed office of Vice President in the first place.⁴¹ By the stroke of one obstinate bullet, Roosevelt jumped into Presidential power with speed and an agenda. Roosevelt's Presidency, coupled with the fight against anarchism and immigration, quickly led to the forging of McKinley's death as just another tragic American event in the minds of the public. Why it lost significance so quickly in American public memory can not only be attributed to the viability of a Roosevelt Presidency and the sudden U.S. focus on defining what a true American was, but also to the lengthy process of McKinley's death.

⁴¹Ferdinand Cowle Iglehart, *Theodore Roosevelt: The Man As I Knew Him* (New York: The Christian Herald, 1919), 155-156.



While McKinley lingered on his deathbed for eight days, Garfield remained alive for an incredible two-and-a-half months after he was shot. Both eventually succumbed to injuries from their bullet wounds, but there was little doubt about the effect a dying President in office had on a nation: “Grief and Anger Stir Leading Men” was one headline that graced the *New York Times* only a day after McKinley was shot.⁴² Garfield controlled the Presidency for two-and-a-half months while dying. He signed one extradition paper from the State Department in August 1881. This was the single duty he

⁴²“Grief and Anger Stir Leading Men,” *New York Times*, September 7, 1901.

performed between his shooting and death.⁴³ McKinley simply waited to be examined in surgery, only ultimately to have surgical efforts fall in vain when he died.⁴⁴ Unlike with assassinated Presidents Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy, the country was actually given a chance to say goodbye, so to speak, to Garfield and McKinley. As is seen with most deaths, the least traumatic grieving process is one in which mourners are given the chance to have final words with the loved one. The public was not physically viewing or seeing the Presidents, but they were given constant updates on their conditions via newspapers and hearsay and they given a brief time to somewhat process the tragedy that had occurred.

In the midst of bidding farewell to Presidents Garfield and McKinley, the American people seemingly were able to move on with the rest of their lives after the presidents' funeral trains departed for their final resting places. The sudden deaths of Lincoln and Kennedy ignited a shock in the hearts of the American public. The deaths of Garfield and McKinley came after the initial shock of their shootings had already worn off. Without the shock value associated with many turbulent historical events, the assassinations of Garfield and McKinley became less about their shootings and more about their dying processes. Furthermore, Garfield's dying process fell into interpretation as a small part of his weak and short presidency and McKinley's dying process became quickly overshadowed by the Roosevelt Presidency. As the deaths of these two presidents lost magnitude in American public memory, they slowly became detached from the actual assassinations that made these two events initially historic.

Most modern assassinations and national catastrophes gain interest via the severe amount of attention initially placed on the event and its apparent results. This is especially evident with the assassination of the heir to the Austrian throne, Archduke

⁴³Ackerman, 423.

⁴⁴Fallows, 25.

Franz Ferdinand. He died on June 28, 1914, and it is still viewed as one of the main causes of World War I.⁴⁵ As both Garfield and McKinley remained alive for a short time after their assassinations, attention was more quickly paid to their medical statuses and whether or not a new president would step into office. With more vital information pertinent, the shootings became a much smaller concern than the state of each president's health. If they had both died within a day or two of the assassination, attention would most likely have turned toward revenge against the assassins and the tragedy of the event. This was seen with both Lincoln and Kennedy. Given the situation, however, both assassinations quickly lost luster as mere background to the greater story surrounding the dwindling life of the incumbent and its pending result: a new president of the United States. Whereas Lincoln and Kennedy were quickly viewed as American martyrs, Garfield and McKinley became more closely viewed as kind family men suffering with a lot of power in their hands. Memory of the event became more about what the result would ultimately be and less about what actually happened.

While American public memory waned in the wake of the Garfield and McKinley assassinations, it became marked by contributory factors that took away from their images as martyrs. In his book on political martyrdom, Eyal J. Naveh compared eventual public response years after the Lincoln assassination to the portrayal of the assassinations of Garfield and McKinley years following the events. The author asserted that Lincoln continued to be viewed as a national unifier years after his death because of his perceived role in the Civil War, but "the new level of nationality that Garfield and McKinley had supposedly created remained emotionally shallow to those who had not experienced the ritual around their deathbeds."⁴⁶ In other words, those not directly exposed to the emotional time period surrounding the deaths of both Garfield and

⁴⁵Lee Davis, *Assassination: Twenty Assassinations That Changed History* (London: Tiger Books International, 1993), 39.

⁴⁶Naveh, 92.

McKinley simply became unaware of any status they had as being great reformers or standards of national unity. As Lincoln continued to personify the image of martyr for the cause of freedom and liberty, Garfield and McKinley quickly lost any idea that upheld them as the cornerstone of national strength.

The labels furthermore attached to Garfield and McKinley that painted them as defenders of freedom and martyrs for that ideal were spun of a different fabric than Lincoln's version of freedom. Since Republican leaders in the Gilded Age saw freedom as the protection of law and order in the United States, Garfield and McKinley quickly became the defenders of society from threats of tyranny and anarchy.⁴⁷ Especially given Leon Czolgosz's ties to anarchy and Charles Guiteau's attempt to unravel American society over a desired appointment, these titles of defense were easy to apply to the slaughtered presidents. Yet, a defining traumatic event like the Civil War for Lincoln and patronage to the cause of civil rights for Kennedy were nowhere to be found in Garfield and McKinley's careers.⁴⁸ Consequently, the lack of a defining moment that reduced a societal evil throughout their political endeavors made their stories much easier to forget.

Besides lacking a pivotal circumstance in their careers that elevated them to martyr status, Garfield and McKinley only maintained short-lived runs with associations that portrayed them as strong mythical or religious figures.⁴⁹ Both were described in media and in eulogies as virtuous and Godly in both their private lives and the suffering that preceded their deaths. Yet neither was raised to the status of great reformer or mythical patriarchal figure that planted hope for the country in the future. Both were

⁴⁷Naveh, 88.

⁴⁸Naveh, 100.

⁴⁹Naveh, 84. Furthermore, *New York Times* articles directly following the death of each President did describe them as martyrs: "The Martyr Laid at Rest," *New York Times*, September 27, 1881 and "Martyr President Borne to Capital," *New York Times*, September 17, 1901.

merely viewed as maintainers of the status quo in the United States.⁵⁰ Garfield's death did ultimately invoke civil service reform with the passage of the Pendleton Act in 1882 and McKinley's death did result in both federal and state legislation that restricted immigration and the activities of anarchists.⁵¹ However both dead Presidents were eventually viewed as playing no role in that process.⁵² Without perceived roles as great reformers like Lincoln, the American public apparently saw little reason to consciously associate Garfield and McKinley with martyrdom, excluding those who were alive when their assassinations occurred.

Beyond the eyes of those who lived through the assassinations of Presidents Garfield and McKinley, their presidencies left little to be desired by American lore. With no establishment of any great reform and no cause for freedom to defend, they were left to be remembered as little more than presidents in a relatively quiet period in American history. At least that is what most Americans tell one another. Despite the fact that Garfield shockingly nabbed an opportunity to become president and McKinley was president during a war, the period of time that underlined their administrations fell victim to the shadow of the Civil War and the martyrdom of President Lincoln. Garfield had the similar long-shot log cabin story that Lincoln did, but Lincoln had the embracing narrative and title as unifier of the country in the midst of the Civil War to add to his prestigious image. Lincoln furthermore represented good crushing the evil of slavery in his presidency and ultimately became a martyr for freedom.⁵³ Despite their successes, Garfield and McKinley did not have a compelling story outside of the assassinations themselves. It would seem that consequently an event must have an enthralling narrative or story to back it in order for it to be a stronger force in public memory. While Lincoln's

⁵⁰Naveh, 85.

⁵¹Murray Edelman and Rita James Simon, "Presidential Assassinations: Their Meaning and Impact on American Society," *Ethics* 79:3 (April 1969): 204-205.

⁵²Naveh, 96.

⁵³Naveh, 96.

death had the traumatic Civil War in the forefront and Kennedy's had a whole host of conspiracy theories, Garfield and McKinley were simply ransacked by two interesting individuals.

The issue of conspiracy also plays a vital role in how the public has remembered the assassinations of presidents Garfield and McKinley. Both Charles Guiteau and Leon Czolgosz were within touching distance of the presidents when they fired bullets at them, with several witnesses standing at the scene. While there were some cries of conspiracy in both cases,⁵⁴ there was little doubt that Guiteau and Czolgosz were guilty of their crimes. Lincoln's assassination, and Kennedy's, especially, thrives on the possibility of there being another side to the story.⁵⁵

Abraham Lincoln was shot at close range by John Wilkes Booth at Ford's Theater, in Washington, D.C. on April 14, 1865. He was shot from behind while watching the play *Our American Cousin* alongside Mary Todd Lincoln, Major Henry Rathbone, and his fiancée. All were seated in a balcony above the stage. Moreover, the policeman that was supposed to be guarding the Presidential party had left to go to a nearby tavern.⁵⁶ Conspiracy theories about who was an accomplice in the assassination circulated and still remain somewhat popular today. These include the eventual conviction of eight known companions of Booth for conspiracy in Lincoln's murder, which led to the execution of four of the supposed conspirators.⁵⁷ Other stories encapsulate Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, radical Republicans, and northern cotton

⁵⁴Laucella, 89. In the case of McKinley's death, several anarchists were arrested and attacked following his assassination. Also, Murray Edelman and Rita James Simon in "Presidential Assassinations: Their Meaning and Impact on American Society," *Ethics* 79:3 (April 1969): 201, point to a widespread belief after the Garfield assassination that New York Senator Roscoe Conkling and Republican Stalwarts may have had something to do with the assassination because of their ties to Charles Guiteau.

⁵⁵In Sheldon Appleton's "The Polls—Trends: Assassinations," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 64:4 (Winter 2000): 515, it is revealed through a November 1998 CBS public opinion poll that 76% of those polled believed that the Kennedy assassination was part of a broader plot, with more people than Lee Harvey Oswald involved in the shooting.

⁵⁶Laucella, 62-63.

⁵⁷Laucella, 66-67.

and gold speculators as a part of a major plot to kidnap President Lincoln, Vice President Andrew Johnson, and Secretary of State William Seward, in order to take eventual control of the government. The plot was supposedly discovered in 18 incriminating pages of Booth's diary that were ultimately found to be missing. Whether or not these allegations are true, the idea of an existing conspiracy clung to the minds of those grieving Lincoln's death and those who researched his death years later. Conspiracy was especially prevalent in a 1977 book entitled *The Lincoln Conspiracy*, by authors David Balsiger and Charles E. Sellier, who claim to have found the eighteen missing pages of Booth's diary.⁵⁸

While Lincoln's death did draw some to believe in a conspiracy theory, the death of John F. Kennedy propagated a whole flurry of belief in alternate views of his assassination. John F. Kennedy was assassinated in his presidential motorcade by Lee Harvey Oswald. Oswald shot from the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository on November 22, 1963, in Dallas, Texas.⁵⁹ The latter statement, alone, is enough to make most Americans' skin crawl. The reasoning behind this sentiment is fueled by beliefs that several shots were heard when the president was hit. Witnesses saw two men in the window of the Texas School Book Depository at the time of the shooting. The belief developed that the bullet supposedly came from the grassy knoll area in front of the motorcade.⁶⁰ These few reasons aside, numerous investigations by the U.S. government and theories about a second gunman and Mafia or CIA involvement that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s only did more to fan the flame of excitement for conspiracy theorists.⁶¹ As noted earlier, public opinion polls show a public wary of the Warren Commission's claim that Oswald was the lone gunman and planned executor of the

⁵⁸Laucella, 68.

⁵⁹Davis, 87.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Laucella, 243-260.

crime.⁶² Besides being the most recent assassination of a president, the death of Kennedy continues to thrive in American public memory in large part due to the belief in a conspiracy.

As some Americans have looked to uncover the truth behind the Lincoln and Kennedy assassinations, very few have been left questioning the crimes of assassins Charles Guiteau and Leon Czolgosz. With few conspiracy theories fueling them, the Garfield and McKinley assassinations lack the elements that opposing views often generate. Lodged as closed cases in the minds of the American public, their assassinations are left to those who choose to uncover their details. In a different fashion the Lincoln and Kennedy assassinations have a stronger leg to stand on for those who do not consider themselves well-read in American history. A few obscure facts about the Lincoln and Kennedy assassinations could potentially lead to fiery debate amongst many over who actually played a role in the assassination of the president. With no alternate theory of the crime, memory of the Garfield and McKinley assassinations remains forsaken in comparison to memory of the other two presidential assassinations.

Besides lacking the compelling conspiracy portion of an assassination, there is one final element of the Garfield and McKinley assassinations that must be addressed. More specifically, the mental statuses of assassins Guiteau and Czolgosz played a major role in how the assassinations and subsequent deaths of these presidents were actually portrayed. This research will not serve as an assessment of the actual mental statuses of the assassins, but will merely serve as a tool to gain an idea of how their mentalities were perceived by historians, medical experts, and the American public. Utilizing this perception will offer an opportunity to elaborate on why the assassinations have fallen short-sighted in public memory. The sanity of both Guiteau and Czolgosz was questioned

⁶²The Warren Commission was the original governmental investigating committee that looked into the Kennedy assassination in late 1963.

following the assassination of each of their targets, as many tended to view an attempt to take the life of a president as a gesture of insane magnitude.⁶³ Despite this, opinions about the specific lifestyles of each of the assassins led to medical and popular opinions about their mental statuses.

While chatter loomed regarding the potential insanity of Leon Czolgosz, there is little argument from most historians and medical experts that Charles Guiteau was most likely insane at the time he committed his crime.⁶⁴ He was most likely delusional at best and believed in the rational possibility of being guaranteed the position of Consulship to Paris in the Garfield administration. After not obtaining the position and becoming invoked by God to carry out his act, he shot at President Garfield twice. Despite the ruling that he was sane enough to stand trial,⁶⁵ several medical experts and historians, both at the time and more recently, point to his foregone insanity.⁶⁶ One prime example of this is Guiteau trial examiner E. Hilton Jackson's statement that Guiteau was pronounced insane by a "Pension Medical Board of Experts," just "a short time before the fatal July 2nd," when Garfield was shot.⁶⁷ Furthermore, his mental status and reasoning behind assassinating the president was outlined in a letter found on his person at the time of the shooting. Offering deeper insight into his psychology, Guiteau claimed that, "the president's removal was a political necessity," and that his crime was, "not murder."⁶⁸ The assassination of Garfield was ultimately viewed as the tragic consequence

⁶³ Appleton, 505-506. Based on a 1990 poll of 1,839 United States citizens, almost 90% of those polled believed that assassination can either never or almost never be justified

⁶⁴ Jackson, 1028.

⁶⁵ Rosenberg, 96.

⁶⁶ In Charles E. Rosenberg's *The Trial of the Assassin Guiteau: Psychiatry and Law in the Gilded Age*, the author explicitly states on page xiii of his introduction that Guiteau was undoubtedly suffering from mental illness and was, therefore, insane. Furthermore, E. Hilton Jackson offers a similar response to Guiteau's mental status in his coverage of the trial over twenty years later, while James W. Clarke claims on page 198 of his 1982 book, *American Assassins*, that "there has been no American assassin more obviously deranged than Charles Guiteau".

⁶⁷ Jackson, 1028.

⁶⁸ Charles Guiteau to the American people, June 16, 1881, Georgetown University Library: Charles Guiteau Collection.

of an act committed by an insane man. While some managed to portray Garfield as a martyr following his death, more believed his death to be an unfortunate accident at the hands of a man unfit for the American population.

The portrait of President Garfield's death as a fateful incident was especially magnified following the death of President McKinley. Leon Czolgosz was a self-proclaimed anarchist that saw the assassination of the president as his duty to ensure personal freedoms.⁶⁹ The early twentieth century was a time when anarchism was especially frowned upon in the United States. Czolgosz's actions only added more fuel to the fire.⁷⁰ Because it was perceived to be an insane political decision to fight for anarchy, Czolgosz's mental status quickly came into question. This was especially the case after his trial and execution. These observations included a full autopsy of his body by doctors and medical experts immediately following his death.⁷¹ While little physical evidence pointed to any abnormal psychological characteristics, historians and medical experts continue to debate whether or not Czolgosz was legally insane.⁷² With insanity as an alternate possibility, the American public was left with this potentiality to explain the reasoning behind Czolgosz's decision to assassinate McKinley. In comparison with the circumstances surrounding Garfield's assassination, both assassins have been viewed as disturbed Americans housing the necessary audacity needed to murder the President. While one prevailing opinion may not dominate popular thought, the assassinations have

⁶⁹Seibert, 78

⁷⁰Sidney Fine, "Anarchism and the Assassination of McKinley," *The American Historical Review* 60:4 (July 1955): 777-778

⁷¹Seibert, 346

⁷²Most take the full body exhumation study for granted, but James W. Clarke offers two entirely different opinions in *American Assassins*. Dr. Walter Channing published an article in *The American Journal of Insanity* in 1902 that debated earlier claims that Czolgosz was sane at the time he committed his act, while his associate, Dr. L. Vernon Briggs, pointed to paranoid schizophrenia as responsible for Czolgosz's insanity in *The Manner of Man that Kills*.

come to be perceived as tragic accidents; the presidents just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

As both assassins' mental statuses fell into question, their victims' deaths became similarly compared to the tragic death of the president in a car accident or plane crash. Without the major background story to elicit a stunning response from a crowd, their deaths became tales of suffering that were endured via fate at the hands of two not-so-normal Americans. Their deaths were accidents not because men were killing them for what they stood for, but rather because irrational men murdered them for the raised platform they stood upon in office. The American public has inevitably come to terms with the ideal that Lincoln and Kennedy died strictly because they were Lincoln and Kennedy. On the other hand, those who remember Garfield and McKinley have described their deaths of as results of the position they both held. Lacking significant principle or executive posterity as a major part of their assassinations, both Garfield and McKinley have tumbled into the shadows as two fallen powerful figures without much of a name.

This research has outlined some of the potential reasoning behind the fading status of these two presidential assassinations. However, there is no expectation that any answers provided here will assume complete sovereignty over this conceptualization. The major questions surrounding the coverage of the Garfield and McKinley assassinations are also answered through the simple lack of prior research available on the events themselves. The result is an issue with historiographical components that has led to some form of amnesia in regard to these two assassinations. Facts about their presidencies, perception of the mental statuses of their assassins, their drawn-out deaths, and lack of conspiracy theory may be responsible for the near-death of the Garfield and McKinley assassinations in public memory, but historical thinking and the way history is remembered also plays an equally important role.

While these questions could be reserved for historiography, they more characteristically fall into the realm of public memory study and inquiries about historical consciousness. As Susan A. Crane asserts in her article on collective memory, history and historical thinking comprise the task of preserving what would otherwise be lost and are mainly responsible for accurately presenting what occurred in the past.⁷³ The task may be a tall order at the very least, but what historians choose to write about and discuss in the media sets the stage for what the public is left to discuss. Furthermore, what is presented to students through textbooks and curricula determine what events are specifically focused on and, therefore, memorized. The historian consequently often determines what precisely is significant enough to be remembered.⁷⁴

In the case of the Garfield and McKinley assassinations, a distinct lack of coverage is partially to blame, especially in comparison to coverage the Lincoln and Kennedy assassinations have received in various books, textbooks, and scholarly literature.⁷⁵ The other major issue arises from a variety of reasons that made the Garfield and McKinley assassinations less memorable: the perceived effectiveness of their presidencies; their longer battles with death; their status as martyrs for defending any significant cause; and the specific circumstances surrounding their respective assassins and assassinations. One could argue that any moment, individual, or occurrence in history is worthy of at least remembering merely because it happened. Yet, how those moments, individuals, or occurrences are portrayed and perceived by professional historians and the

⁷³Susan A. Crane, "Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory," *The American Historical Review* 102:5 (December 1997): 1372

⁷⁴Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn, "Introduction," *Representations* No. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory (Spring 1989): 3

⁷⁵A significant amount of research has determined this based on the number of books and articles available about Lincoln and Kennedy when compared to Garfield and McKinley. The most amazing part is that Lincoln, the first of the assassinated Presidents, has received the most recent coverage.

general public marks the biggest difference in the magnitude and detail of scholarship available.

With a stark contrast in coverage between the Lincoln and Kennedy assassinations, the Garfield and McKinley assassinations leave everyday Americans with little history to actually remember. David Blight presents a similar point in his book on how the Civil War is remembered, declaring that most Americans hold a repository of facts and lessons learned from the war that have taken shape over time. Blight goes on to claim that romance trumped reality, in the case of the Civil War, and more popular views that reconciliation of differences surpassed enduring struggles have won precedence in historical memory.⁷⁶ The Garfield and McKinley assassinations similarly became molded to be remembered in a particular fashion. The importance of the events was quickly washed away by their lingering deaths and the potential arrival of a new president. Consequently, historians and popular culture itself took these angles and painted these assassinations as somehow separate from the two other Presidential assassinations. Lincoln and Kennedy offered mystery and a thrilling back story; Garfield and McKinley did not. This ultimately led to less writing about the events and a whittling down of their descriptions in textbooks.⁷⁷ Losing steam with historians and popular thought inevitably left Garfield and McKinley a small leg to stand on when it came to permanent remembrance by the American public.

Outside of a deficient amount of historical recognition, the Garfield and McKinley assassinations have not been entirely ignored. Some examples include movie references, a popular assassination novel written by Sarah Vowell, and the Broadway hit

⁷⁶David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 1-4

⁷⁷See footnote 2

Assassins.⁷⁸ Furthermore, some research has been dedicated to uncovering the facts and events surrounding both assassinations. While most of the research collectively accrued only a short time after each president's death, some books have been published since the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.⁷⁹ Unfortunately most mention of their assassinations is generally in conjunction with other political or presidential assassinations and more or less left to plain facts regarding the events. A simple library or internet search will reveal more available literature on the Lincoln and Kennedy assassinations. This includes works that take different angles, like conspiracies. Without momentous research and discourse over the course of the twentieth century, both assassinations spend little time in the limelight. Their historical significance is consequently downplayed as the assassinations slowly fade into the oblivion of the abyss that often comprises history.

President James A. Garfield lay on his deathbed on September 18, 1881 and asked Colonel Almon A. Rockwell if his name "will have a place in history." Rockwell ultimately responded, "Yes, a grand one, but a grander one in human hearts."⁸⁰ He could not have been more wrong. For both President Garfield and President McKinley a lag of historical consciousness has proven fatal to their posterity and overall remembrance. Their assassinations have more specifically become two major events in American

⁷⁸One specific movie reference can be found in the Clint-Eastwood-directed 1992 movie, *Unforgiven*, which was set in the Gilded Age and featured a scene where a banner was displayed that proclaimed Garfield's shooting. Sarah Vowell wrote *Assassination Vacation*, in 2005, which detailed her journey to different sites that were significant in the deaths of Lincoln, Garfield and McKinley. Stephen Sondheim wrote the music and lyrics for *Assassins*, which contained separate scenes for each Presidential or would-be Presidential assassin, including Guiteau and Czolgosz.

⁷⁹Besides the scholarship mentioned throughout this piece, other books include: Charles G. Dawes, *A Journal of the McKinley Years*, edited by Bascom N. Timmons (Chicago: The Lakeside Press, 1950); Allan Peskin, *Garfield* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1978); Antoine Wilson, *The Assassination of William McKinley* (New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, 2002); Robert Kingsbury, *The Assassination of James A. Garfield* (New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, 2002); Howard Wayne Morgan, *William McKinley and His America* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2003).

⁸⁰As reported by Robert Reyburn, M.D., *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 1894 in Ira Rutkow, *James A. Garfield* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006)

history that have fallen to the wayside. While some literature does exist on the subject, the pickings are slim and the writing is mostly on the wall. Through reasons uncovered in this research, a lack of professional participation in discussion, and little room for availability in school curricula and textbooks, the Garfield and McKinley assassinations have, for the most part, been forgotten by the American public.

Reasoning and research concludes that this loss of memory may have been due to several factors: a short and weak Garfield Presidency; a McKinley presidency quickly trumped by the larger than life presence of Theodore Roosevelt; no martyr status or persistent cause to stand for in either of their stories; no major conspiracy theories surrounding the events; lingering deaths that led to more focus on the medical status of the presidents and less focus on the actual shootings; and perceivably insane assassins that killed both presidents for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. These ultimately have led to a view of their deaths as fateful accidents. Putting rationale aside, there could be hundreds of reasons that explain why these assassinations do not make up important portions of the repository of historical facts held by the American public. Historical events unfortunately are not always recalled accurately and are rarely free from bias. This bias includes partiality to the remembrance of specific events, occurrences, and persons as historically significant. The assassinations of Garfield and McKinley never contained the elements that would have them deemed important by professionals and by common citizens consequently. This has been outwardly demonstrated by the insignificant amount of research covering these two events and the massive amount of research available that covers the Lincoln and Kennedy assassinations.

The work performed may not be entirely sufficient to deal with such a diverse topic, but the questions fueling research are quite interesting. Any time events or individuals lose their historical luster it is always worth a more inquisitive glance. Reasoning may not be up to par and the arising questions may only be partially answered,

but the ideology has at least been ignited by some discourse and further insight. While the assassinations teeter on the verge of loss in American history and historical research, the problem mainly lies in how the public perceives these men and how the elements deemed interesting are not found in their stories; interesting enough to be remembered, that is. The issue is both exciting and disheartening, but inevitably requires further discussion and addressing. An amazing bulk of history may consistently continue to be forgotten without a way to salvage prominent historical occurrences.

