

# The role of mental disorder in attacks on European politicians 1990–2004

James DV, Mullen PE, Meloy JR, Pathé MT, Farnham FR, Preston L, Darnley B. The role of mental disorder in attacks on European politicians 1990–2004.

**Objective:** The only systematic studies of attacks on public figures come from the USA. These studies de-emphasize the role of mental illness and suggest threats are of no predictive value. This study re-examines these questions through a study of attacks on European politicians.

**Method:** All non-terrorist attacks on elected politicians in Western Europe between 1990 and 2004 were analysed.

**Results:** Twenty-four attacks were identified, including five involving fatalities, and eight serious injuries. Ten attackers were psychotic, four drunk, nine politically motivated and one unclassifiable. Eleven attackers evidenced warning behaviours. The mentally disordered, most of whom gave warnings, were responsible for most of the fatal and seriously injurious attacks.

**Conclusion:** A greater awareness of the link between delusional fixations on public figures and subsequent attacks could aid prevention. Equally importantly, recognition would encourage earlier intervention in people who, irrespective of whether they eventually attack, have delusional preoccupations which ruin their lives.

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## Significant outcomes

- A high proportion of those who attacked European politicians were psychotic at the time.
- Almost all psychotic attackers gave repeated warnings in the form of obviously disordered communications and approaches.
- Recognizing the links to attacks on public figures of both delusional fixations and disordered communication could increase the frequency of earlier mental health interventions. This would prevent some attacks and equally importantly benefit the far larger number of seriously mentally ill people who pester public figures without ever resorting to violence.

## Limitations

- Some cases may have been missed, either because they remain outside of the public domain or were not captured in the search design.
- Psychiatric evaluations were not available in all cases, potentially reducing the ascertainment of mental disorder in the sample.
- Though the existence of prior warning behaviours came to light in a number of cases, it is probable that similar behaviour in other attackers may have passed unremarked or been subsequently suppressed.

## Introduction

The protection of public figures from attack has acquired an increasing priority in our security-

conscious world. The fears for the safety of politicians in particular are often connected to anxiety about terrorist activities, though the largest study to date did not include any terrorist-inspired

attacks (1–3). The few studies of physical attacks upon politicians, as opposed to studies of threats or approaches, come all from the USA (1–7). The most extensive, Fein and Vossekuil's Exceptional Case Study (ECS), though focussing on the President and elected officials, included many incidents involving a range of other prominent people from sports stars to captains of industry. The ECS concluded: 'from an operational perspective, a focus on mental illness may not be useful in preventing assassination,' and further that 'threats were of little predictive value' (1–3). In their series, attackers typically planned over many months and often prepared by practicing with their chosen weapon and reconnoitering the attack site. Emphasis in the study was on identifying those who posed a threat and intercepting them on their pathway to attack.

There are no published surveys of those that have attacked or killed politicians in Europe and the United Kingdom. This study examines all reported attacks on politicians within Western Europe in recent years that were perpetrated by individuals, rather than terrorist groups. Terrorist attacks were excluded in part because the ECS and other US studies did not consider such attacks and in part because the terrorist attacks over the period of the study were confined to the activities of Irish and Basque nationalist groups.

#### Aims of the study

The aim of the study was to characterize those who attack public figures and in particular to explore the possible role of mental illness. The study was also designed to explore similarities and differences with findings reported from the USA, in particular regarding the predictive value of threats.

#### Material and methods

Cases examined in this review are limited to attacks on elected politicians between January 1990 and December 2004 in the Scandinavian countries, Germany, Austria, Italy, Switzerland, Belgium, Netherlands, France, Spain, Ireland and the UK. Cases were identified using public information sources and contacts with security agencies. Court documents or official reports were acquired in some cases, in others we relied upon publicly available secondary sources. Extensive and detailed Internet searches were conducted in English, French, Italian, Spanish and German. Source documents were also obtained in Swedish and

Dutch. A full list of the sources is available from the authors on request.

This survey excludes attacks by regional separatist movements in Ireland and in the Basque country. Between 1990 and 2004, over 500 people were killed as a result of the Northern Ireland conflict. The attacks on elected officials were however limited to the assassination of Ian Gow M.P., the attacks on the Carlton club, favoured by conservative politicians, in June 1990 and on number 10 Downing Street in 1991. Since 1990, the Basque Separatist movement, ETA, has succeeded in assassinating 11 politicians and come close to killing many others. Terrorist groups in other countries such as the Red Army Faction in Germany, the Angry Brigade in the UK and the Red Brigade in Italy were inactive over the study period. The assassination of a politician by professional hit men (André Cools, the former Belgian Deputy Prime Minister, in 1991) has also been excluded.

Data were gathered about the attack, the victim and the attacker. These were recorded in two ways: firstly, as data points within a computerized database and, secondly, in the form of short descriptive case histories. The cases were also categorized according to whether or not the attackers were known to be mentally disordered, were motivated by political ideas or by idiosyncratic personal fixations, whether they gave prior warnings, and by the nature and the seriousness of the attack.

#### Mental disorder

Psychiatric assessments were available in 12 of the 24 cases; in the remaining attackers, assumptions had to be made on the basis of public records.

#### Motivation

Motivation was categorized according to whether the attacker was primarily politically motivated, primarily pursuing a personal quest, or was unknown. Motivation also had a negative – that the attacker was not pursuing a terrorist agenda.

#### Seriousness of attack

Attacks were described in terms of the weapon used and the injury inflicted. It was recorded whether or not proximity to the victim was achieved, proximity being taken as being within 2 m of the victim. In addition, the potential and

actual seriousness of attack was recorded according to the following categorization:

- i) Lethal
- ii) Serious with injury: all attacks causing injury involving potentially lethal weapons (e.g. stabbings, shootings, bombings).
- iii) Serious without injury: attempts at attack with potentially lethal weapons, which did not result in serious injury.
- iv) Little life-threatening potential: attacks that had little potential for serious injury or death (e.g. punches, soft missiles).

The category 'death and serious injury' used in the analyses comprised categories i) and ii).

#### Exclusion criteria

A distinction was drawn between assaults on the one hand and activities that fell within the range of what might be considered traditional political activity on the other. The throwing of eggs and stink bombs at politicians was therefore not considered to be an assault. Examples of such excluded cases include: the pelting of German Chancellor Helmut Kohl with eggs on 11th May 1991, and the throwing of an egg at John Prescott MP, in the 2001 UK general election campaign. Included in the survey are cases where missiles were used which had the capacity to cause harm (solid missiles) or occasion understandable fear (e.g. those containing powder which might be poisonous).

Cases where attacks were made on the property of politicians, rather than their persons, were also excluded. An example is the torching of the car belonging to Hamburg's Minister for Internal Affairs, Hartmuth Wrocklage, on 13th May 1999.

#### Statistical analysis

To determine differences between groups on categorical variables, Fisher's exact test was used to overcome the problems of assumption violation. As sample sizes were small, the likelihood of producing highly statistically significant differences was reduced. Given that the calculation of effect size is independent of sample size, it provides a more comprehensive account of differences where such exist (8). For these reasons, effect sizes were calculated and was calculated for  $2 \times 2$  analyses, the measure used being phi ( $\phi$ ). To assist with the evaluation and classification of effect size, Cohen (8) produced a conservative set

of guidelines, with small = 0.20, medium = 0.50 and large = 0.80.

#### Ethics

This study is based on cases in the public domain. No professional or other relationship has ever existed between the authors and the attackers. The names of the attackers have not been used in the paper, though we are aware that the names of some of the assailants are well known.

## Results

#### Number of attacks

Twenty-four attacks on elected politicians were identified (see Table 1). In one attack (that on politician Nigel Jones), the victim was a third party who attempted to protect the MP. In one involving a mass shooting, the apparent target escaped injury, whilst others died. In a second mass shooting, a group of politicians was targeted. Fourteen of the 24 attacks occurred in the last 5 years of the 15-year period. Attacks occurred in Austria, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Eleven attacks took place in Germany.

#### Victims of the attacks

Eighteen of the cases involved national politicians, one a local council in France, one a regional assembly in Switzerland, and two the mayors of Vienna and Paris (see Table 1). In the two mass shootings (cases 13 and 14), 22 people were killed and 34 injured. A further three attacks resulted in deaths (cases 11, 15 and 19) and eight involved serious injury (cases 1, 2, 5, 9, 12, 17, 18, 20). In eleven, no injury was sustained, but several could have been life-threatening such as a rifle shot off target, a Molotov cocktail that was poorly aimed, and two knife attacks (see Table 1).

#### Weapons used

Weapons were used in 20 of the 24 cases, including firearms in five, a letter bomb, a Molotov cocktail, a samurai sword; eight involved knives; one a cosh; one a photographic tripod; one a liquid-filled balloon and one a powder bomb. Of the five fatal cases, two involved handguns alone, one handguns, an assault rifle

Table 1. Attacks by Individuals on Western European Politicians 1990–2004

Case number, year and country	Intended and actual victim	Position of victim	Place of attack	Attacker age/gender	Weapon	Attack outcome	Employment status of assailant	Previous diagnosis/mental state at time	Motive type	Previous conviction for violence	Warnings or warning behaviours	Legal outcome
1. 26.04.90 Germany	Oscar Lafontaine	Senior SPD leader	Political rally	42/F	Knife	Severed carotid artery	Doctor's assistant	Paranoid schizophrenia/psychotic	Fixated & deluded	Yes. Attempted arson	Years of posters and demonstrating	Hospital
2. 12.10.90 Germany	Wolfgang Schäuble	Interior minister	Political rally	37/M	Handgun	Paraplegia	Surveyor's assistant	Paranoid schizophrenia/psychotic	Fixated & deluded	No	Years of letters and law suits	Hospital
3. 26.01.93 Germany	Björn Engholm	Leader of Social Democrat Party	Political rally	N/K/M	Knife	No injury, was stopped at 1 m	N/K	Paranoid schizophrenia/psychotic	Fixated & deluded	N/K	Threatening letters to politicians	Hospital
4. 02.12.93 Germany	Richard Weizsäcker	German President	Theatre	49/M	Punched to ground	Light bruising	N/K	None/normal	Political extremist	Yes	No, but known neo-Nazi extremist	6-month suspended prison sentence
5. 05.12.93 Austria	Helmut Zilk	Mayor of Vienna	Office	44/M	Letter bomb	Lost two fingers	N/K	None/normal	Political extremist	Yes	Serial bomber	Prison
6. 23.11.95 Germany	Manfred Püchel	Saxony-Anhalt Interior minister	In car	35/F	Molotov cocktail	No injury sustained	Unemployed nurse	Unknown/mentally disturbed at arrest	Fixated	N/K	Threatening letters to Püchel and others	Hospital
7. 26.11.95 UK	Paddy Ashdown	Leader of Liberal Democrat Party	On street	51/M	Knife	No injury sustained	Occasional shop worker	None/drunken	Angry opportunist	No	No	Suspended sentence
8. 02.05.97 France	Philippe Douste-Blazy	Minister of Culture & Mayor of Lourdes	In shop	37/M	Knife	Haemo-pneumothorax	Unemployed	Schizophrenia/psychotic	Fixated & deluded	N/K	Attempted self-immolation in front of town hall	Hospital
9. 1997 UK	Ian McCartney	Minister of State for Trade and Industry	In Labour Party club	30/M	Punched	Broken nose	Bouncer	None/drunken	Angry opportunist	Yes	In context of campaign of harassment	12 months prison
10. 13.05.99 Germany	Joschka Fischer	Foreign minister	Political congress	37/M	Red paint balloon	Ruptured ear drum	N/K	None/normal	Political protest	No	No	3600 DM fine
11. 28.01.00 UK	Intended: Nigel Jones, Actual: Nigel Jones & Andrew Pennington	Liberal Democrat MP	MP's constituency surgery	50/M	Samurai sword	Death of Pennington. Defence wound to Jones	Part-time barman	None/paranoid psychosis	Fixated & deluded	Yes. Assault	Years of letters to various recipients & 50 visits to MP	Hospital
12. 06.06.00 Germany	Angelika Beer	Green Party defence spokesman	In street	N/K/M	Knife	Cuts to arm	N/K N/K	N/K	Political extremism	N/K	Threatening letters & actions believed by same man	N/K
13. 27.09.01 Switzerland	Intended: Robert Bisig Actual: assembly members	Transport official	Zug regional assembly building	57/M	Assault rifle, shotgun, hand guns	14 dead, 15 injured. Mr Bisig unhurt	Salesman	None/uncertain	Fixated querulant	Yes. Assault	Campaign of letters, leaflets & court cases	Suicide at the scene
14. 27.03.02 France	Nanterre city council	Local city councillors	Council chamber	33/M	Semi-automatic pistol. Revolver	8 dead, 19 injured	School caretaker	Depression/'largely incoherent'	Fixated	Drew gun during psychology session	No	Suicide day after arrest

Table 1. (Continued)

Case number, year and country	Intended and actual victim	Position of victim	Place of attack	Attacker age/gender	Weapon	Attack outcome	Employment status of assailant	Previous diagnosis/mental state at time	Motive type	Previous conviction for violence	Warnings or warning behaviours	Legal outcome
15. 06.05.02 the Netherlands	Pim Forteyn	Dutch political party leader	Leaving radio studio	33/M	Semi-automatic pistol	Death	Employed environmental organisation	None/Obsessive-compulsive personality disorder	Fixated	No	No	18 years prison
16. 14.07.02 France	Jacques Chirac	French President	Political parade	25/M	Hunting rifle	No injury: shot missed	Unemployed chauffeur	Disputed at trial, probably schizophrenia	Fixated	Known for violent neo-Nazi activities	Warning on right-wing web-site	Prison
17. 20.09.02 Germany	Hans Christian Ströbele	Prominent Green MP	Street campaign stall	35/M	Cosh	Concussion	Employed	Normal	Neo-Nazi political extremism	Yes	No, but known violent extremist	Prison
18. 06.10.02 France	Bertrand Delanoë	Mayor of Paris	Party at Paris town hall	39/M	Knife	Abdominal wound requiring emergency surgery	Unemployed computer worker	Psychotic	Fixated & deluded	Yes	None known	Unfit to plead, Hospital
19. 10.09.03 Sweden	Anna Lindh	Swedish foreign minister	Department store	25/M	Knife	Death	Unemployed	Paranoid schizophrenia/psychotic	Fixated	Yes	Prison	
20. 12.02.04 Germany	Roger Kusch	Hamburg justice minister	Political rally	41/F	Knife	Stab wound to leg	Unemployed	Psychotic	Fixated & deluded	N/K	Years of complaints and letters	Hospital
21. 18.05.04 Germany	Gerhard Schroeder	German chancellor	Political reception	52/M	Fist	Bruised ear	Unemployed teacher	Normal	Political protest	No	Letters to Schroeder	Suspended sentence
22. 19.05.04 UK	Tony Blair	British Prime minister	House of Commons	36/M	Flour bomb	No injury	Wealthy businessman	None/normal	Political protest	No		£600 fine
23. 02.06.04 Germany	Guido Westerwelle	FCP leader	Political rally	34/F	Hand slap	No injury	N/K	Drunk	Unknown motive		No	1200 Euro fine
24. 31.12.04 Italy	Silvio Berlusconi	Italian Prime minister	Walking in Rome	28/M	Threw camera tripod	Bruise behind ear	Bricklayer	Normal	Angry opportunist	No	No	Charges withdrawn

and a shotgun, one a samurai sword and one a knife (see Table 1).

### Place of attack

Seven of the 24 attacks occurred at campaign rallies and one at a political parade. Nine further cases were in public places, three were in the chambers of elected assemblies, one in a constituency surgery, one in a car, one in a private office and one at an official party to which the public were invited. In all, 22 of the 24 cases concerned public functions or public places (see Table 1).

### Proximity

Twenty cases involved achieving close proximity to the subject, this being defined as coming within 2 m. Those that did not involved a hunting rifle (Chirac), a letter-bomb (Zilk), a paint bomb (Fischer) and a powder bomb (Blair).

### Personal protection

No information is available about the presence or absence of personal protection officers in the cases of Weizsäcker, Fischer and Westerwelle, although their positions indicate that the presence of such officers was likely. Those accompanied by personal protection officers at the time of the attack comprised Lafontaine, Schäuble, Engholm, Püchel, Chirac, Schröder and Berlusconi: Blair is accompanied to the Parliament building by protection officers, but they do not enter the chamber where the incident occurred. Those without personal protection officers comprised Jones, Kusch, Delanoë, Fortuyn, Lindh, Ströbele, Beer, Ashdown, McCartney, Douste-Blazy and the Zug and Nanterre chambers. It is of note that all the fatalities occurred amongst those who were not protected, although the presence of personal protection officers did not prevent eight attacks, including the two most serious woundings.

### Specificity of target

There is evidence in three cases (Lafontaine, Schäuble, Kusch) from the statements of the attackers that the choice of victim was chance, and that another politician of similar status would have been equally acceptable. In a fourth case (Delanoë), the course of events indicates that the attack was impulsive and that the choice of victim was more or less accidental.

### Planning

In five cases, there was no evidence of any prior planning – the attack on Delanoë, where the assailant said he came upon the victim by chance; the killing of Anna Lindh, where the assassin had by chance come across her only 14 min before the attack; the attack on Ashdown; the attack on McCartney; and the attack on Berlusconi. In the case of the attack on Westerwelle, the drunken condition of the assailant suggested that this was also a spontaneous act. In the remainder of cases, the attack was either clearly planned, or involved specific weapons suggesting planning. It is of note that, when planning occurred, it was usually over a matter of only days before the attack.

### Features of assailants

The age range was 25–57 with a mean age of 38.7 (SD 8.8). Five of the 23 assailants were women. In all except one case, the attacker acted alone. In ten cases (43%), there was evidence that the assailant was a loner or social isolate and, in six of these cases, there was evidence of profound social alienation.

### Diagnostic issues

Four cases were reported to have been drunk at the time of the offence with no mention of accompanying mental disorder. In a further six cases, there is no reference to mental disorder having been present in the reports. We have made the assumption that this indicates an absence of significant disturbance.

Thirteen cases had been ascertained as mentally disordered, eight had definite schizophrenia, and two had paranoid disorders of uncertain aetiology, two personality disorder (one borderline, one obsessive) and one a depressive disorder.

### Motivation

Nine attacks arose from coherent, albeit extreme political commitments which had been shared with like-minded enthusiasts. Thirteen were pursuing agenda of an idiosyncratic nature, usually but not always delusional in content, to an obsessive and irrational degree – a phenomenon referred to as ‘fixation’ (9). In two cases, the motivation was unclear. Of those pursuing personal agenda, all were mentally disordered with nine being definitely psychotic and one possibly psychotic at the time of the attack. None of the

Table 2. Associations with pursuing highly idiosyncratic personal grievances and causes ('fixation')

	Fisher's exact <i>P</i> -value, two-tailed	$\phi$
Death or serious injury resulted	0.027	0.54
Attacker a 'loner'	0.000	1.0
Warning behaviours shown	0.000	0.76
Definitely psychotic	0.000	0.76
Definitely deluded	0.000	0.76

political group was known to be mentally disordered.

Of those pursuing personal grievances and causes, none was driven by erotomaniac or morbid infatuations. Compared to the politically motivated, they were more likely to undertake attacks resulting in death or serious injury, to be 'loners', to show clear evidence of being psychotic at the time of the attack, to show clear evidence of delusional beliefs, and to have exhibited some form of warning behaviour (see Table 2).

#### Other aspects of motivation

Five of the 24 assailants were known to be members of militant or radical organizations, though these groups were neither clandestine, publicly advocating violent action, nor officially regarded as terrorist. In 12 cases, there was evidence of intent to kill or recklessness as to whether death resulted. In three cases, the assailant intended to die as part of the incident.

Attempts were made to fit the assailants into the motivational groups suggested by Fein and Vossekul (2). Two cases wished to achieve notoriety or fame, both wishing to die in the attempt, three to avenge a perceived wrong, eight to publicize a perceived problem, four to save the country. These categories were not mutually exclusive. It was difficult to assess which cases wished 'to bring about political change', a concept that remains ill-defined in Fein and Vossekul's account. The remaining seven cases seemed to be motivated simply by varying degrees of inchoate anger. In none of the cases was there any evidence of a previous interest in assassinations.

#### Warning behaviours

In 11 of the 24 cases, there had been some form of warning behaviour shown by the attacker. These involved posters, newspaper advertisements, attempted law suits against the government, chaotic deluded letters to politicians and police,

Table 3. Factors associated with death and serious injury and with warning behaviours

	Associations with death or serious injury		Associations with warning behaviours	
	Fisher's exact <i>P</i> -value, two-tailed	$\phi$	Fisher's exact <i>P</i> -value, two-tailed	$\phi$
Evidence of a mental disorder	0.012	0.57	0.000	0.77
Definitely psychotic	0.036	0.49	0.003	0.65
Definitely deluded	0.036	0.49	0.003	0.65
Politically motivated	0.024	-0.56	0.009	-0.61
Loner	0.005	0.70	0.001	0.74

threatening letters to politicians, leafleting the public, telling friends of their intention to attack and attempted self-immolation in front of the victim's place of work. In some cases, these behaviours had gone on for some years.

Those that presented some form of warning behaviour were significantly less likely to attack for a purely political reason, and more likely to have a mental disorder, to be psychotic and to show clear evidence of delusional beliefs at the time of the attack (see Table 3).

#### Outcome

Of the 23 cases for which the perpetrator was known, eight resulted in the admission of the attacker to psychiatric hospital for treatment. Six of the assailants were given a prison sentence. Three were given a fine, and three a suspended sentence. One committed suicide at the scene and one a day after the attack. One avoided any judicial sanction, the charges being withdrawn after the intervention of the victim.

#### Associations with death and serious injury

All those who killed politicians were loners ( $P = 0.038$ ,  $\phi = 0.52$ ), who showed evidence of mental disorder ( $P = 0.046$ ,  $\phi = 0.46$ ). Attacks resulting in death were associated with an aim to avenge a perceived wrong ( $P = 0.016$ ,  $\phi = 0.68$ ). Attacks resulting in either death or serious injury were likewise associated with evidence of mental disorder, the presence of psychosis and of delusional beliefs, the perpetrator being a loner and the absence of a political motive (see Table 3).

#### Discussion

Despite the limitations of the methodology employed, a general picture of non-terrorist attacks on Western European politicians emerges. Some of

the most senior politicians in Western Europe have been subject to attack during the 15 years in question. Fatal attacks are rare, but have included a government minister, a leader of a political party, an aide to a member of parliament, and two mass killings. A total of 25 people died in the 24 incidents studied. A minority of cases involved firearms, the favoured weapons being knives. The great majority of the attacks occurred at public functions or in public places. Politicians appear to be particularly at risk during election campaigns.

Almost all the fatal and serious attacks were made by those who had a history of mental disorder, most of whom were deluded at the time of the attack. The levels of violence in general and homicidal violence in particular is higher among those with serious mental disorders (10, 11). The over representation of psychotic disorders is, however, even more pronounced among these attackers of politicians. Unlike attacks on media stars and other celebrities, the attackers were not motivated by misplaced infatuations or erotomanic delusions. In contrast to mentally ill attackers, those from politically motivated groups were all pursuing an understandable, if extreme, set of ideas which were shared with others, and though they might identify intensely with the ideas, they were not dominated by personal or self-referential themes.

Twelve of the attackers had obsessive preoccupations with a cause which they pursued in isolation and to the exclusion, not just of other more mundane priorities, but of any common sense or self interest. This group had a state of mind we have referred elsewhere to as 'fixated' (9). The lawlessness of these fixated individuals is not usually a calculated resort to the extra-legal, but the reflection of an obsessive preoccupation which leads to such a loss of sense of proportion that damaging or killing others seems justified. Political extremism in contrast usually emerges in interactions among a group on the fringes of the normal political process. Political extremists who take individual violent action do so as an extension of their beliefs, but in doing so they usually separate themselves both from the group to which they belong and from the group's programme. This is different from terrorism, which though also fostered within groups has a shared focus on extralegal action and the politics of personal action and spectacle (12–14). Terrorists realize the central strategy of the group in taking violent action, whereas political extremists in resorting to individual violence alienate themselves from the group to which they had been, however loosely, attached. The fixated, by contrast, have never been integrated into a like-minded group

and their resort to violence is not a calculated adoption of violence as a tactic but an extension of an obsessive pursuit blind as to wider consequences.

In 12 of the 24 cases, there had been some form of advanced warning, usually in the form of communications rather than approaches. An important feature about such warning behaviours was that, for the most part, they did not constitute direct threats to an individual, but rather evidence of gross disturbance and psychopathology, which failed to illicit any systematic risk assessment or management response.

Two of the fatal cases involved mass killings. In one of these (case 13), the perpetrator was a querulant, i.e. a pathologically persistent complainant (15), and in the other, a social isolate fixated on retribution against politicians (case 14). It is of note that, in a continent where the possession of firearms is not widespread, both had licenses for the weapons with which they carried out their attacks, in one case despite his having previously pulled out a firearm in front of a mental health worker.

Fourteen of the 24 attacks occurred in the last 5 years of the 15-year study period. This may be an artefact of the data collection method, in that the explosion in information and Internet sources in recent years might have increased the probability of attacks being recorded. However, the possibility exists that attacks on politicians in Western Europe are becoming more frequent.

In this sample, there was sufficient evidence in eight of the 24 cases to establish the presence of psychotic illness, and in a further four cases, there was serious mental disorder which may have been psychotic. In the ten cases in the sample which resulted in death or serious injury, six attackers appear to have been psychotic at the time of the attack, with some information to suggest that two more may also have been psychotic. Fein and Vossekuil in the USA (1–3) virtually excluded a role for mental illness by arguing that such disorders disable problem-solving abilities and render individuals incapable of mounting an attack. What Fein and Vossekuil consider constitutes a true mental illness reflects legal rather than clinical criteria. The reasoning of the attackers in this series revolved around beliefs such as the existence of underground killing factories, being subjected to pain and lust transmitters, and that children were being nailed to crosses by the Ku Klux Klan. Such ideas in Europe would be regarded as strong evidence for psychosis. These probably belong, however, to the category of reasoning that Fein and Vossekuil refer to as



‘technically rational’ and not therefore for them necessarily indicative of insanity.

Clark (7) also dismissed psychiatric explanations for attacks on politicians claiming they are reductionist and represent a bias on the part of psychiatrists, as well as politicians, to conclude that such attacks are evidence of irrationality, a view that, he claims, is subsequently verified by the highly selective and questionable presentation of so-called symptoms of mental illness. Our study does not support such dismissive scepticism about the role of mental illness in attacks on politicians.

Fein and Vossekuil (1) state: ‘Assassinations, attacks and near attacks, almost without exception, are neither impulsive nor spontaneous acts.’ This survey however includes five instances of impulsive and spontaneous attacks – on Silvio Berlusconi, Bertrand Delanoë, Anna Lindh, Paddy Ashdown and Ian McCartney. The attack on Guido Westerwelle was also probably spontaneous in nature. Planning was reported in 80% of the US cases, and was known or could be assumed in 72% of this sample. However, whereas Fein and Vossekuil report in most cases planning that went on for ‘weeks and months or even years’, planning when it occurred in this sample appeared to take place over a matter of days or a week at most.

Considering the frequency of attacks, it was noted that the ECS recorded 34 cases of attack or assassination (not all necessarily involving elected politicians) over a period of 47 years, which equates to an annual rate of 0.7. The European survey looked at 24 cases over 15 years, an annual rate of 1.6. The relative populations of the countries considered taken together are not significantly different from that of the USA. There are more central governments, but these equate to a lesser number than those of the individual US states, which were included in the US survey. It is possible that the inclusion threshold in the US study may have been set at a higher level or that attacks may be more common in Europe, or in both countries in more recent years.

In contrast to the US ECS, there were no cases in the European sample of attackers who were trying to achieve a loving relationship with the target or express rage at the supposed rejection of their love. The difference probably reflects the presence of celebrity victims in the US sample. In the US sample, 44% were known to have had a previous interest in assassination, but this appears to have been absent amongst the European attackers. There were also differences in the place of attack. In this sample, 22 out of the 24 cases occurred in public places or at public functions.

In the ECS sample, 11% were apprehended whilst travelling to the target. Of the remaining cases, 57% occurred in the person’s home or office. This presumably reflects the mixed target composition of the ECS sample.

In the European cases, as in the US study, we could find no evidence of cases where the attack was preceded by a direct threat to kill the individual eventually attacked. A striking finding, however, was that 11 out of 24 attacks were preceded by obvious and often flamboyant warning behaviours in the form of threatening or bizarre communications to politicians, public figures, or police forces. This was similar to the US sample, where 77% had a history of verbal or written communication about the target and 63% had a history of ‘indirect, or conditional threats about, or to, the target’. In the ECS, this does not appear to be accorded central importance. However, our view of the matter is different; attention to mental illness and to disorganized communications and approaches, even if they do not incorporate direct threats should, we believe, be central to threat assessment and management. Treating and following up psychotic individuals who have made repeated attempts to communicate with or about a public figure potentially removes them as a threat, without the necessity to wait for them to pose a specific danger. It also removes the need to identify an eventual target, it being a finding in the ECS and in our survey that the precise target that an attacker chooses will not infrequently depend on availability and chance rather than reflecting those they have previously harassed or appeared to be preoccupied with.

It is likely that the differences between the ECS approach and that advocated here is one of legal framework. In a country such as the USA, with limited access to health care for a significant proportion of the population and limited legal powers to detain the mentally ill, the possibilities of early intervention are limited, even with obviously mentally ill people behaving in a manner which raises real concern. In much of Europe by contrast, the existence of comprehensive mental health services, together with mental health laws with a lower threshold for compulsory detention and treatment, enables early intervention through a mental health route.

The incidents discussed are unlikely to constitute a complete census of attacks on elected politicians during the period in question. We are aware of a number of attacks and attempted attacks where a decision was made to avoid publicity and as a result forego prosecution. However, it is likely that all attacks involving

senior figures or serious injury which are in the public domain are included above.

The details about the cases are limited to those available in the information sources. Whereas detailed psychiatric reports were available in several cases, others relied upon secondary public information sources. The motivation of the assailant in many of the cases was clear, but in a number it had to be inferred. This was in particular the case with the attackers of Bertrand Delanoë, Anna Lindh and Jacques Chirac, as well as the mass shooting at the Nanterre Council Chambers. In the Nanterre incident, there were no detailed evaluations after the offence, because the assassin died the following day. In the cases of the attackers of Jacques Chirac and Anna Lindh, the nature of the court process influenced the manner in which motivation was presented by the defending lawyers, as well as determining the exploration of diagnosis. In legal systems where the issues of criminal responsibility and insanity are central to psychiatric disposal, these become the focus of psychiatric evaluation. In these two cases in particular, the presentation of motive in both cases came to focus on mental instability itself rather than any other factors. Nor is it the case that motive need ever become entirely clear, either to the perpetrator or the observer.

The conclusion of the ECS (1–3) was that ‘many, if not most, attacks on public officials and public figures are potentially preventable’. This study comes to a similar conclusion, but suggests very different strategies of risk management.

In contrast to the US study, this study suggests there is utility in separating the cases into mentally disordered and politically motivated. The primarily politically motivated group give little if any advance warning. Defending against this group falls back on personal protection with a concentration on public events which present an opportunity for attack. In contrast, the mentally disordered, who are responsible for the bulk of the lethal and seriously injurious attacks, do evince warning behaviour. The majority of these warning behaviours were not subtle in nature, nor should they have been easy to overlook if anyone was paying attention to such manifestations.

The conclusion must be that, in the mentally disordered cases, many of whom were actively psychotic, some of the attacks might have been prevented. This would have required greater awareness of the link between delusional preoccupations with public figures and subsequent attacks. The vast majority of those with delusions centering on public figures and supposed governmental malfeasance never act on their beliefs. A few do.

The important fact is that, whether or not they ever attack, all of these people are deluded and in need of treatment. As a group, many suffer severe disruptions to their lives as a result of their delusional preoccupations (9). They are all in need of treatment. That that treatment may occasionally prevent an attack on a public figure is merely a fortunate byproduct of good mental health practice. The setting-up of a system involving joint risk assessment and management by mental health workers and police of cases which bring themselves to attention through unusual communications or approaches could result in the prevention of a significant proportion of attacks on elected politicians. This is especially so in many European jurisdictions where the configuration of public health services combined with the flexibility of mental health law render the potential of such a joint-working arrangement particularly effective. The single greatest benefit from such cooperation would be the earlier recognition of mentally ill people who as a result of falling under the baleful influence of delusional preoccupations are ruining their lives.

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