

HUNTING HARRY

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

On Nov. 1, 1950 — 75 years ago — two armed Puerto Rican nationalists attempted to kill President Harry Truman. They were intercepted by Secret Service guards and White House police officers in a brief but deadly shootout at the Blair House, across Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House, which was undergoing renovations at the time. Truman was unharmed.



NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Final Fireside Edition

Spokane Daily Chronicle

THE WEATHER
Considerable cloudiness tonight; partly cloudy tomorrow; little temperature change. Expected low tonight, near 30; high yesterday, 47 at 2:30 p. m.; low today, 32 at 4 a. m.; 33 at 10:30 a. m.; 34 at 11:45 a. m.; 35 at 1:30 p. m.

65TH YEAR, NO. 35.

36 PAGES

SPOKANE, WASH., WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 1, 1950.

PRICE FIVE CENTS.

PHONE MADISON 1121.

PRESIDENT ESCAPES BULLETS OF ASSASSINS; 5 MEN SHOT



These three wire service photos ran atop the front page of that night's Spokane Daily Chronicle.

One of the attackers, Oscar Collazo, lies wounded at the base of the steps to the Blair House.

The other attacker, Griselio Torresola, was shot dead and fell into shrubbery in front of the Blair House.

A crowd gathers in front of the Blair House on Pennsylvania Avenue. Truman and his family were living there while the White House was undergoing an enormous renovation project.

A PLOT TO KILL THE PRESIDENT

There was a nationalist movement in the mid-20th century in Puerto Rico for independence from the United States. Unfortunately, the movement turned violent at times.

In late 1950, two Puerto Rican nationalist extremists decided to draw attention for their movement by assassinating President Harry Truman. This was despite the fact that Truman supported greater Puerto Rican autonomy.

The two would-be assassins, Griselio Torresola and Oscar Collazo, arrived in Washington, D.C., on Oct. 31, 1950, and set out to check out their target. They knew the president had bodyguards. But how many? How heavily armed would they be? All they carried were pistols: Collazo had a Walther P.38 and Torresola carried a Luger.

They were stunned to learn from a taxi driver that the White House was closed for renovations and had been for nearly two years. Truman, his wife

This is the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery craft and decorative art museum

The Lee House had been combined with the Blair House in 1943.

This was Truman's bedroom window, from which he tried to watch the gunfight.

The Blair House is across Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House.

Later, Collazo would admit they weren't even sure Truman was at home. After all, the West Wing of the White House was still open. Truman typically walked across the street, accompanied by his Secret Service guard, to work.

Nov. 1, 1950, was an unseasonably warm day in Washington, D.C. Truman was indeed at home. He had stripped down to his underwear and was napping in his bedroom on the second floor when the attack began at about 2:20 p.m.



Leslie Coffelt

Torresola ambushed White House policeman Leslie Coffelt. Other guards opened fire, killing Torresola. Coffelt had taken three bullets. He'd be the only guard to die that day.

By this time, the gunfire had awakened the president, who stuck his head out of his open window to see what was going on. Guards yelled for him to "get down."

The entire shootout had lasted 38.5 seconds. Collazo would serve 29 years in prison for the attack.



The West Guard-house, where Coffelt was killed.

The gunmen approached from two different directions, hoping to shoot their way into the main entrance of the Blair House.

The East Guard-house

and daughter were living across Pennsylvania Avenue in what was essentially a presidential guest mansion, the Blair House.

They quickly drew up a plan: Collazo would approach the East Guardhouse

and Torresola the West Guardhouse, draw their guys and open fire on the guards. Once inside, they'd shoot their way upstairs to where they presumed they could find the president.

AND THEN, THREE AND A HALF YEARS LATER ...

In March 1954, four more Puerto Rican nationalists arrived via train at Washington, D.C.'s Union Station, ate a leisurely lunch and then strolled across the street to the Capitol Building to the visitors' Gallery of the House of Representatives.

The leader of the four, Lolita Lebrón, was asked by a security guard if she had a camera. Cameras were not allowed in the House gallery. She had no camera, but she and her colleagues were carrying automatic pistols.

On her signal, the attackers unfurled a Puerto Rican flag, yelled "Viva



U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Puerto Rico libre!" and opened fire into the House chamber.

More than 30 shots were fired. Five Congressmen were hit. One, Alvin Bentley, was hit in the chest. Heroic 16-year-old congressional pages carried him to safety. Two of those pages — Paul Kanjorski, wearing glasses and Bill Emerson, pointing in the right of the photo — would go on to become congressmen themselves.

No one died this time. The four attackers were caught, sentenced to 70-year prison terms, and, in the late 1970s, returned to Puerto Rico.

Sources: "American Gunfight: The Plot to Kill Harry Truman and the Shoot-Out That Stopped It" by Stephen Hunter and John Bainbridge Jr., "Hunting the President: Threats, Plots and Assassination Attempts — from FDR to Obama" by Mel Ayton, "The Secret Service: The Hidden History of an Enigmatic Agency" by Philip H. Melanson with Peter F. Stevens, "Truman" by David McCullough, National Archives, the White House Historical Association, Harry S. Truman Library & Museum, Ghosts of D.C., WTOP News, History.com