Assassin's bullets alter history

by Lionel_Van_Deerlin

Assassination. It's one of the ugliest words in human history, describing a crime so heinous it rates a special definition beyond murder. Not always the action of demented malcontents, the killing of political leaders - from the plot against Julius Caesar to the recent outrage in Pakistan - has often foiled workable self-government. For Benazir Bhutto's troubled country, her killing may mean yet another discouraging resort to martial law.

Americans this week are reminded that assassination never has been limited to parts of the world where terrorism and despotism may flourish. The release from prison of Sara Jane Moore 32 years after her failed attempt on the life of President Gerald Ford serves to highlight a sad history of our own. Four U.S. presidents have been killed by assassins' bullets.

Our Secret Service has become one of the largest executive entities, charged with guarding the president and others in leadership. Two killings in 1968 - of Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy in quick succession - were adjudged as grievous in their way as presidential slayings.

An attempted assassination 75 years ago, had it succeeded, would surely have altered national and possibly even world history. On Feb. 15, 1933, a deluded misfit, Giuseppe Zangara, took aim at Franklin D. Roosevelt shortly after the president-elect had debarked from a yacht at Miami's Bayfront Park. Jostled by a crowd surrounding the dock, a bullet intended for Roosevelt hit and fatally injured the mayor of Chicago, Anton Cermak.

Four other people were struck by Zangara's erratic gunfire. It's hardly an exaggeration to say that if Roosevelt, rather than the luckless Mayor Cermak, had been felled that day, there would have been no New Deal to combat the Depression, and - who knows? - a possible absence of U.S. leadership in the war against facism a decade later. The attempt on his life, remember, was just 17 days before FDR was sworn in as president.

What if a president-elect were to die? Would we reconvene the Electoral College? Leave a choice to Congress? Schedule a new national election? The Constitution had been strangely silent on this possible dilemma for nearly 1 1/2 centuries. By almost incredible coincidence, however, a 20th Amendment to the Constitution had been ratified on Jan. 23, 1933, scarcely three weeks before the Miami shooting. The new language provided:

"If at the time fixed for the beginning of the term of the President, the President elect shall have died, the Vice President elect shall become President."

Thus, in the event of Roosevelt's death there in Miami, a former House speaker, John Nance Garner of Texas, would have been sworn in as president on the following March 4. Garner had been a contender for the 1932 presidential nomination, but settled for second place as a condition of the convention's switch to Roosevelt.

But Garner was an uncharismatic conservative who shared none of FDR's aspirations for fundamental change. Through two subsequent terms as vice president, he never sought to hide his contempt for Roosevelt's New Deal as "alphabet soup." In an economically stricken nation with 15 million unemployed, one can only guess how a restless citizenry would have responded to Garner's leadership. Social Security, guaranteed home loans, the Work Projects Administration? His presidency would have pushed for none of these.

A further irony surrounds the drama of Feb. 15, 1933. Mayor Cermak was hustled to a hospital in the car carrying Roosevelt. A marker still on display at the Bayfront site where he was shot quotes Cermak as saying to the president-elect, "I'm glad it was me instead of you."

Possibly true. If so, however, the mayor proved himself a man of truly generous spirit. The fact is, he was no admirer of Roosevelt. As host mayor to the previous year's Democratic convention, Cermak had not been a part of the delegate switch that gave FDR the two-thirds margin needed for the nomination. A typical Chicago politician who had clawed his way to the top through ward politics, Cermak nurtured a natural hostility toward persons of patrician background, such as Roosevelt.

Then why had he gone to Miami? Because Chicago was broke. School teachers were being paid in scrip, with no relief in sight. A well-remembered alderman, bar owner Paddy Bauler, admitted he persuaded Cermak to go begging to the next president for help.

"He wouldn't a gone down there except for me," Bauler later wailed. "And how was I to know some nut would put a shot in 'im?"

Van Deerlin represented a San Diego County district in Congress for 18 years.

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