

**THE HISTORY CHANNEL® PRESENTS:  
10 DAYS THAT UNEXPECTEDLY CHANGED AMERICA™**



***Murder at the Fair: The Assassination of President McKinley***  
(SEPTEMBER 6, 1901)

On the sweltering afternoon of September 6, 1901, hundreds of people waited in line to meet President William McKinley at the Pan American Exposition in Buffalo, New York. The exposition was the first world's fair of the 20th century, and the popular president had come to the fair to make a speech and celebrate America's achievements in technology, culture and recent emergence as a world power. McKinley, age 58, planned to shake hands with the public for just ten minutes, but within that brief time, a young man named Leon Czolgosz reached the front of the line and shot the president twice, at point-blank range. Despite doctors' initially positive prognosis, McKinley died a week after the shooting, shocking the nation. Upon McKinley's death, Vice President Theodore Roosevelt was sworn in as the youngest U.S. President in history.

The 28-year-old Czolgosz was the son of working-class Polish immigrants. A self-proclaimed anarchist, Czolgosz was extremely disaffected by the growing social and economic divide within the United States. The assassination traumatized and deeply saddened the nation, but also revealed an undercurrent of public dissatisfaction brewing beneath America's surface optimism. Smart, impulsive and extraordinarily charismatic, as McKinley's successor Roosevelt ushered in a new era in American politics, embracing the nation's desire for economic reform and regulation of big business. With insights from scholars and striking recreations, this documentary is an excellent opportunity for teachers to introduce students to this dramatic event in American history and the rise of progressive politics which followed.

**Curriculum Links:**

*Murder at the Fair: The Assassination of President McKinley* would be useful for American History, American Culture, and Politics courses. It would be an excellent addition to course units on the Gilded Age and the rise of Progressivism. It is appropriate for middle school and high school students. It fulfills the following standards as outlined by the National Council for History Education: (1) Values, beliefs, political ideas, and institutions, (2) Conflict and cooperation, and (3) Patterns of social and political interaction.

**Key Terms:**

*Students should identify the following terms. Visit [www.mirriamwebster.com](http://www.mirriamwebster.com) for definitions.*

Alienated  
Anarchism  
Progress  
Alias  
Infrastructure  
Reform  
Hierarchy  
Arbitrary  
Epitome  
Buckboard  
Facetiously

### **Comprehension Questions:**

1. *What was the purpose of World's Fairs such as the Pan American Exposition? Why were they called the "timekeepers of progress"?*
2. *How would you describe the personality and political contributions of President McKinley?*
3. *Why do you think Leon Czolgosz was so unhappy with his life? Do you think his dissatisfaction revealed larger problems in American society? Discuss.*
4. *Why, according to the historians who speak in this documentary, did Czolgosz decide to assassinate President McKinley? Do you agree with their arguments?*
5. *What do you think the symbolism of Czolgosz use of the World's Fair as the place to assassinate McKinley? Why was McKinley so fond of world's fairs?*
6. *How did people in the United States react to the assassination of President McKinley? What do you think they expected and feared in the wake of his assassination?*
7. *McKinley's assassination paved the way for Theodore Roosevelt to become president. Many felt that Roosevelt was not suited for the job. Compare and contrast the presidencies and personalities of McKinley and Roosevelt.*
8. *What was the fate of Czolgosz after the assassination? Do you think his sentence was fair and reasonable, given the historical context? Discuss.*
9. *What connections do you see between the economic and social despair Americans such as Czolgosz felt and the popularity of Theodore Roosevelt? Discuss.*
10. *What long-term impact did the assassination of President McKinley have on America?*

### **Extended Activities:**

1. The 1901 Pan American Exposition in Buffalo, New York was an international event which revealed both the progress and shortcomings at the core of world politics. At the library or online, have students research the Pan American Exposition. Then, divide them into small groups and have each group create a visual postcard announcing and advertising the event. Each group should choose an official motto for the Exposition and images that they think capture the essence and significance of the event.

2. President William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt were two very different leaders who were both popular and influential leaders. Ask students to compare and contrast the two leaders and create presentations of their findings. Students should pick quotes that represent the ideas of each leader and their significance in American history. These presentations can be in bullet-point format, on poster-board, or in essay form. Students should share their findings with the larger class.
3. The period between 1895 and 1905 was not only the turn of the century, but a turning point in U.S. and world history. Ask students to choose one year from this decade and prepare a presentation of the significant events which took place during the year of their choice. Lead students in an overall discussion of the state of the U.S. and the world at the turn of the twentieth century.

### **Primary Source Exploration:**

President William McKinley delivered his Second Inaugural Address on March 4, 1901. In his speech, McKinley outlines the progress the nation had made during his first four years in office, and he highlighted the challenges that lie ahead. Ask students to read the excerpt below, and consider the questions which follow.

“WHEN we assembled here on the 4th of March, 1897, there was great anxiety with regard to our currency and credit. None exists now. Then our Treasury receipts were inadequate to meet the current obligations of the Government. Now they are sufficient for all public needs, and we have a surplus instead of a deficit. Then I felt constrained to convene the Congress in extraordinary session to devise revenues to pay the ordinary expenses of the Government...Then there was deep solicitude because of the long depression in our manufacturing, mining, agricultural, and mercantile industries and the consequent distress of our laboring population. Now every avenue of production is crowded with activity, labor is well employed, and American products find good markets at home and abroad.” (President William McKinley, Second Inaugural Address; March 4, 1901)

1. *How does McKinley describe the progress made by the United States during his first term in office? What do you imagine were the major challenges the United States faced when he was first elected in 1896?*
2. *Do you think most Americans would agree with McKinley’s assessment that economic conditions had improved in the U.S.? How might Leon Czolgosz respond to this quote?*
3. *What do you think was the biggest challenge the United States faced in 1901? How would you describe the state of U.S. and world politics at the turn of the century?*

### **Resources:**

#### **Books**

McGerr, Michael E. *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920*. (Oxford, 2005).

Vowell, Sarah. *Assassination Vacation*, (Simon & Schuster, 2005).

Rauchway, Eric. *Murdering McKinley: The Making of Theodore Roosevelt's America*, (Hill & Wang, 2004).

Rydell, Robert. *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916*, (University of Chicago, 1987).

### **Web sites**

A Smithsonian site dedicated to the President McKinley:

[http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/presidency/timeline/pres\\_era/3\\_685.html](http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/presidency/timeline/pres_era/3_685.html)

An excellent teacher's site on the McKinley assassination:

<http://www.rcps.org/dis/teachers/swope/PresidentialAssassinations/mckinley/McKinley.htm>

A useful website on the Pan American Exposition in Buffalo:

<http://library.bfn.org/local/pan-am.html>

An online exhibit on Theodore Roosevelt from the National Portrait Gallery:

<http://www.npg.si.edu/exh/roosevelt/>

