

The failed assassination bid on the life of President Andrew Jackson, 30 January 1835

Andrew Jackson, the 7th President of the United States, whose parents hailed from Boneybefore, near Carrickfergus, has many claims to fame. ‘Old Hickory’ (as Jackson was nicknamed on account of his legendary toughness) was the first president to be elected from west of the Appalachians. Unlike his six predecessors, he was not born to great privilege and was the first president to be born in a log cabin. Nor was he an intellectual like John Adams or Thomas Jefferson, the 2nd and 3rd Presidents respectively, who were among the leading intellectuals of their era. As the founder of the Democratic Party, he was the first president to found a modern political party. After his victory over the British at the Battle of New Orleans (8 January 1815)) he was spoken of as ‘a second Washington’ but before 1822 he showed little interest in becoming president. He first contested the Presidency in 1824 and secured election in 1828. He was the first president to expand the role and powers of the presidency, so much so that his opponents bitterly denounced him as ‘King Andrew I’. Jackson was also the first president to be targeted by an assassin. To date he is the one and only US president to physically attack his would-be assassin. Above all, Jackson was the first (and remains, arguably, the greatest) of a long line of Ulster-Scots presidents.

On 30 January 1835 Jackson attended the funeral of Warren R. Davis, a South Carolina Congressman and lawyer, who had died on 29 January 1835. Afterwards, as Jackson was leaving the Capitol, the seat of the US Congress, via the East Portico, Richard Lawrence, an unemployed and mentally ill English housepainter, stepped out from behind a column and aimed a pistol at Jackson’s back. The pistol misfired. Lawrence then pulled out a second pistol which also misfired.

Lawrence was quickly wrestled to the ground by those present, including another Tennessean politician of Ulster-Scots descent, Congressman David Crockett (who incidentally never referred to himself as Davy). The sixty-seven year-old Jackson, a man of fiery temper who had fought dozens of duels, killing at least one opponent (Charles Dickinson in 1806), and ending up with many pieces of lead shot inside him, vigorously laid into his would-be assassin with his cane. Jackson had to be restrained by his aides.

When the police tested Lawrence’s misfired pistols, they worked perfectly, driving bullets through an inch-thick wood plank at 30 feet. To his friends, Jackson’s survival could only be attributed to the intervention of Providence.

Lawrence was brought to trial on 11 April 1835. The prosecuting attorney was Francis Scott Key whose principal claim to fame remains his authorship of the words of 'The Star-Spangled Banner'. After only five minutes of deliberation, the jury found Lawrence not guilty by reason of insanity.

Lawrence's motivation was not political in any conventional or meaningful sense. By the early 1830s Lawrence was clearly mentally deranged and had succumbed to the delusion that he was King Richard III, the last king of England drawn from House of York who was killed at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485 and displaced by Henry VII, the first of the Tudor monarchs. He was convinced that the US government owed him a large sum of money and that the man denying him 'his' money was President Jackson. He believed passionately that when he obtained 'his' money he could assume his rightful place as King of England. For some bizarre reason he blamed Jackson for killing his father in 1832, despite the fact that Lawrence's father had died nine years earlier and had never set foot in the United States.

There have been at least 20 known attempts on the lives of US presidents. To date four have succumbed to an assassin's bullet: Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President, in 1865, James A. Garfield, the 20th President, in 1881, William McKinley, the 25th President, in 1901 and John F. Kennedy, the 35th President, in 1963. By contrast, only one British prime minister has ever been assassinated: Spencer Perceval who was murdered by John Bellingham, a merchant with a grievance against the British government, on 11 May 1812.