

How presidential assassinations changed U.S. politics

By History.com, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.03.18

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Image 1. John Wilkes Booth leans forward to shoot President Abraham Lincoln as he watches the play "Our American Cousin" at Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C., April 14, 1865. Image from a mechanical glass slide by T.M. McAllister made around 1865-75. From Wikimedia Commons

Four U.S. presidents have been murdered while in office – all brought down by gunfire. Reforms and a new political direction followed each of these presidential assassinations.

Abraham Lincoln's Assassination Dramatically Changed The Reconstruction Era

President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated just five days after the end of the Civil War.

On the evening of April 14, 1865, Lincoln was attending a play at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C. John Wilkes Booth — a 26-year-old actor, Confederate sympathizer and white supremacist — slipped into the Presidential Box. He shot Lincoln in the head.

Booth and his conspirators had originally planned to kidnap Lincoln to save the Confederate States during the Civil War. As the Confederacy faltered, however, Booth's thoughts turned to murder.

Lincoln died the following morning on April 15, 1865. Vice President Andrew Johnson succeeded Lincoln, and became in charge of the Reconstruction.

Johnson was a former congressman from Tennessee and had once owned slaves. He was the only Southern senator to remain loyal to the Union during the Civil War. As president, he favored being merciful in readmitting Southern states to the Union during the Reconstruction era. During Reconstruction, the United States began to rebuild and bring the country together again.

Johnson believed the Southern states should decide what was best for them. He pardoned most former Confederates for leaving the Union. He allowed Southern states to elect new governments, and many former Confederates were elected. As a result, the new state governments ended up passing laws known as "black codes."

These laws were designed to limit the freedoms of former slaves. Blacks could not decide when to quit their job, for example. Soon, many African-Americans had little choice but to continue working on Southern plantations.

After James A. Garfield's Death, The System Of Political Patronage Changed

On July 2, 1881, President James A. Garfield was shot twice – in the arm and the back. This happened as he entered a railroad station in Washington, D.C.

Garfield was on the way to Massachusetts to give an Independence Day speech at the time. He had been president for just four months.

Garfield survived the initial injury, but died two months later from a severe infection. This was likely the result of the unsanitary surgical practices American doctors used at the time.

Charles Guiteau, the man who shot Garfield, was an unsuccessful lawyer and preacher. He had stalked the president around Washington, D.C. for weeks before the attack. Months earlier he had written a speech for Garfield to use in his campaign. The speech was mostly ignored, but Guiteau had come to believe that it had been essential to Garfield winning the presidential election.

Guiteau wanted a government job as a reward for helping the president. He insisted he should be made an ambassador to France. When Garfield's government denied him the job, Guiteau turned to revenge.

Because Garfield was assassinated by someone who was seeking public office as a reward, Congress felt it had to act. It passed the Pendleton Civil Service Act. This reformed the civil service system and established the principle that federal jobs should be awarded for merit instead of as rewards to supporters. Garfield's successor, Vice President Chester A. Arthur, signed it into law in 1883.

After William McKinley's Assassination, The Modern Secret Service Was Created



Anarchist Leon Czolgosz shot President William McKinley on September 6, 1901. McKinley was shaking hands at a public reception at the Pan-American Exposition, a fair in Buffalo, New York.

Czolgosz concealed his weapon with a handkerchief and shot McKinley twice in the stomach at close range. McKinley died of his wounds eight days later, on September 14.

McKinley's assassination led to better protections for U.S. leaders. Before McKinley's death, presidential security was not very organized. After his death, the Secret Service's role became to protect U.S. leaders.

McKinley's successor was Vice President Theodore Roosevelt who has widely been regarded as the first modern president. He increased the power of the presidency at home and overseas.

John F. Kennedy's Assassination Led To Key Civil Rights Laws



President John F. Kennedy's assassination took place on November 22, 1963. He was traveling with his wife, Jacqueline, in an open-top car in Dallas, Texas. Gunman Lee Harvey Oswald fired shots from the sixth-floor window of a nearby building.

Two shots hit President Kennedy, one in the neck and one in the head, killing him.

Before his death, Kennedy had proposed an important civil rights law. This would outlaw discrimination based on race, religion, gender or national origin. The law was controversial and had stalled in Congress.

His successor, Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, took advantage of the national outpouring of sympathy after Kennedy's death. He got Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act. These laws helped end racial segregation and provided greater protections to black voters.

Quiz

- 1 Read the selection from the section "Abraham Lincoln's Assassination Dramatically Changed The Reconstruction Era."

He was the only Southern senator to remain loyal to the Union during the Civil War. As president, he favored being merciful in readmitting Southern states to the Union during the Reconstruction era. During Reconstruction, the United States began to rebuild and bring the country together again.

Why did the author include this selection?

- (A) to introduce the idea that the Southern states were upset about the Civil War
 - (B) to provide background on Johnson's views that shaped his presidency
 - (C) to explore the steps taken to rebuild the South during Reconstruction
 - (D) to demonstrate that Johnson was loyal to Lincoln and his policies
- 2 Which answer choice accurately characterizes Congress' reaction to the assassination of President Garfield?
- (A) Congress briefly proposed a strict law enforcing background checks on campaign speech writers but it was changed by Chester A. Arthur.
 - (B) Congress reluctantly proposed a law that would change the use of public office as a reward and had to be pushed to pass it by Chester A. Arthur.
 - (C) Congress acted quickly to create and enact strict laws that would oversee medical training and practices to prevent future deaths.
 - (D) Congress felt compelled to create a law that would prevent people who had supported candidates from seeking federal jobs as rewards.
- 3 Read the section "After William McKinley's Assassination, The Modern Secret Service Was Created." How does this section contribute to the article's overall development?
- (A) by providing background information about medical practices that caused a president's death
 - (B) by showing how an assassination affected the protection and power of the presidency
 - (C) by exploring the problems that anarchists had with the power of the presidency
 - (D) by arguing in favor of increased national and international power for the president

- 4 Read the following selection from the section "John F. Kennedy's Assassination Led To Key Civil Rights Laws."

His successor, Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, took advantage of the national outpouring of sympathy after Kennedy's death. He got Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act.

How does this selection contribute to the section overall?

- (A) It illustrates that Kennedy's death led to changing feelings toward the Civil Rights Act in Congress.
- (B) It introduces the controversy and contrasting viewpoints about the Civil Rights Act in Congress.
- (C) It emphasizes the effects of Johnson's hard work after his inauguration as president.
- (D) It elaborates on the problems with inequality that the Civil Rights Act was supposed to solve.

Answer Key

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