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Assassination from MLK to Mrs T: Contrast and Convergence in the United States and Britain

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ABSTRACT

State response to assassination conspiracies is a reality behind diplomacy. This examination analyses British and American responses to assassination from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s. It argues the United States and Britain began with very different cultures of assassination. The 1980s was a period of structural convergence driven by practical collaboration: it had little to do with a longstanding 'special relationship', the Second Cold War, or relations between Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

Assassination, and especially the state's response to assassination conspiracies, takes historians straight into the realities behind diplomacy and politics. This examination analyses British and American interaction about assassination from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s. That analysis is then deployed in a comparative dissection of American and British political cultures. In this sense, there are three main arguments. First, and in broad terms, assassination was central to American political culture: it was not central to British political culture. In part, this difference was due to a series of murders in the United States in the 1960s: John F. Kennedy in 1963, Martin Luther King in April 1968, and Bobby Kennedy in June 1968 (Table 1). This argument takes its cue from David Reynolds's observation that these murders had an almost 'alchemical' effect on American political culture. After the murder of Bobby Kennedy, President Lyndon Johnson explicitly denounced the violence of the United States in contradistinction to what he perceived as the peacefulness of 'England'.[1]

For the United States, the 1970s was a relentless decade of looking back at the assassinations of the 1960s. Congressional committees, especially the Senate's Church Committee of 1975–1976 and the House's Special Committee on Assassinations in 1978, manifested this political process in investigations. To give a proper sense of scale, the House Special Committee was the most expensive Congressional investigation since the Second World War: it cost more than double the investigation of the Watergate scandal.[2]

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Britain on the other hand was trying to forget past assassinations.[3] Britain's own rich and violent history of assassination had occurred, in the main, in its Empire.[4] The Empire was no more; and, the British hoped, there were no lessons for a modern nation to learn from the Imperial experience.[5] The American government tended to agree with this assessment.[6]

The United States' effort to deal with its own assassination past also revealed a persistent American reflex, not shared by the British: the desire to turn murders into assassinations. Formally, the American system was very clear as to the difference. In the 1976 case of Orlando Letelier, a former Chilean diplomat assassinated in Washington, DC, United States federal lawyers stated repeatedly that an assassination was 'not an ordinary wrongful death … result[ing] from … the isolated act of a private citizen'.[7] (Table 1) An assassination was a conspiracy.[8] One of the first questions asked in the White House when President Ronald Reagan was shot in March 1981 was: 'is this a conspiracy?'[9] The answer was 'no' in the wake of the attack, but the definitions surrounding assassination were restated by John Roberts, a special assistant to the attorney general working in the White House, and Rudy Giuliani, an associate attorney general at the Department of Justice.[10] By the 'Letelier test', the murders of John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Bobby Kennedy were not assassinations: they were 'ordinary wrongful deaths' caused by the 'isolated acts of individual citizens', respectively, Lee Harvey Oswald, James Earl Ray, and Sirhan Sirhan. The American political system, however, was consistently unwilling to accept the distinction made by the American legal system. Politically, and nominally, these murders constituted assassinations.[11]

Table 1. Assassinations in the Anglo-American sphere between 1968 and 1984 mentioned in the text.

Date	Victim *Attempted Assassination* Assassination	Affiliation	Location
April 1968	Martin Luther King	US civil rights leader	USA
June 1968	Bobby Kennedy	US politician	USA
April 1970	*Chiang Ching-kuo*	Taiwanese dynast	USA
December 1971	*Zaid al-Rifai*	Jordanian ambassador	UK
March 1973	Cleo Noel	US ambassador	Sudan
July 1973	Yosef Alon	Israeli intelligence officer	USA
December 1975	Richard Welch	US intelligence officer	Greece
June 1976	Francis Meloy	US ambassador	Lebanon
September 1976	Orlando Letelier	Chilean former ambassador	USA
January 1978	Said Hammami	PLO representative	UK
July 1978	Razzak al-Naif	Iraqi former PM	UK
March 1979	Richard Sykes	British ambassador	Netherlands
March 1979	Airey Neave	British politician	UK
April 1980	Mustafa Mohammed Ramadan	Libyan journalist	UK
April 1980	Mahmoud Abbu Nafa	Libyan lawyer	UK
October 1980	*Faisal Zagallai*	Libyan student	USA
March 1981	*Ronald Reagan*	US president	USA
June 1982	*Shlomo Argov*	Israeli ambassador	UK
October 1984	*Margaret Thatcher*	British prime minister	UK

Second, the history of assassination demonstrates how the United States and Britain had become even more dissimilar by the 1980s, at least in terms of traditional foreign policy. During that decade, the United States had a foreign policy that happened in the world. As Reagan said to Margaret Thatcher, the British prime minister, about international assassination, 'we are the only Western power in a position to act decisively'.[12] By contrast, Britain had a foreign policy not only made in London, but also one that largely happened in London. Thatcher admitted in 1983, regarding assassination in London by foreign Powers, that she 'was not sure how much influence we can realistically bring to bear'.[13]

When addressing the reality of assassination, Thatcher made no bones about the fact that Britain no longer regarded itself as a Great Power. David Reynolds cautioned in the wake of Thatcher's fall from office that any historians who failed to look carefully at how she thought about international power, swallowing her public rhetoric whole, would find themselves led astray.[14] Thus, one should be beware of merely applying, unmodified, concepts such as his own 'competitive co-operation', developed to explain the dynamics of a different age of Anglo-American relations. The simultaneous co-existence of both tension and amity in Anglo-American relations was not the same as 'competitive co-operation'. Britain was not 'competing': 'convergent contrast' is a better variation on the theme for the 1980s. Consequently, Britain and the United States did exert a considerable influence upon each other in the 1980s when it came to responding to assassination conspiracies. The assassination threat created new similarities. Each Power had much the same problems, they wanted to collaborate, and they came up with like-minded solutions. The relationship in the 1980s was in many respects new: it was not merely the recreation of a past alignment.

Thus, third, the Anglo-American response to assassination constructed a new social reality in a fashion that mere diplomacy could never achieve. This new reality was powerful, not least because it involved the potential life or death of those taking the decisions. A significant number of American and British ambassadors suffered assassination overseas; a foreign intelligence service carried out a car bomb assassination in Washington outside a building frequented by members of Congress; a terrorist group assassinated an MP in the Houses of Parliament in London; Reagan was shot; Thatcher was blown up.[15] (Table 1) The American secretary of state, George Shultz, believed that one of the most likely targets for assassination in the 1980s was a 'traveling Secretary of State'.[16]

To understand this metamorphosis, this analysis disentangles the complex evidence for how the American and British governments conceptualised assassination conspiracies. It then examines how those governments responded to assassination, and the effect that response had on their respective political cultures.

In the late 1960s, it seemed that the United States and Britain could not be much further apart on assassination. The United States appeared to have an endemic assassination problem: Britain had a minor extradition problem.[17] On 4 April 1968, the American civil rights campaigner, Martin Luther King, was murdered in Memphis, Tennessee. A single shot fired from a high-powered hunting rifle killed King, and the unknown shooter disappeared. Two weeks later, the Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI] identified James Earl Ray as King's assassin. On 1 June 1968, it sent a special agent to Europe in pursuit of Ray. Then, on 5 June, the American presidential candidate, Bobby Kennedy, the brother of John F. Kennedy, the United States president assassinated in 1963, was murdered. Three days later, officers of the London's Metropolitan Police arrested Ray at Heathrow airport near London.

By chance, Ray's flight thrust the British government into the centre of the most enflamed series of assassination conspiracies in modern American history. Luckily, for the Harold Wilson government – and especially luckily for its home secretary, James Callaghan – Ray defused a potentially awkward issue in Anglo-American relations by declining to fight extradition. He pleaded guilty to murder, obviating a need for a trial. In interviews subsequently given in prison, he stated categorically that he had acted alone; there was no assassination conspiracy: Ray was an 'ordinary citizen' who had murdered King.[18] The British government was content with that outcome. It remained all too aware of the legal pitfalls of extraditing 'political' fugitives to the United States.[19] The British wanted Ray to be a common murderer rather than an assassin. Few in the American political sphere, however, were willing to let the matter rest. Depending on political viewpoint, many in both the executive and legislative branches, to say nothing of the press, wanted to believe in a 'white power' conspiracy.[20] In 1975, for instance, under pressure from senators, congressmen, and the press, the Department of Justice under the Gerald Ford Administration began formally investigating the possibility that the FBI had 'caused the death' of King.[21]

No transatlantic discussion of assassination in the 1970s could avoid America's decade-long self-laceration on this topic. Such critical self-reflection moved far beyond the question of race to the wider field of whether Cold War American culture had become uniquely 'ugly'.[22] In the words of William Colby, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 'it was like being a prisoner in the dock, there was a real interrogation. All the questions were on assassination, and it was like "when did you stop beating your wife?"'.[23]

In January 1975, Philip Agee, a former CIA officer living in London, published an *exposé* of his erstwhile employer, entitled *Inside the Company: CIA Diary*. According to Agee, the CIA had been in the 1960s, and by implication still was, the main driver of assassination in world politics. The publication of *Inside the Company* in Britain was timed to coincide with the

opening of the enquiry in Washington led by Senator Frank Church into the assassination activities of the CIA.[24] To pre-empt that Democrat-led inquiry, the Republican president, Ford, ordered his vice president, Nelson Rockefeller, to investigate American assassination. Rockefeller reported in July 1975.[25] He concluded on behalf of the executive branch that previous American administrations had been involved in planning assassinations, confirming not only the suspicions of the Senate, but also many of Agee's claims.[26] In November 1975, the Church Committee issued its first public report, confirming in 'infinite detail' United States involvement in multiple assassination conspiracies.[27]

In December 1975, persons then unknown assassinated Richard Welch, the CIA head of station in Athens.[28] (Table 1) The assassination saw Agee accused of revealing Welch's name and role, thus making him a target for one of America's enemies. Many CIA officers thought that they were being set up as the fall guys for the sins of the American state, prompting a pushback campaign within both government and the press.[29] According to the London *Times*'s American correspondent, journalists 'being used by the CIA and its friends to generate a backlash' targeted Agee.[30] In November 1976, the British government, now with Callaghan as prime minister, announced that it would expel Agee using the long-standing powers of the home secretary. The British government claimed that it had come to its decision because Agee was a threat to British security rather than because of the American campaign: very few people anywhere on the political spectrum believed them.[31]

Agee's expulsion created discontent within both the British and American security apparatuses. Although, the Americans were grateful that the British had acted, the CIA's 'comprehensive review of the entire Agee case' concluded, 'all efforts the agency has taken to launch retaliatory legal or administrative action against Agee have come to naught'.[32] As for the British review, it concluded that the Agee case had rendered expulsion from Britain on security grounds nigh unusable. Each time the home secretary used his legal powers to deport a private individual in an assassination-related case, his political appetite for doing so in the future diminished.[33]

Neither Britain nor America was well prepared for the new assassination threat that emerged from the Middle East in the 1970s. The matrix for that assassination threat was Palestinian, first manifested in the creation of a terrorist group known as Black September within the Fatah faction of the Palestine Liberation Organisation [PLO]. Black September's initial targets were Jordanian. In November 1971, it assassinated Wasfi Tal, the prime minister of Jordan and architect of the PLO's expulsion from his country – the eponymous Black September.

.A few days later Black September attempted to assassinate Tal's close political ally, Zaid al-Rifai, then serving as ambassador in London (Table 1). The British government of Edward Heath had no idea who had attempted

a daylight machine gun attack on the streets of its capital. It turned to its American allies who, they believed, would have better information.[34] Washington did supply the British with a list of potential assassins, but it had been equally blind-sided. The American list proved to be fundamentally misleading, since it did not identify Black September as an organisation within Fatah and, instead, concentrated on 'splinter groups' outside the PLO.[35]

For both governments it was the events of September 1972, when Black September massacred Israeli athletes competing at the Olympic Games in Munich, that brought the group into the foreground of their attention.[36] Then, in March 1973, the group captured and executed the American ambassador in Sudan, Cleo Noel. (Table 1) Not only did Black September murder a senior American diplomat, but they also attempted to claim responsibility for previous assassinations. One of the main demands of the kidnappers was the release of Sirhan Sirhan, the Palestinian murderer of Bobby Kennedy, from American 'captivity'.[37]

The director of the FBI, Patrick Gray, subsequently told Congress that in autumn 1972, he had authorised a break-in at the Arab Information Centre in Dallas in the hope of recovering a Fatah 'list of names of men involved in planned assassinations in the United States'. The FBI had acted at the request of the CIA that was in turn responding to intelligence received from Israel.[38] In July 1973, indeed, one of Israel's military *attachés* in Washington, Colonel Yosef Alon, died of a shooting outside his house. (Table 1) Although this murder went unsolved, it was the working assumption of everyone involved in the investigation that the killing was a Black September operation.[39] During 1975, however, both Washington and London concluded that Black September had become dormant.[40] In terms of foreign policy and diplomatic practice, it thus become a regular reflex to 'let sleeping dogs lie'. The situation that the British and Americans believed existed in 1972 – that Palestinian groups other than Fatah conducted assassinations – had actually happened by 1976.[41]

In 1978, however, Callaghan's government finally admitted that over the previous decade, it had misunderstood the nature of assassination. Since the days when Callaghan had been home secretary, the British state dealt with assassinations as a series of isolated incidents. They were conceptualised as an occasional phenomenon somehow distinct from the mainstream of international politics.[42] However, as the British government belatedly acknowledged over the next decade, assassination had become a regular and endemic challenge to both British interests and the broader western political system. The time had come to pore over events since 1968 and retrofit them into an analytical pattern.[43] Having done so, the British state needed to prepare itself for more of the same.[44]

A great deal of credit for the British change of heart over assassination can be given to the Palestinian terrorist Abu Nidal – Sabri al-Banna – and his main sponsor, the ruler of Iraq, Saddam Hussein.[45] The British tended to use the shorthand 'Black June' for this conspiracy, and the Hussein/Nidal assassinations served to bring the British and the Americans closer together, whilst making apparent their essential difference.[46] In a very direct fashion, it was hard for the British government to ignore Black June. In January 1978, Black June assassinated the PLO representative in London, Said Hammami; six months later, Iraqi intelligence assassinated Saddam Hussein's long-term rival, Razzak al-Naif, living in exile in London.[47] (Table 1) The killings in London also put Black June firmly on the American radar, but the sense of a direct threat to America was much less palpable.[48] United States intelligence agencies concluded, 'Abu Nidal has a stronger following amongst Palestinians in Britain than any other country'.[49] Despite increased vigilance, matters only became worse for London. In June 1982, a Black June assassin shot Shlomo Argov, the Israeli ambassador in London – badly wounded, he survived. (Table 1) There seemed no doubt that Britain had a Black June assassination team working for Iraqi intelligence on its hands.[50] The Americans passed over intelligence that Abu Nidal answered to the head of Iraqi intelligence, Saddam Hussein's half-brother, Barzan Tikriti.[51] According to the Americans, Abu Nidal and Barzan Tikriti planned their joint operations in a villa in the suburbs of Baghdad; and in February 1982, Iraqi intelligence had created a large terrorist training camp in Ramadi for Black June.[52]

The Americans were initially surprised that the Thatcher government chose to stick to the line that Saddam Hussein was not the architect of the Argov assassination.[53] In December 1982, it declared that neither the Secret Intelligence Service [SIS], the foreign intelligence agency, nor MI5, responsible for domestic counter-intelligence, had been able to establish 'clear proof of a direct link between the group and the Iraqi Embassy'.[54] The prosecution of Argov's attackers was carefully orchestrated to prove that there had been an assassination conspiracy organised by the 'Abu Nidal group', whilst not mentioning that the assassination weapon had been supplied by Iraqi intelligence.[55] There was little mileage, British officials pointed out, in denying Saddam Hussein a veil of respectability, lest someone 'might reasonably argue … we should do something about it'.[56] Thatcher bit her tongue.[57] There was, nevertheless, another layer to the Anglo-American choreography defining the Abu Nidal conspiracy.[58] Although the Americans were often critical of British pusillanimity, Reagan was in truth reasonably content.[59] Both governments wished to cosy up to Barzan Tikriti, Abu Nidal's controller, as a facilitator of arms sales to Iraq.[60]

With the British adopting a supine posture, the Americans who took the Black June issue to its short-term conclusion.[61] In early October 1983, the State Department issued a public statement that it had 'no reason to believe

that the Government of Iraq has supported acts of international terrorism'. Iraq would thus be eligible to buy arms for use in its war against Iran.[62] In response, Saddam announced that he would end all Iraqi subsidies to Black June and expel Abu Nidal from Iraq.[63] In December 1983, Donald Rumsfeld, the former secretary of defence in the Ford Administration, arrived in Baghdad to inaugurate a new era in cordial Iraqi-American relations. The British accepted that the Baghdad-Black June nexus had been broken.[64] The news was 'very welcome' in London.[65]

However, both British and American intelligence did warn that Abu Nidal at bay probably meant more rather than fewer assassinations.[66] Black June assassinated a British SIS officer in Bombay in March 1984[67]; and the CIA concluded that the 'ANO [Abu Nidal Organisation] has ... since March 1984 ... conducted a series of bombings and assassinations against British targets' in revenge for the British imprisonment of the would-be assassins of Argov.[68]

In September 1977, Roy Mason, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in the Callaghan government, attended the tenth anniversary celebration of the coup that had brought Libya's Colonel Muaamar Qaddafi to power. It was an important symbolic moment. Mason's attendance upon the Libyans signalled to the diplomatic community that the British government had accepted that Qaddafi's well-documented supply of weapons to the Provisional Irish Republican Army [PIRA] had ceased, as he now claimed.[69] At the end of 1979, however, Qaddafi publicly changed tack on assassination once more.[70] His new representatives in London charged that the British were harbouring Libyan dissidents with plans to assassinate Qaddafi. The Libyan government produced a 'target list' of dangerous dissidents in Britain and, at the same time, crowds protesting supposed American policy in Saudi Arabia – with two of Islam's holy sites – burnt down the United States Embassy in Tripoli.[71]

Both the British and Americans assumed that Qaddafi was posturing and that after a flurry of activity, he would want, 'to build a better relationship'. The Jimmy Carter Administration soon changed its mind on that score. In February 1980, it withdrew its *chargé*, Bill Eagleton, because he was at risk of assassination – in an earlier diplomatic dispute, the American ambassador had been permanently withdrawn in 1972. In April 1980, the State Department expelled two Libyan diplomats from the America in 'light of intelligence suggesting intimidation and possible violence against Libyan students in the US'.[72]

The British took no such action, although they possessed similar intelligence. A few days later, a gunman assassinated Mustafa Mohammed Ramadan at Regent's Park mosque. Ramadan's name had been one of those featured on the 'target list' of November 1979.[73] Thatcher's senior ministers all agreed that this assassination had been, 'instigated by the Libyan authorities through their mission here'. They counselled, however, against challenging the head of the

Libyan People's Bureau [LPB], an operative of Qaddafi's secret service, Musa Kusa. Instead, they cooked up a plan to send the head of the Joint Intelligence Committee to Libya to ask Qaddafi to call off his assassins. On the day that Thatcher agreed to the plan, the Libyans assassinated a second dissident in London, Mahmoud Nafa.[74] The British envoy went anyway and, in public, the government described the double assassination as 'harassment'.[75]

In response to the assassinations in London, however, the Reagan Administration expelled six Libyans from the United States because they were part of an 'international campaign of terrorism'. In issuing the order, the State Department noted that 'scores' of Libyan students in the United States had been threatened with 'extermination'.[76] In London, it was Musa Kusa, rather than the British government, who engineered his own expulsion. He told the press, 'Libyan Revolutionary Committees based in Britain had decided to kill two of Colonel Qadhafi's opponents in London and that he approved of this'.[77] At that point, in June 1980, ministers felt they had little choice but to declare him *persona non grata*.[78]

In October 1980, a Libyan dissident, Faisal Zagallai suffered attack in the college town of Fort Collins, Colorado. (Table 1) Despite being shot twice in the head from close range, he survived the assassination attempt; and the shooter proved to be an associate of Edwin Wilson and Frank Terpil, former CIA officers who now worked for Libya.[79] The FBI arrested the would-be assassin. A few days later Reagan approved the decision to close the LPB in Washington. Reagan and his advisors saw closure as part of a plan 'meant to put Qadhafi [sic] on notice that the US is taking a new and more forceful approach to our dealings with Tripoli'. Other parts of the plan included the raising and training of anti-Qaddafi insurgents in Sudan and Egypt and a demonstration of American naval might off the coast of Libya.[80]

In this plan, and its successors, the assassination strand and the geopolitical strand were distinct operations. The State Department director of policy planning, Paul Wolfowitz, was particularly insistent on this point.[81] The assassination of an American ambassador would help 'dramatize' the need for action against Libya, but putting too much stress on assassination risked narrowing, 'the frame of reference of "provocation" and "response" to such an extent that we leave ourselves open to the politically costly charge of having overreacted'.[82] The Reagan government chose to challenge Libya because it had, 'become a strategic threat to US interests both in the Middle East and Africa'.[83] Whereas the British were reluctant to take any significant action against assassination, the Americans saw assassination as a potential excuse for doing so.[84]

In the short term, as even those keenest to smell out Libyan malfeasance admitted, the assassinations did indeed stop.[85] However, the assassination campaign visibly re-started in February 1984 when a 'Committee of Revolutionary Students' took over the LPB in London. As the State

Department intelligence department commented, 'England, with the largest Libyan population in Europe, was the natural place for Qadhafi to make his point'.[86] On 7 March 1984, the British intelligence services issued a specific warning that the 'LPB may have assassins at its disposal and stock of weapons'. However, the actual murder that tipped Anglo-Libyan relations into crisis was that involving a British policewoman who was controlling a dissident demonstration outside the LPB: she was killed by a shot from within the building.[87]

In summer 1985, the Reagan Administration attempted to weave together a coherent account of assassination as the key to understanding contemporary world affairs. This attempt operated on multiple levels: bilateral intelligence exchanges, multilateral diplomacy, and public rhetoric.[88] The account was relatively straightforward. Assassination was not 'simply the erratic work of a small group of fanatics'.[89] In the past five years, it had become, 'an attack on all western civilization', coordinated by malign state actors.[90] Of those malign state actors, Libya was the most vulnerable. Libya was thus the 'crucial candidate for deterrent retribution ... irrespective of whether an immediate linkage' was established between its activities and a particular assassination.[91]

The problem with this account was that very few policy-makers outside the United States accepted it. There was widespread acceptance amongst Western governments that assassination was an escalating threat. No one had any trouble in believing that Qaddafi had numerous Libyan exiles assassinated and tried to assassinate rival political leaders in the Middle East and Africa. However, Libya was not behind assassination on a global level: emulation was as plausible an explanation as direct influence. Most damaging of all, as Thatcher pointed out, America played favourites in defining the global assassination conspiracy: she survived an assassination attempt by PIRA, an organisation that the Reagan Administration was notoriously reluctant to pursue for its crimes.[92]

However, the Libyan regime shift from assassination to mass casualty attacks against anonymous Americans finally tipped Reagan's hand on the decision to launch a direct assault on Libya.[93] On 6 April 1986, a bombing occurred at a West Berlin nightclub frequented by American service members stationed in Germany; blame fell on the Libyan regime. The assassination issue, however, remained important.[94] Most members and supporters of the Thatcher government believed that an American air attack on Libya launched from British soil would increase rather than decrease the risk that 'British targets will be singled out by Libyan hit-men'.[95] Indeed, in the wake of the subsequent American bombing of Tripoli six days after the nightclub attack, terrorist groups in Beirut murdered both their British and American hostages.[96] The British believed that Qaddafi also supplied the PIRA with large quantities of the plastic explosive, Semtex, in direct retaliation for the Tripoli raid: the first attack with the new weapon was the assassination of a judge in Northern Ireland.[97]

The very different British and American cultures of assassination reflected in divergent approaches to security. The apex of the state security apparatus was protection for the head of government, with both Britain and America having long-standing arrangements for protection. The United States Secret Service had been continuously protecting American presidents since the assassination of William McKinley in 1901; the British Special Branch had intermittently protected prime ministers and other senior cabinet ministers since the 1880s. There the similarity ended.[98] Special Branch maintained the same level of protection for most of the twentieth century, something rather embarrassingly revealed by an incident in January 1972. A well-known lunatic in Brussels doused Prime Minister Heath in ink. His sole Special Branch bodyguard was not there.[99] A subsequent review of the debacle revealed that Special Branch protection officers never bothered to prepare overseas trips, as they merely trusted that the local authorities had everything under control.[100] By contrast, the United States Secret Service underwent extensive expansion and modernisation since the murder of President Kennedy in 1963.[101] In 1965, the Secret Service's remit expanded permanently beyond the constitutional chain of command.[102] The permanent protection of former leaders only came to Britain a decade after it was formalised in the United States.[103] In both countries, the extension of security to those outside the chain of political succession immediately moved the issue from one of strict practicality to one of prestige.[104]

The sense of vulnerability to their 'world cities', London and New York, also brought the British and American experience closer together. The attempted assassination of Chiang Ching-kuo, the heir of Chiang Kai-shek of Taiwan, in New York in 1970 illustrated how that city, as home to the United Nations, had become a honeypot for would-be-assassins.[105] (Table 1) It was then the task of the New York Police Department, not the federal government, to protect visiting dignitaries in New York. The Secret Service, renamed the White House Police and its uniformed branch, the 'Executive Protective Service' [EPS], widened its remit. In 1971, Congress gave the president permission to deploy the EPS to New York to protect diplomatic missions.[106]

A few months later, the attempted assassination of Zaid al-Rifai illustrated how vulnerable diplomats and other dignitaries were in London.[107] King Hussein of Jordan withdrew his children from school in England and sent them to the United States because he did not believe the British could or would protect them adequately.[108] In late 1972, the Metropolitan Police and Home Office despatched an investigative mission to America with a view to replicating what the Americans had already done. The British decided to form its own Diplomatic Protection Group [DPG] within the Metropolitan Police.[109] The mixture of practicality and prestige affected diplomatic protection as much as it did the protection of the indigenous political élite. Once established, both the EPS and the DPG found themselves inundated with demands for increased security that they could not satisfy.[110]

Similar pressures came from overseas. In 1976, assassins murdered the United States ambassador at Beirut, Francis Meloy, who had no effective protection. (Table 1) Investigations of the assassination suggested that Meloy's single Lebanese driver-bodyguard had probably been working for the assassins.[111] In 1977, new protocols emerged for the protection of ambassadors under 'extraordinary' threat. They were to have an armoured car and a team of four State Department security agents [SY] in an armoured follow car. Another team, this time of Marine security guards, would deploy with advanced detection equipment such as closed-circuit television cameras and infrared vision systems to create a 'bolt hole' to which the diplomat could flee.[112]

The tipping point in the British case came three years later with the assassination of Sir Richard Sykes, the British ambassador in The Hague. (Table 1) Although Sykes was the Foreign and Commonwealth Office leading expert on Irish terrorism, and the former head of the Permanent Under-Secretary's Department that oversaw the SIS, he was unprotected at the time of his murder by the PIRA.[113] In the wake of the Sykes assassination, British diplomats argued that the so-called security measures proposed by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's Security Department were little more than window dressing: they wanted British special forces personnel from the Special Air Service [SAS] for protection teams.[114] The British government hired a private security firm, founded by former SAS personnel, to take over the security of ambassadors judged to be at extraordinary risk.[115]

As a longer term solution, the British examined the possibility of replicating American SY teams, turning the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Security Department into something more akin to the State Department's Office of Security.[116] In January 1980, however, Thatcher rejected that option. Instead, she decided to terminate the contract with the SAS mercenaries and deploy actual SAS 'guarding teams' to provide security overseas. The responsibility for overseas security thus fell to the British Army and Ministry of Defence.[117] At the same time, Special Branch was expanded to provide bodyguard services to a much wider range of British and foreign dignitaries and diplomats in Britain.[118] A review of the system in 1983 concluded that it had become good at focusing protection on VIPs but was much less effective as far as 'ordinary' people were concerned.[119] For instance, whilst the judge overseeing the Argov assassination trial remained well protected, the jury members, equally at risk, were not.[120]

The British and American streams of security culture definitively crossed and coalesced in 1984. In early summer that year, Reagan visited Britain. The previous year, Vice President George Bush had made a similar visit. According to the British 1968 *Firearms Act*, it was illegal for foreign bodyguards to carry weapons and ammunition in London. The Americans made it quite clear that no bodyguards equalled an end to visits by senior members of the Reagan

Administration. Bush's Secret Service detail had come with some – extra-legal – rules of engagement.[121] During the Reagan visit, it became clear that the Americans were ignoring both the law and the rules of engagement. Three American agents stopped and searched at Heathrow were not only illegally armed under the terms of the Act, but also casually carrying live ammunition in their hand luggage in contravention to the rules. The incident 'did not inspire confidence in the Americans' adherence to the terms of the concession that they were given.'[122]

In September 1984, Geoffrey Howe, the foreign secretary, proposed changing the British system[123]; and a new bodyguard regime that complied with American practice emerged before the attempt to assassinate Thatcher in Brighton the next month. The prime minister signed off on the 'immediate implementation' of the new protocol a few days after the assassination attempt.[124] This attempted killing sealed British convergence with American norms. In response to the attack on Thatcher, Reagan wrote, 'in the context of our special relationship, I have directed that my experts be available to work with yours to assist in bringing the perpetrators to justice. If you wish, we can have our experts discuss further cooperative measures when they convene next month in London'.[125] In this case, the president was not engaging in mere political rhetoric. The offer specifically framed co-operation against the PIRA within the terms of Anglo-American intelligence-sharing agreements. The Reagan Administration had hitherto been shy of intelligence collaboration regarding Ireland, and the British viewed Reagan's offer as a significant breakthrough.[126] Thereafter, the British and Americans held 'semi-annual and very frank' talks on counterterrorism – the Irish threat discussed, although the British were careful not to overdo their welcome on that topic.[127]

The convergence of British political culture with American security culture was even more profound than a secret accommodation. Just before Reagan's 1984 visit to Britain, the White House staff had assured enquirers that he mixed with the ordinary people even less than he had done before the attempt to murder him in 1981. The 'already heavy security which surrounds every President has been substantially increased since the assassination attempt on President Reagan in March 1981', the office of the White House chief of staff, James Baker, wrote; 'there is no such thing as the President "dropping in" any place. The Secret Service ... "security sweep" ... precludes any use of the location for many hours prior to the President's arrival'.[128]

As part of the enquiry into the Brighton bombing, the head of the prime minister's private office pointed out that fundamental change would have to occur in Britain, too. 'A balance', Robin Butler said, 'has always to be struck between security, the PM's need to be seen and meet people, the rights of other members of the public to move freely and the general standard of what is

acceptable by way of security arrangements in this country'. Now, 'in the aftermath of the Brighton bomb' that balance would have to change. The 'new balance' would have been unacceptable 'before the Brighton explosion occurred'.[129] The final agreed British government position was that 'difficult decisions' occurred about the future of security and the ensuing 'changes to established democratic traditions'. The public could no longer expect access to important political leaders.[130]

The standard narrative of Anglo-American relations in the 1960s posits a structural change in relations brought about by the final collapse of Britain as a world Power. This collapse was symbolised by the Wilson government's sudden decision in 1968 to withdraw from 'East of Suez'. The narrative suggests that this profound shift in relations counter-balanced an enduring cultural affinity, variously encapsulated as French President Charles de Gaulle's 'Anglo-Saxons' or Henry Brandon's 'WASPs', underpinned by the maintenance of nuclear and intelligence collaboration agreements stretching back to the 1940s.[131]

The study of the 'realities behind diplomacy', in this case assassination, challenges this standard narrative. It confirms, and indeed emphasises, the change in structural relations.[132] It casts doubt on the idea of cultural affinity. When it came to assassination, the United States and Britain were culturally dissimilar. The assassination wave of the 1970s and 1980s created a new cultural affinity between them. In the security field, Britain was 'Americanised' in the 1980s, not before.

The consequence of this change was the creation of a transatlantic political elite that moved seamlessly within an integrated security sphere. New York and London were the primary nodes not only for the British and Americans themselves, but for many others also. These cities drew 'the protected' for various reasons including finance, education, and healthcare. The core signifier of the elite was protection provided by the state: the elite were those with protection, anyone without protection was, by definition, non-elite. The response to assassination was thus both very practical and highly symbolic: a new social reality constructed.

The construction of this new reality highlighted the profound social and cultural difference between terrorism and assassination. The difference would have come as little surprise to scholars of political violence writing before 1968: traditionally, the two phenomena received different treatment. However, during the 1970s, assassination and terrorism elided in nearly all published governmental and academic studies. Assassination was a tactical choice made by certain terrorist groups. Of course, there was overlap between terrorism and assassination; however, the social reality created by assassination was quite different from that constructed by mass terrorism. The documentary record shows that the British and Americans were fully aware of the damage that assassination was doing to their preferred political

traditions. In particular, it demonstrates that – despite the fascination of American political culture with assassination – adaptation was much more 'traumatic' for the British. Assassination caused a more profound change in British political culture.

Finally, the study of the historical record grants some insight into the still vexed question: does assassination work?[133] In straightforward terms, assassination was not an effective means of changing the foreign policy of either the United States or Britain. It was, however, highly consequential in altering the political culture of both countries.

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