

## [H-Diplo Article Review 1140, English on Ball, "Assassination from MLK to Mrs T"](#)

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# H-Diplo ARTICLE REVIEW 1140

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Simon Ball. "Assassination from MLK to Mrs T: Contrast and Convergence in the United States and Britain." *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 33:1 (March 2022): 64-85. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2022.2041808>.

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This compelling article reflects many of the strengths evident in Simon Ball's previous work. He has a capacity for the imaginative and subversive recreation of important historical periods and subjects.<sup>[1]</sup> He repeatedly displays a mastery of wide-ranging first-hand sources. And he has an eye also for ways in which particularizing questions can enrich our understanding of broader historical issues. The current article focuses on assassination (a theme on which he has earlier written very powerfully),<sup>[2]</sup> and considers American and British responses to assassination during the years from the late 1960s until the mid-1980s. It is well-researched, subtly written, and it deserves a wide readership.

The article develops three central arguments. First, Ball argues that, "in broad terms, assassination was central to American political culture" but "was not central to British political culture" (64). By the 1960s, "The United States appeared to have an endemic assassination problem"; Britain, by contrast, did not (67). Second, Ball suggests that, "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" (66). But assassination prompted important engagement: "Britain and the United States did exert a considerable influence upon each other in the 1980s when it came to responding to assassination conspiracies" (66). During the 1970s, Middle Eastern politics in particular had made assassination more globally prominent, and responding to assassination partly changed the dynamics of US-UK engagement. Third, therefore, Simon Ball argues that, "the Anglo-American response to assassination constructed a new social reality in a fashion that mere diplomacy could never achieve" (66).

This is an ingenious thesis. As noted, it reflects Ball's rather mischievous instinct towards undermining existing assumption (here, especially, people's over-attention to the personal links

between Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and President Ronald Reagan, and also the often casually-developed belief in a US-UK Special Relationship). Ball's evidence, indeed, "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" (77). As so often, I came away from reading Ball's work with a sense of how many major historical themes run through and are relevant to it.

Conspiracy theories, whose political roots and pernicious consequences have been well scrutinized by scholars such as Quassim Cassam,<sup>[3]</sup> are repeatedly significant in relation to US assassinations and assassination attempts, and they unveil the degree to which wider political divisions and dynamics are reflected in and refracted through this painful phenomenon. Indeed, a US obsession with conspiracy endures at time of writing, and reinforces Ball's point about the considerable distance that exists between the respective cultures of the US and the UK.

Again, the issue of assassination sometimes occasioning major change emerges through Ball's article. This is true in terms of the way that the UK's approach to security changed in response to the murder of British Ambassador Richard Sykes in The Hague by the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) in March 1979 (75). It is also true, however, of the wider implications of the United States' responses to Libyan assassination (with Ireland again becoming prominent). Colonel Qaddafi's strong support for the PIRA reflected his desire to strike back in response to UK alignment with the US in attacking him (73). In geographical and temporal terms, assassination could generate a long shadow.

It also related to neighbouring phenomena. Ball is alert to the complex dynamics here involving assassination and terrorism:

"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" (77).

One vital point here is that state responses to particular killings (like state responses to non-state terrorism more broadly) can change history far more than do those murders themselves.

This leads to Ball's concluding point about the efficacy of political violence: "the study of the historical record grants some insight into the still vexed question: does assassination work? 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" (78).

This seems to me to raise yet another very important historical issue: the different kinds of success or effect that politically violent attacks actually generate. Ball is surely right that assassination (like so much non-state terrorism) largely proves ineffective in terms of securing its practitioners' central,

strategic goals. But, again like terrorism, assassination can represent tactical-operational success of a high order, it can gain global publicity for a cause, it can prompt responses through which states frequently undermine themselves, and it can achieve for its practitioners a fame or a vengeful result which complement strategic failure.<sup>[4]</sup>

For, in Ball's analysis, assassination prompts changes far beyond the intentions of its agents, and far grander in historical significance than the blood-stained consequences of specific assaults themselves. From US-UK relations, to international politics, to the dynamics of terrorism, to the challenging of assumed historical understandings of the modern period - in all of this Simon Ball uses the lens of assassination to clarify wider historical understanding in valuable ways.

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## Notes

<sup>[1]</sup> — Simon Ball, *The Bitter Sea: The Struggle for Mastery in the Mediterranean, 1935-1949* (London: Harper Press, 2010).

<sup>[2]</sup> — Simon Ball, "The State and the Assassination Threat in Britain, 1971-1984," *Historical Journal* 62:1 (2019): 241-65.

<sup>[3]</sup> — Quassim Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

<sup>[4]</sup> — Richard English, *Does Terrorism Work? A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).