

EDITORIAL

IT APPEARS THAT . . .

On that fateful day of November 22, 1963, I was placidly sitting in a classroom listening to my professor of physical geology expound upon the wonders of our earth. Suddenly the classroom door opened, the chairman of the department walked in and conferred briefly with my professor who then informed us that the President of the United States had been shot. Class was dismissed. Within a few minutes I was listening to the news as reporters tried to piece together the disjointed bits of information associated with this terrible incident. President John F. Kennedy was pronounced dead, and the suspected assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, was arrested in a theater and charged with the assassination of the President of the United States.

One aspect of this incident was especially intriguing. I was already aware of the belief in the inexorable 20-year cycle of United States presidents dying while in office. The evidence appeared quite convincing to some, and President Kennedy's death added one more cycle to this series. Why has every United States president who has been elected on a 20-year cycle since 1840 died while in office? The cycle is as follows:

Harrison	Elected 1840	Died while in office
Lincoln	Elected 1860	Died while in office
Garfield	Elected 1880	Died while in office
McKinley	Elected 1900	Died while in office
Harding	Elected 1920	Died while in office
Roosevelt	Elected 1940	Died while in office
Kennedy	Elected 1960	Died while in office
[Reagan	Elected 1980	—————]

On a superficial level, this series appears to be beyond the realm of ordinary coincidences, but upon further investigation, I found that the argument is much less convincing than it first seems.

For instance:

- a) The cycle does not work prior to 1840. Jefferson was elected in 1800 but did not die while in office; neither did Monroe who was elected in 1820.
- b) It is not always the president's first term of office that qualifies him for the 20-year cycle. McKinley qualified by his second term, and Roosevelt by his third.
- c) The precision of the cycle seems weak. Dying while in office does not necessarily take place during the presidential term that qualifies for the 20-year cycle. Lincoln qualifies by his first term of office, but he died

during his second term in office. Roosevelt did not die until his fourth term in office.

- d) One president who does not fit at all into the cycle also died while in office. Elected in 1848, Taylor died apparently of exposure the following year.
- e) It may not be such an unusual event for a president to die while in office, because presidents tend to be men of maturity and thus more subject to the health problems of old age. Also, they are prize targets for assassins. Four of the seven presidents in this cycle (Lincoln, Garfield, McKinley, and Kennedy) were assassinated.

If objections *a*, *b*, and *c* above are considered to be valid, we find that only 4 of 9 United States presidents qualify for the proposed 20-year cycle. Objection *d* suggests a further weakness in the so-called cycle, since a president died while in office out of the cycle. Scrutiny weakens the evidence, and I remain completely unconvinced that there is any validity to this cycle — although at first it appears quite striking.

Appearances can be deceiving and, combined with other factors that influence our decisions, can lead to disastrous results. Scholarly activities are not immune from this pitfall. One of the more outstanding examples in the history of science is the so-called discovery of N-rays by the French physicist Blondlot. In 1902, while investigating the question of the polarization of X-rays, Blondlot noticed that a spark seemed to be brighter under the influence of a new kind of radiation which appeared to behave differently from the normal X-rays. He named these new rays “N-rays” in honor of his university and city, Nimes, France. His entire original system of identification and analysis was based upon his observations of the brighter appearance of the spark, and not on its length which could have been more objectively evaluated. Blondlot was not the only person taken in by appearances. The effect of N-rays were reported “by at least forty people and analyzed in some 300 papers by 100 scientists and medical doctors between 1903 and 1906” (Nye 1980, p 125). These rays were found to emanate from animal muscles, the digestion of albuminoids and by plants in the dark. It was also found that intellectual activity increased the production of N-rays by the nervous system. This new radiation improved visual perception and was used to explain spiritualistic phenomena. The study of N-rays soon became “a minor industry” (Broad & Wade 1982, p 113). Furthermore in 1904 the French Academy of Sciences, the official spokesmen for French scientists, bestowed its coveted Le Conte award on Blondlot.

All was not well, however. Several scientists were unable to reproduce the supposed results. These skeptical individuals were usually accused of having eyes insensitive to the increase in spark intensity and other apparent luminous effects of the rays. Soon a growing number of scientists became doubtful. Their doubts were enhanced in 1904 by R. W. Wood of Johns Hopkins University who, in the role of a sleuth, visited the laboratories at Nancy to investigate the

authenticity of the rays. While Blondlot was demonstrating the spectral qualities of the rays in a darkened room, Wood surreptitiously removed an aluminum prism from the spectroscope. Blondlot reported identical results when the prism was removed (Wood 1904). During his visit Wood also found other unexplainable results, showing that the data could be readily contrived. This incident, which was reported in English, French, and German science journals, did not immediately end the defense in support of N-rays. Research and discussion on the apparent effects continued for several years, although interest soon dwindled. At present the so-called N-rays have only historical interest.

Important lessons can be learned from both the apparent cyclic pattern of United States presidents dying while in office and from the purported N-rays. Man is obviously prone to draw conclusions based upon his superficial observations or those of others. One of the most important lessons to be learned is to be less gullible. The remedy is to be more thorough before drawing conclusions. In the study of origins where authentication of past events is unusually difficult, thoroughness is essential.

REFERENCES

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