

## ***JOHN HINCKLEY CASE (1982)***

The facts were never in dispute. On March 30, 1981, John Hinckley, Jr., fired six shots at President Ronald Reagan and his entourage outside the Washington Hilton Hotel. The President, Press secretary James Brady, police officer Thomas Delahanty, and Secret Service Agent Timothy McCarthy were hit. All recovered. Hinckley was arrested at the scene and later charged with attempted murder.

With the abortive assassination having been captured on videotape and replayed endlessly on television, Hinckley's trial was expected to be a foregone conclusion— until the defense attorneys announced their intention to enter a plea of not guilty by reason of insanity. In this respect they were greatly aided by Judge Barrington Parker's decision to hear the case under federal procedural rules, which meant that the prosecution would bear the burden of proving Hinckley's sanity beyond a reasonable doubt; whereas, under local rule, the onus would have fallen on the defense attorneys to prove their client insane. This was an important distinction.

### **Stalking Gunman Fires Six Shots**

Senior prosecutor Roger Adelman made his opening address on May 5, 1982. He described how Hinckley had deliberately stalked the President, and that when the time came to act, he assumed the "crouch position" used by an experienced marksman cognizant of his own actions. "With six shots, Mr. Hinckley hit four people," said Adelman, concluding that these were "the central and critical events" of the case.

Chief defense counsel Vincent Fuller made no attempt to deny the truth of what Adelman had said, but he disputed the motivation. He traced the origins of the assassination attempt back to Hinckley's four-year obsession with movie actress Jodie Foster, an obsession that led to prolonged psychiatric treatment. Frustrated by his inability to meet Foster, Fuller said, Hinckley retreated "into this world of isolation." He began stalking President Jimmy Carter, and later President Reagan. On the morning of the shooting Hinckley checked into a Washington hotel and wrote Foster an undelivered letter, clearly outlining his intentions:

Dear Jodie,

There is a definite possibility that I will be killed in my attempt to get Reagan. It is for this reason that I am writing you this letter now... I am asking you to please look into your heart and at least give me one chance, with the historical deed, to gain your respect and love.

I love you forever.

— John Hinckley

The accused's father, Jack Hinckley, delivered an impassioned plea from the witness stand. Referring to the rancor between himself and his psychologically troubled son— enough to compel Hinckley's banishment from the family home— Jack Hinckley cried,

I am the cause of John's tragedy. I forced him out at a time when he simply could not cope, I wish to God that I could trade places with him right now.

Testimony, quite predictably, developed into a battle of medical opinion. Was Hinckley a helpless victim of his own neurosis, or was he, as prosecutors alleged, a willful assassin? Dipping deep into his sizable fortune, Hinckley's father paid the handsome fees of an impressive array of psychiatrists to argue the former.

### **Just How Mad?**

Dr. David Bear of Harvard University described Hinckley's obsession with the movie *Taxi Driver*, in which Jodie Foster had starred, explaining how Hinckley identified with the leading character, Travis Bickle, and his attempt to shoot a presidential candidate. Bickle's later success with an attractive woman, said Bear, convinced Hinckley that "violence, horrible as it is, was rewarded... [he] felt like he was acting out a movie script."

Answering for the government, Dr. Park Deitz characterized Hinckley as a spoiled rich kid, basking in "notions of achieving success and fame in a way that would not require a great deal of effort." Settling on some sensational crime as the easiest means of gaining attention, Hinckley then "thought about a variety of potential crimes and how much publicity each would attract." While conceding Hinckley's abnormality, Deitz insisted that the defendant was never out of touch with reality—the hallmark of psychosis.

Such contradictory and confusing testimony clearly presented enormous problems for the jurors as they retired on Friday, June 18, 1982. They returned the following Monday. Judge Barrington Parker, visibly shaken, read their verdict—not guilty by reason of insanity—to a stunned courtroom. In post-trial interviews some jurors hinted that they had been coerced into this verdict by other jurors. Following acquittal, Hinckley was detained at St. Elizabeth's mental hospital and remains there to the present day.

The most grievously injured victim of Hinckley's havoc, James Brady, lent his name to a bill designed to stiffen gun control regulation but saw his efforts fail to pass the U.S. House of Representatives in March, 1992.

In September 1992 a federal judge ruled that Hinckley's insanity did not absolve him of liability for damages to the three presidential aides wounded in the shooting, all of whom had brought suit against the would-be assassin.

Hinckley's acquittal sparked a vigorous and often misguided debate about the insanity defense. Many sought to curtail its use; others urged total abolition. Sadly, the swell of unrest owed more to the standing of the victims than it did to the facts of the case. John Hinckley had enough peculiarities of mind and behavior to justify the jury's decision.