

Trump: Neither Unique nor Irreplaceable

By Gwynne Dyer

Almost everybody who feels obliged to comment about the attempted assassination of Donald Trump is currently insisting that 'violence has no place in American politics', but of course it has. Four US presidents have been assassinated while in office, and three others (now including Trump) have been injured in assassination attempts.

Seven presidents out of 45 have been killed or wounded by a would-be assassin's bullet. That's a higher casualty rate than American soldiers suffered in any war of the past century. Violence plays a considerably larger role in American politics than it does in other developed countries, but it's not clear why.

It can't just be that the murder rate is much higher in America than in other fully developed countries (six times higher than Germany or Britain). The US murder rate is similar to the murder rate in semi-developed countries like Paraguay, Thailand or Russia, but none of those countries has a similar rate of political assassinations.

So, we're left with the default answer. All those American presidents were shot by guns, which are universally available in the United States but rare elsewhere. The US has at least the same share of fanatics and nut-cases as other countries, so what did you expect?

The more interesting question is whether assassinations really change the course of history all that much. Intuition says yes, but historical experience says probably not.

Intuition says that the assassination of Abraham Lincoln in 1865, just after his victory in the American Civil War, delayed the genuine emancipation of American blacks by at least a century.

Realism says the 'reconstruction' of race-based attitudes and institutions, especially in the South, was bound to take three or four generations no matter who was president. Indeed, the job is still not finished.

Intuition says that the Second World War would not have happened if any of the nine alleged assassination plots against Adolf Hitler during the 1930s (mostly by Germans) had succeeded.

Realism says the extreme character of the peace treaty imposed on the losing powers after the First World War made the Second World War inevitable. If not Hitler, then Himmler or Goebbels or Goering. If not the Nazis, then some other far-right German group seeking revenge for the 'unfairness' of history.

Intuition says the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy in 1968, just when he was looking likely to win the Democratic presidential nomination, was a tragedy that prolonged the Vietnam war and opened the road to power for the criminal Richard Nixon.

Realism says that Kennedy might not have won the nomination, that if he did he might not have won the election ? and if he had become president it would probably have taken him just as long to find a face-saving way out of the Vietnam mess as it actually took Nixon. True, there would have been no Watergate scandal, but so what?

And what if Saturday's bullet had hit Donald Trump about two fingers' width to the right and blown his brains out? Half the US population would be enraged and the other half would be secretly relieved, but how much would really be changed?

The Republican Party in the US would still be much farther to the right than it was ten years ago, and it's sheer nonsense to believe that Donald Trump was the sole cause for that slide into crude nationalism and populism.

Boris Johnson in Britain, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Marine Le Pen in France, Narendra Modi in India and half a dozen other populist leaders have been peddling similar falsehoods to similar demographic groups in deniable partnership with the same neo-liberal financial interests for years: Donald Trump is not unique, nor is he irreplaceable.

We are at what may be peak neo-liberalism right now. It began its rise with the elections of Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom in 1979 and Ronald Reagan in the United States in 1980, and for the next four-and-a-half decades the gulf between the very rich and the rest grew steadily wider almost everywhere.

There was nobody to put the brakes on before this process triggered a big political backlash, because the global rich are not that well organized. The victims were always free to vote against it, but mostly did not until the damage became too obvious to ignore. That is starting to happen now.

At this late stage in the cycle, the tactics of subtle misdirection must give way to the cruder distractions of nationalism and populism, and the Trumps and Johnsons of the world get their time on the stage. But they are stereotypes filling roles, not original thinkers with real plans.

As a number of people have pointed out, the graveyards are full of indispensable men.