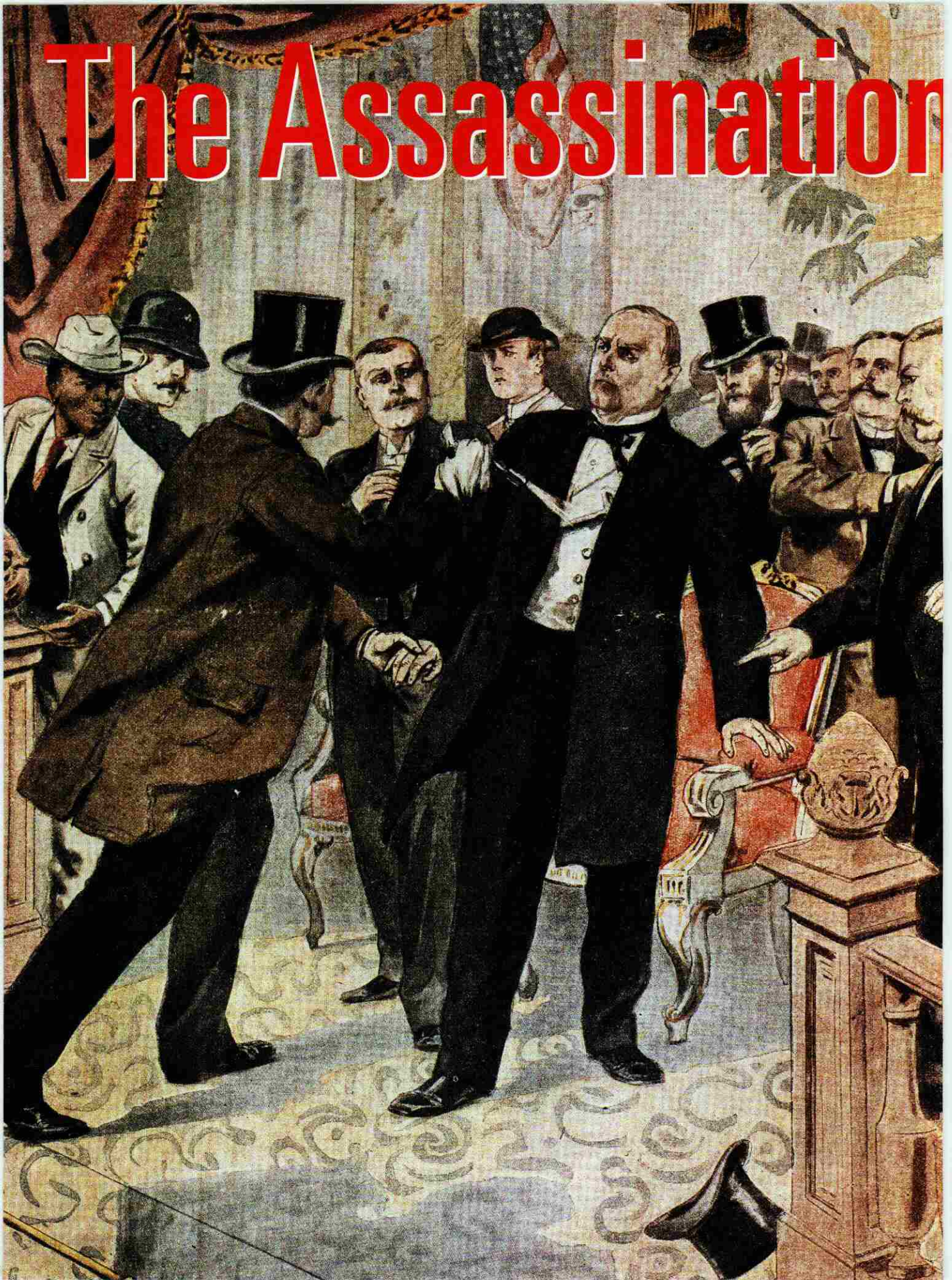


The Assassination



of WILLIAM MCKINLEY

by Wyatt Kingseed

LEON CZOLGOSZ stood in line and counted the people between him and the president of the United States. Nondescript, dressed in a dark suit, and wearing an innocent expression, Czolgosz (pronounced chôl-gôsh) looked younger than his 28 years. He had waited for more than two hours in 82-degree heat on September 6, 1901, for his turn to shake hands with President William McKinley, who was visiting the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York.

It was the first year of the new century, a perfect time to reflect on the nation's rise in world prominence and to speculate on the future. The exposition, a world's fair that celebrated the Americas' industrial progress and achievement, had attracted visitors from

Leon Czolgosz shoots President William McKinley on September 6, 1901, in a contemporary depiction. The print was made in France, which may account for the assassin's European-style mustache.

around the world. The event was more than halfway through its six-month run when President McKinley, the most popular chief executive since Abraham Lincoln, arrived.

Anarchist Leon Czolgosz came to Buffalo, New York, with a mission. He believed that government was evil, and he planned to stamp out that evil, beginning at the top.

McKinley's final public appearance in Buffalo was an afternoon reception in the Temple of Music, an ornate red-brick hall on the exposition grounds. Since being elected president in 1896, McKinley had been notorious for discounting his own personal safety at public appearances, and he had repeatedly resisted attempts by his personal secretary, George Cortelyou, to cancel this event. Cortelyou had argued that it wasn't worth the risk to greet such a small number of people, but the 58-year-old president refused to change his mind. "Why should I?" he asked. "Who would want to hurt me?"

Cortelyou, always nervous about public receptions, tightened security as best he could. The people who wished to greet the president at the Temple had to file down a narrow aisle under the scrutiny of a special guard provided for the occasion. Outside, mounted police and soldiers controlled the massive crowd seeking entrance.

Just months into his second presidential term, McKinley—who had easily won reelection in 1900—had made the most significant speech of his presidency the day before, announcing a policy of reciprocal trade agreements with foreign nations to encourage improved markets for American goods. It marked the culmination of a decade-long evolution in thinking for the long-time isolationist and exemplified his statesmanship in recognition of changing times.

McKinley's star first rose on the national scene some 10 years earlier as the Republican Party's staunchest advocate of protectionism. He believed that high tariffs discouraged the importation of foreign goods, thereby helping keep prices high for American goods and producing profits for industries and high wages for workers. Using protectionism as his platform for election to the U.S. House of Representatives and the Ohio statehouse, where he served



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Crowds mill around the Pan-American Exposition's Temple of Music, the building where Czolgosz shot President McKinley.

two terms as governor, McKinley established himself as his party's standard-bearer. According to biographer Margaret Leech, McKinley "carried to Congress an emotional conviction that the solution for all the country's economic ills was to make the already high tariff rates higher still." By 1900, however, he saw reciprocity as a means for commercial expansion and a way to promote world peace.

McKinley was a veteran of the Civil War and retained vivid memories of the bloody conflict. As president, he was reluctantly drawn into the Spanish-American War of 1898. At first he downplayed stories of Spanish atrocities against Cuban nationals. But the yellow journalism of competing newspaper publishers William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer fired passions after the battleship *Maine* exploded and sank in Havana's harbor. Big business, looking to expand markets, added to the inexorable forces pushing the president toward war.

Spain proved little challenge though, as American forces easily defeated the

outnumbered and outgunned army and navy of the Old World power. As the victor, the United States gained Puerto Rico, Wake, Guam, and the Philippines. The Pacific Islands were particularly significant as they established an American presence in a new hemisphere. Moreover, the United States annexed the Hawaiian Islands that summer. American business concerns became ecstatic over the prospects for expanded influence overseas. But not everyone supported the president. Hearst in particular continued to publicly criticize him. The condemnation reached a low point on April 10, 1901, when the publisher's *Journal* printed an editorial

that declared, "If bad institutions and bad men can be got rid of only by killing, then the killing must be done." Although Hearst had been responsible for many attacks on McKinley, he maintained that the editorial had been published without his knowledge. He ordered the presses stopped, but a number of newspapers were already on the streets.

ON SEPTEMBER 5 an estimated 50,000 people, including Leon Czolgosz, had listened to the president's speech. "Isolation is no longer possible or desirable," McKinley said. "The period of exclusiveness is past. The expansion of our trade and commerce is the pressing problem. Commercial wars are unprofitable. A policy of good-will and friendly trade relations will prevent reprisals." The *New York Times*, remarking on the president's about-face, wrote, "Unquestionably the President has learned much in the last few years."

Unfortunately, America's move toward imperialism had done little for the common workingman. Already frustrated by years of economic depression that began with the Panic of 1893, and by the lack of progress toward more humane working conditions, American workers wondered

why some of the vast wealth of the industrial boom wasn't trickling down to them. Millionaires like railroad king Cornelius Vanderbilt, oil baron John D. Rockefeller, steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, and banker J.P. Morgan had accumulated unprecedented private wealth and were known to spend more on an evening's entertainment than a coal miner or tradesman could earn in a lifetime. Such ostentatious displays bred discontent. Rubbing salt in the wound, the industrialists routinely relied on the government to help squelch worker uprisings.

Employee unions had progressively become a more dominant force in American life during the last quarter of the nineteenth century as they sought to improve working conditions. Strikers had clashed violently with police and the military in Chicago's Haymarket Riot in 1886 and again in the Pullman strike eight years later, leaving scores of people dead in the streets. In 1892, Pinkerton detectives in Homestead, Pennsylvania, suppressed a steel strike and protected scab laborers (see "If You Men Don't Withdraw, We Will Mow Every One of You Down," April 2000). The government had sided with management against workers in each instance.

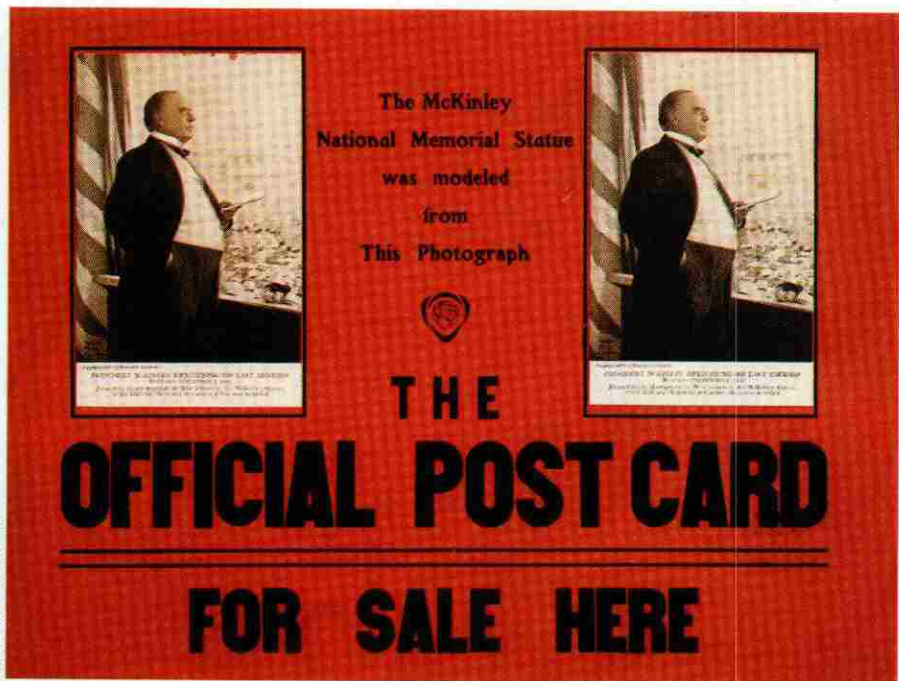
A more dangerous element—anarchism—exacerbated the situation when it arrived from Europe. Anarchists brought a more radical philosophy to the scene, maintaining that any form of government exploited and oppressed the people. They believed that one way to combat government was to eliminate those in power. Since 1894, anarchists had assassinated four European leaders—President Sadi Carnot of France, Empress Elizabeth of Austria, King Humbert of Italy, and Spanish statesman Cánovas del Castillo. In the United States, an anarchist had attacked industrialist Henry Clay Frick, in part for his role in the failed Homestead strike.

For some individuals with little or no formal education, few skills, and no hope of improvement, anarchism offered a natural outlet for their frustration. Cleveland resident Leon Czolgosz fit the profile perfectly. Poor, reclusive, and often unemployed, he had been born in Detroit to Polish parents in

1873. He left school after five and a half years and worked at various jobs and later drifted to Chicago and became interested in the socialist movement. The interest continued in Cleveland, where he took a job in the city's wire mills. Two weeks before he traveled to Buffalo, Czolgosz attended a lecture given by the nation's most notorious anarchist leader, Emma Goldman. She spoke of the struggle between the classes and why the time had come for action against government.

accompanied their parents. The line moved quickly. Many in attendance held cloths to dab the sweat from their foreheads on the warm, humid day. As the waiting people shuffled forward, Foster noticed one man in line who had his right hand wrapped in a handkerchief. Foster wondered if it covered an embarrassing injury.

McKinley saw the man's apparent disability, and he reached to shake his left hand. Suddenly, Leon Czolgosz thrust his bandaged right hand into the presi-



SURROUNDED BY HIS entourage inside the Temple of Music, McKinley enjoyed the opportunity to meet his admirers. Host John Milburn, the exposition's president, stood on the president's left, so he could introduce acquaintances to McKinley as they approached. Secret Service agent George Foster, the president's chief bodyguard, usually held that position, but he found himself five feet away from the president and standing opposite him. To McKinley's right stood Cortelyou, who looked into the face of each person as they came close to his boss. He intended to signal the guards to close the doors after 10 minutes to stop the parade of well-wishers and then rush the president on to his next appointment.

President McKinley greeted each person with a warm smile and a handshake, pausing briefly to exchange words with any children who had ac-

A postcard shows President McKinley delivering what proved to be his last speech, at the esplanade of the Pan-American Exposition on September 5, 1901.

dent's chest. Onlookers heard two sharp popping sounds, like small firecrackers, and a thin veil of gray smoke rose up in front of the president. McKinley looked confused and rose up on his toes, clutched his chest, and leaned forward. Members of his entourage moved to support the slumping president and help him to a nearby chair as the blood spread across his white vest. "Be careful how you tell my wife," McKinley said, his strength already waning.

Foster and others pounced on the assailant, knocking him roughly to the floor as he tried to aim his revolver for a third shot. McKinley managed a weak, "Don't let them hurt him," when

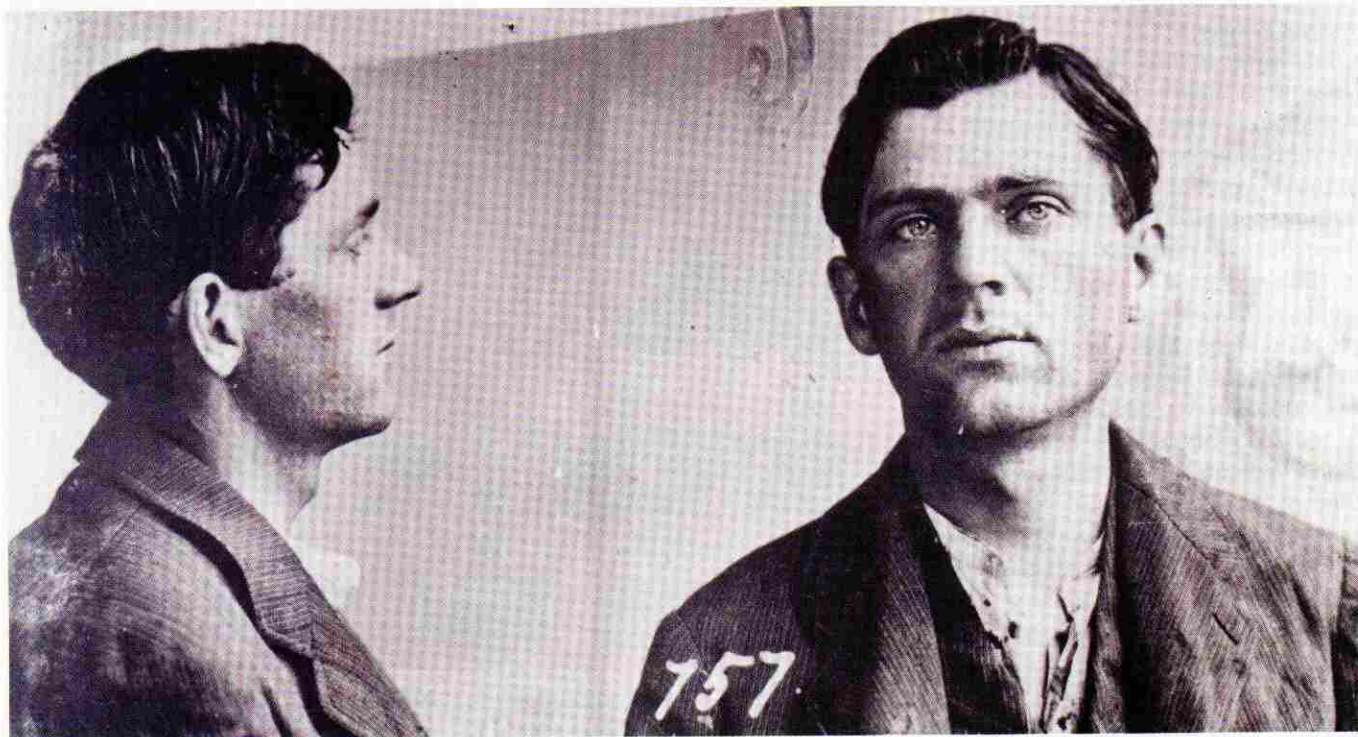
he saw Czolgosz being pummeled beneath a mass of angry guards. As the pandemonium continued, aides rushed the president to a hospital on the exposition grounds. One bullet had struck his sternum a glancing blow, causing only a superficial wound, but the other had penetrated his abdomen, a potentially fatal injury.

Dr. Roswell Park, the exposition's medical director and a surgeon with an international reputation, was performing a cancer operation in nearby Niagara

falling the extent of McKinley's injuries and describing the surgery, during which they had searched for but could not find the second bullet. Summing up, they said the president's "condition at the conclusion of the operation was gratifying. The result cannot be foretold. His condition at present justifies hope of recovery."

While initial reports were optimistic, as they would be for the next six days, one presidential advisor felt an uneasy foreboding. Secretary of State John Hay

spirits were good, but by afternoon he began to experience discomfort, and his condition rapidly worsened. Within 36 hours Hay's prediction came true. Gangrene, unseen, had been forming along the path of the bullet for nearly a week. Some 40 years before penicillin became generally available, McKinley had been doomed the moment Czolgosz fired his revolver. The president died in the early morning hours of September 14, surrounded by a small group of family and friends. That afternoon



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Falls. Rather than wait for his return, the doctors present believed it imperative to act immediately, and they decided to operate as soon as prominent Buffalo surgeon Dr. Matthew Mann arrived.

At 5:20 P.M., an hour and 13 minutes after the shooting, President McKinley went under the knife. As he slipped into an ether-induced sleep, he murmured the Lord's Prayer. Operating conditions were far from ideal, and professional lapses occurred that in retrospect probably raised an eyebrow or two, but the grave emergency required snap judgment. At one time doctors had to reflect the waning sun's rays onto the patient with a mirror because of inadequate lighting.

An anxious crowd awaited word of the president's condition. At 7:00 P.M. the physicians released a statement de-

had already experienced the assassinations of two presidents—the first as a personal secretary to Abraham Lincoln and the second as a personal friend and confidant of James Garfield. Called to Buffalo from Washington, Hay reportedly told his escort that the president would surely die. But the secretary of state's fear was an exception. The optimism of other reports prompted cabinet officials to return to their duties elsewhere. Vice President Theodore Roosevelt, who had rushed to the president's bedside when he received news of the shooting, left Buffalo "with a light heart" and joined his family on vacation in the Adirondacks.

The president improved daily, and he felt strong enough on the morning of September 12 to receive his first food orally—toast and coffee. McKinley's

Above: Anarchist Leon Czolgosz made his assassination preparations with the utmost calm. Assassins in Europe had failed in recent attempts because they had worried about their own safety, but Czolgosz had no concerns about self-preservation. Opposite: The *Buffalo Review* reported the grave news that stunned the world.

Theodore Roosevelt was sworn in as president of the United States.

AS DOCTORS HAD removed the president to John Milburn's house after surgery, another spectacle was playing out across town at police headquarters, where the anarchist's life was in as great a peril as McKinley's had been. Police brandishing rifles and soldiers

PRESIDENT IS DEAD

Assassin's Bullet Has Done Its Work; Roosevelt Becomes Chief Executive

End Came This Morning After a Long Period of Stupor That Followed a Sad and Gentle Parting With His Brave Wife. "God's Will, Not Ours, be Done" His Last Words.

AT 2:15 A. M. THE PRESIDENT DIED.

It was a fatal day. The end came suddenly. A fatal event after the assassin's bullet had done its work, the President of the United States passed from life into a stupor that his medical or surgical skill could not overcome. When he died he was in the hands of his doctors.

Roosevelt Speeding to Buffalo.

When Mr. McKinley died at 2:15 a. m. last night, the news of his death reached the general public. The A. S. P. M. bulletin gave the news of his death to the world to know. It was an awful time that the President died.

Notary Ready to Swear Him In.

Special Agent George Foster admitted that the Vice-President was ready to be sworn in at Buffalo. It is understood that he is in company with several gentlemen who will accompany him to Buffalo.

Cabinet Officers Prepared to Resign.

The members of the President's cabinet, all of whom are in the city, with the exception of James Smith and those who have prepared their resignation, are ready to resign. It is understood that they will do so as soon as the President is sworn in.

Wife Noble in Her Fortitude.

The wife of the President's assassin shot at Mrs. McKinley when she went into the President's room, bearing upon the arm of the President. She was noble in her fortitude. She knew the condition of the President. She was noble in her fortitude.



THE LATE WILLIAM MCKINLEY.

FALSE REPORTS TWICE SENT OUT

Extras Put on the Street Announcing the President's Death While the Vital Spark Was Still Glowing.

There was much uncertainty in the early hours concerning the President's condition. Two extra news papers were sent out, announcing his death. Later, however, it was found that the reports were false.

Oil in New Brunswick. Emma Goldman is told the news in prison. Report of the death of President Arouses Little Sympathy from the Leader of Anarchists.

EXPOSITION CLOSED.

Bulletin—Director-General Buchanan announced at 2:15 a. m. that the Exposition would be closed Saturday and Sunday.

VICE-PRESIDENT WAS INFORMED LATE LAST NIGHT.

Received Word of Serious Condition of President While Hunting in the Adirondacks.

Special Agent George Foster admitted that the Vice-President was ready to be sworn in at Buffalo. It is understood that he is in company with several gentlemen who will accompany him to Buffalo.

OUR GREAT PRESIDENT IS DEAD.

Our great President, William McKinley, has died. He was a great man, a great leader, a great patriot. His death is a great loss to the world. He was a man of great courage and great faith.

CZOLGOSZ IN COUNTY JAIL

The recently captured was taken from the jail in Buffalo. He was a man of great courage and great faith. He was a man of great courage and great faith.

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FAIR TODAY.

WASHINGTON, Pa., Nov. 10.—The Erie County Fair, which opened yesterday, promises to be a success.

with bayonets transported the assailant through an angry mob of thousands who called for Czolgosz's head. Now an estimated crowd of 30,000 stood ready to rush the station to drag the prisoner from his cell. "Kill him! Lynch him!" they demanded. One observer commented that the "roar of the crowd was never to be forgotten by anyone who heard it." Buffalo Police Superintendent William Bull's quick action probably saved the prisoner's life. Bull and his men, some of them mounted, used nightsticks to beat back the surging crowd and eventually managed to cordon off the street and surround the police station three deep, a daunting presence that discouraged mob action.

District Attorney Thomas Penney interrogated the would-be assassin inside the station. Czolgosz readily confessed. A self-described anarchist and disciple of Emma Goldman, Czolgosz said he had acted alone. "I killed President McKinley because I done my duty," he explained without emotion. "I didn't believe one man should have so much service and another man should have none."

From his cell across the street from city hall, Czolgosz must have heard the caisson carrying McKinley's remains roll slowly through the streets of Buffalo on September 16 on its way to the train station for its journey to Washington, D.C. There the president's body was placed under the Capitol dome in the same chamber that once housed the remains of Lincoln and Garfield, before completing its trip for burial in McKinley's hometown of Canton, Ohio.

Czolgosz was indicted and arraigned on September 16, and the trial commenced one week later in Buffalo's city hall. The accused, resigned and unrepentant, pled guilty, but Judge Truman C. White, one of the most experienced of New York's supreme court justices, instructed the court clerk to enter a plea of not guilty in accordance with New York state law. Loran L. Lewis and Robert C. Titus, the two retired justices of the state supreme court appointed to serve as defense counsel, didn't hide their disgust at having been handed the assignment.

District Attorney Penney focused on

the medical aspects of the president's wound and death. During cross-examination, Dr. Herman Mynter, one of the attending physicians, discussed why the doctors did not find the second bullet. He explained that given McKinley's weakened condition, further search risked killing him on the operating table. Doctors did not find the bullet during the autopsy, he noted, because the McKinley family did not want the body mutilated.

The prosecution then established beyond any doubt that the defendant had committed the crime. Czolgosz's signed confession and interrogation immediately after the shooting confirmed his guilt. The only hope for a not-guilty verdict remained with the question of the defendant's mental state, a matter of much newspaper speculation in the weeks preceding the trial. The prosecution and the defense had engaged six psychiatrists to examine Czolgosz, but the alienists, as they were then known, found no evidence of insanity. Defense counsel never even raised the issue until closing arguments, and then only weakly. In fact, defense counsel called no witness-



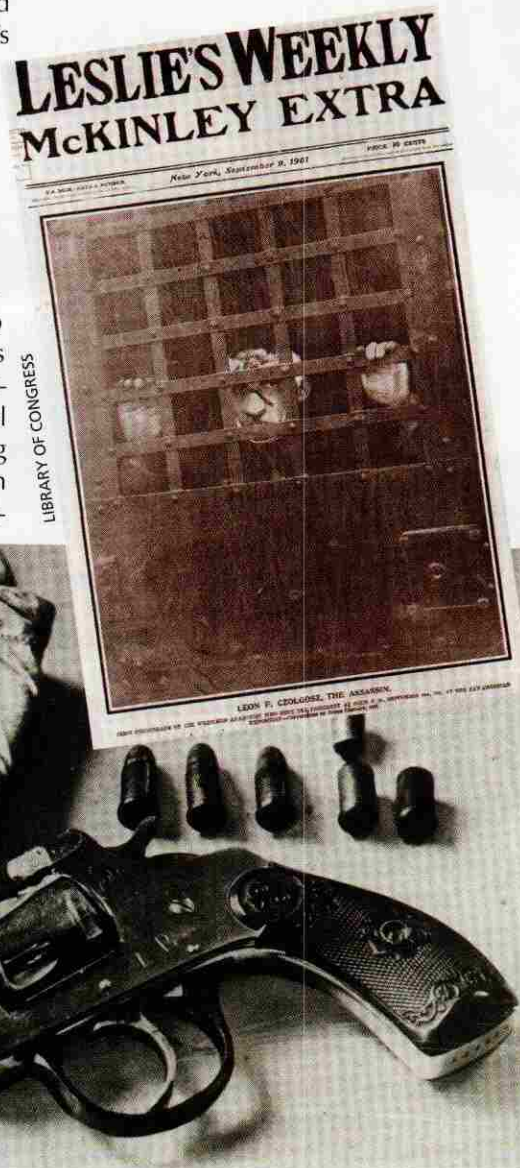
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es on Czolgosz's behalf. In fairness, though, the defendant refused to discuss the matter with either attorney, leaving them little on which to base a defense.

The state rested its case after just one and a half days, and the judge issued

his instructions to the jury. In 30 minutes they returned with the expected verdict—guilty in the first degree. The trial had been a model of expediency, but it hardly represented an example of a strong defense. By today's standards it would likely result in a mistrial on appeal. But in 1901, given the crime's dastardly nature and a public calling for blood, defense counsel did not file an appeal.

The following month, the state of New York carried out Czolgosz's death

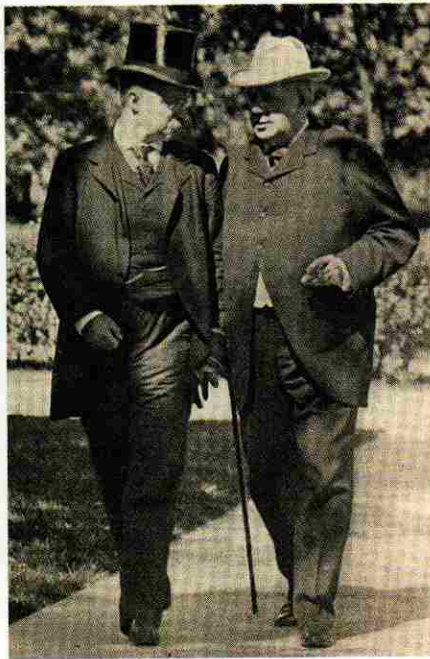


Top: A special issue of *Leslie's Weekly* shows the accused assassin behind bars. Above: Leon Czolgosz used this .32-caliber Iver Johnson revolver to kill the president. He concealed the weapon in this handkerchief.



Above: McKinley's funeral procession moves slowly through the streets of Buffalo before the body is transported to Washington, D.C., and ultimately to the president's hometown of Canton, Ohio, for burial. Right: President Roosevelt walks to John Milburn's house with Republican Senator Marcus Hanna, McKinley's close friend and advisor. Hanna was no admirer of Roosevelt. Two days after McKinley's death he remarked, "Now look, that damned cowboy is president of the United States."

sentence at the penitentiary in Auburn. The warden received more than 1,000 requests for invitations to the execution, but he allowed only 26 witnesses in accordance with state law. Prison officials also rejected two morbid proposals—one from a museum curator to buy the corpse for \$5,000 and another from a kinescope operator for \$2,000 to film the condemned man's walk to the death chamber. On October 29 the



executioner threw a switch and sent 1,700 volts of electricity through Czolgosz's body. Officials were afraid that removal of Czolgosz's corpse might cause a spectacle, so they secured the family's permission to inter it in the

prison cemetery. Prison guards doused the body with sulfuric acid to render it unrecognizable. At Czolgosz's request, the prison chaplain did not conduct a religious ceremony.

In spite of death threats made towards McKinley during his presidency, he had been protected by the most casual and primitive security. The president had often walked unattended in Canton and strolled alone on the White House grounds without George Foster in attendance. After his death—the third presidential assassination in 36 years—Congress stepped up security for United States presidents by directing the Secret Service to add the protection of the president to its duties. Two years later, Congress enacted legislation that made presidential protection a permanent Secret Service responsibility. ❁

Wyatt Kingseed is a freelance writer from Columbus, Ohio. His article "The First Airplane Fatality" appeared in the February 2001 issue of American History.

ABOVE: BUFFALO & ERIE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

CULVER PICTURES