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November 1, 1950 -- an unseasonably hot afternoon in sleepy Washington, D.C. At 2:00 P.M. at his temporary residence in Blair House, President Harry Truman takes a nap. At 2:20 P.M., two Puerto Rican natives approach from different directions. Oscar Collazo, a respected metal polisher and family man, and Grisilio Torresola, an unemployed salesman, don't look dangerous, not in their new suits and hats, not in their calm, purposeful demeanor, not in their slow, unexcited approach. What the three White House policemen and one Secret Service agent guarding the president cannot guess is that under each man's coat is a 9mm German automatic pistol and in each head, a dream of assassin's glory.

American Gunfight Details

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From Reader Review American Gunfight for online ebook

Howard Anders says

About as thorough a treatment of this incident as one could expect, delving into great depth on intimate background knowledge on all participants. The authors appear to have run down every loose thread. As someone who lived and worked in Latin America for several years, I came away very, very impressed with the depth of sympathy and understanding the authors show for Puerto Ricans, and the Puerto Rican Nationalist Movement. Done with the assistance of John Bainbridge, the book nevertheless reflects Mr. Hunter's usual style, to anyone familiar with his works of fiction. Sometimes the amount of detail is overwhelming, to the point of tediousness; however, it is well worth the effort to read past these areas for an intimate glimpse of a bygone era.

Steve says

Well, thank God that's over. There are some books that are fun to read and others that I finish reading just because I started them. This book fell in the latter category. The subject seemed so promising. I kept waiting for the purpose of the book, the big surprise to arrive. It never did. The authors kept implying that there was big news on the horizon. But, really, the attempt on Truman was not just the action of a couple of loonies, but was part of the action of a larger movement? This is so important? Big deal! The point I assume the authors were really making was that no one else is as smart as they are. And I must admit, the research and the details were impressive. I think they are probably right, but. so what? At times, the writing was even compelling. But, overall, this was a long run for a short slide.

Chandler says

How do you take a 30 some seconds shoot-out and make a 300 pg+ book. Two Puerto Rican Nationals attempt to take out Truman, and come close. This book is very heavy on details of the individuals at the shoot out, in a very Paul Harvey kinda way, but more like Paul Harvey with ADD. The actions that occurred on this day helped shape the Secret Service into the more modern protection force we know today. Interesting to learn about the day to day activities of President Truman, he had a habit of walking early every morning, often without his security detail. If you put this book down for a stretch, it may be difficult to keep the characters straight. Also the details of their wives and family members seemed to be just a bit much for characters that I really don't have much of an interest or emotional connection with. This is a conspiracy book, so please more conspiracy, less character study.

Al Young says

Hunter, best known for his Bob Lee Swagger (from which the movie Shooter was taken) was for many years my go-to Airport book author (I had the idea in my head to mention this even before defFrog's excellent post about airport reads). Unfortunately, I have lost faith in Hunter the last few years (a feeling that appears to be shared with many Amazon commenters)

However when I saw this book, I was immediately interested in it, even before seeing Hunter's name on it. The book takes a moment in history that has been forgotten (and interestingly, was forgotten quickly at the time). It also is considered a bumbling attempt to kill Truman by two inept would-be assassins.

Hunter and Bainbridge discount the arguments by explaining what happened, and how close Truman really came to being killed. It is an interesting and unknown story. Without giving too much up, the incident gave us lessons that would change modern policing and the Secret Service and if learned at the time (which they weren't) would have changed everything. The authors explain how since the event, the thinking has changed but only after years of hard lessons learned. It also explains the actions of the two Puerto Ricans who were trying to kill the President, and knowing the background will change your view.

I give this a recommendation because it's a fascinating story and it's a part of history you never read about. It's also a very quick read. That said, this book is far from perfect. For starters, as interesting as this story is, there really isn't much more than 100 pages of material. Hunter expands it out to 380 pages and much of that is notes. For all that Hunter adds, it feels quite stretched.

The other problem it has is that Hunter isn't sure whether to make this a nonfiction article or a novel. The book goes back and forth to some distraction. Additionally, the novelish part only serves to remind you how others would have told the story (The 50s era and pulp-ish elements would have been amazing if James Ellroy was telling the story).

In any case, my complaints don't take much away from a book I enjoyed.

Jess says

I appreciated the minutiae of this book - I can't remember the last thing I read that was this thoroughly researched. The would-be assassins and Secret Service men alike were vividly drawn, and the background on everything from Puerto Rican Nationalism to the delicate inner workings of a semiautomatic pistol was bizarrely fascinating. What did NOT work was the inconsistent style. The tense shifted often, sometimes mid-sentence, as the author tried to figure out how best to capture the immediacy of the event and the intimacy of the players. One chapter gives stream-of-consciousness-style attempts to articulate the thoughts in each person's head. I skipped the rest of the chapter after the first couple - it was like a mid-80s Stephen King novel.

Rhuff says

How different the world might have been had these two assassins succeeded in their fanatic mission. The authors' own attempt at imitation-Capote-esque non-fiction dramatization likewise misses at times, resulting in enough obvious padding to stop a bullet on its own. But the larger implications are worth it: here is President Harry S. Truman, Leader of the Free World, commencing his cold war crusade against the other superpower bloc, laying the foundations of the modern military-industrial, national security state we all know and love. And it almost came crashing down in its cradle, thanks to two gunmen from a peripheral, forgotten colony, flitting into Washington under all the political radar. That this particular act of terrorism failed depended on chance, and the responsible personnel being on their toes - two factors not at play on 9/11/01, for instance.

Wendy says

Usually, Stephen Hunter books are engrossing page-turners. The only reason I kept turning pages here was to finish the damn thing on principle. Good lord. The attempted assassination is definitely an interesting event, but it could have been written about comprehensively in 50 pages max -- I have no idea why it took 350 to circle around the same 38.5 seconds over. And over. And over. And over. Plus, the format was exasperating - here's a 3.2 second snapshot of the battle, omg this guy has cocked his gun and is about to shoot another guy and....new chapter! Let's delve into first guy's childhood some more. And then second guy's childhood. And then back to the battle, for a couple more seconds. Ridiculous cliffhangers gave me whiplash, but only slowed the story down and made me want to give up on it repeatedly. Bummer; I had hoped for better.

Stephen says

In "American Gunfight," the authors' duty to assemble a historical record around a forgotten news event sometimes gets in the way of what is otherwise a gripping story.

This true tale of two committed Puerto Rican nationalists, who failed to assassinate then-President Harry Truman, renders the high hour of American imperialism. In its depiction of duty-bound, patriotic law enforcement officers, its revisits a type of American male mostly departed from the scene.

The gunfight designed to shed light on the plight of oppressed Puerto Rico, and gain the larger world's attention, lasted less than a minute. The authors make up for this lack of material with portraits of the few players who starred in the violent drama.

For the most part, the renderings are too in-depth and arrest the narrative's progress. The same goes for the detailed discussion of guns, their types, and the ways they are fired.

Less nettlesome and better-crafted is the background information on the political fortunes of Puerto Rico and how these spawned the would-be assassins.

It is a testimony to the long-ago happening's allure that a reader probably wades through the sea of superfluous facts, to see how something they already know turned out, turned out.

If you follow.

Nonetheless, Mssrs. Hunter and Bainbridge have done yeomans' work in creating a one-stop and shop nonfiction record of how things went down all those years ago.

Had they not dedicated themselves to the effort, this not-unimportant tragedy, its victims and heroes, would have been lost to the dustbin of history (as they say).

Though, at times, taxing their own narrative, they triumph with the scholastic challenge "An American Gunfight" posed.

Best for readers really looking into the history of Puerto Rican politics.

Bill says

Written more like a detective novel than a history book, *American Gunfight* is about the attempted assassination of Truman by Puerto Rican revolutionaries. Overall it was interesting, although it could have been shorter as the end dragged on a bit.

Matt says

When I was a kid, my only claim to precociousness was of a historical variety. I knew obscure historical figures, and I enjoyed dressing up like them on Halloween. One of my heroes was White House Policeman Leslie Coffelt. On November 1, 1950, Coffelt was on duty when two Puerto Rican nationalists - Oscar Collazo and Grisilio Torresola - attempted to assassinate President Harry S Truman. Coffelt was shot three times, yet as he died, he somehow stumbled from his guardhouse and fired one shot at Torresola. This single bullet - of the dozens fired in a wild gunfight - blew off half Torresola's head.

I first read about Coffelt and the "Battle of the Blair House" in a book called *The Story of the Secret Service*. This book was part of a series called Landmark Books, published by Random House in the 1950s (and also, incidentally, cited as an inspiration for Stephen Hunter and John Bainbridge's *American Gunfight*). The Landmark Book series was dedicated to a jingoistic, right-of-center, hagiographic, redemptively violent history of America. In Landmark's story, the men were men (see, "white" and "armed"), the women were quiet (save for the volume devoted to Susan B. Anthony) and the blacks were mostly forgotten (save for a rousing story about Booker T. Washington).

American Gunfight purports to be a critical new analysis of the Blair House, shorn of legend and myth. Really, though, all it does is clear up a couple errors and bend over backwards to convince the reader that Harry Truman was in actual, mortal danger (I was not convinced in the least - despite Hunter's cartwheels on this subject, Oscar and Grisilio still come off as Quixotic bumbler who thought they could shoot their way into the Blair House and kill a President they weren't even certain was in the Blair House).

Really, all that *American Gunfight* manages to accomplish is an extension of the Landmark Book series. Except this time, it's got 100% more swears!

The book is poorly written. There's no way around that. At times the prose is macho stream of consciousness, and I imagined it being narrated by a scotch-soaked, racist old grand-pappy chomping a cigar. At other times, awkwardly and embarrassingly, the prose veers into this tortured pseudo-eloquence. I want to call it purple, but that implies some level of skill, which is lacking here. However, you know the authors are trying to be profound when they start breaking their sentences into many small clauses.

To be sure, the authors go to great lengths to tell the entire story from all sides. They worship the White House Police and the Secret Service, yet at the same time, are sympathetic to the Puerto Ricans and give a semi-thorough, if flaccid retelling of the context that caused these two young nationalists to try to storm the Blair House. My gratitude at this inclusion was tempered by the fact that the authors aren't very good at

writing about people. Despite all their research and interviews, no one comes alive.

Moreover, despite the slenderness of the book, much of *American Gunfight* seems like padding, as though the authors were getting paid by the word. It is filled with needless and inane details that continually bog the story's forward momentum. Do you want to know the seat number for Truman's daughter when she took the train to Washington? It's in the book. Did you want to read about an interview with the daughter of the man whom Truman awarded the Medal of Honor on the day of the Blair House attack? It's there as well. This is not a minor quibble; the sheer deluge of worthless minutiae transforms what should have been a sleek, exciting story (I think this could've been a great long-form piece in Esquire or the New Yorker) into a slow, bulky, ponderous read.

While the humans in this book are empty ciphers, the authors are on surer ground when it comes to their guns. In a way, parts of this book remind me of the Tom Clancy techno-thrillers I loved in my youth. There are times when Hunter's descriptions of the pistols used in the attack border on a kind of lewdness; it's like NRA porn.

Of all the Luger snatched up by GIs in blown-out tanks or pillbox rubble or ruined farmhouses, this was one of the best. It's sleek blue with almost no cosmetic imperfections, other than identifying scratches and numbers in the finish performed by law enforcement personnel for establishing chain of custody...It shows almost no wear; it could have left the factory yesterday. The checkered walnut grips are deep, sharp, and grainy; the magazine grip, two little finger-sized dish-outs in the magazine base by which the empty magazine is pulled from the gun, have been polished to a high, silver sheen, giving the gun a glittery highlight that plays off the slide stop, itself also polished a bright silver. It's a beautiful gun, for people who recognize beauty in guns...With its sleek, forward-leaning design, the streamlined rake of its grip, the checked knurl of its toggle action, it's almost art nouveau...It lingers in the imagination.

Maybe I don't "recognize the beauty in guns." Or maybe I was getting a little touchy due to Hunter's sneering asides about liberalism, political correctness, and how real men play with guns, smoke Lucky's, and drink black coffee (Hunter repeats on several occasions how one of the Secret Service officers called coffee "Black Magic," like I give a crap). Or maybe I felt this book was written by an oaf making a fetish out of violence, and violence's tools.

I guess that would constitute my own sneering aside. Ahem.

Moving on. The earlier reference to Tom Clancy does Tom Clancy a disservice. Clancy never wrote a line of dialogue that wasn't pure exposition or pure garbage. But the man could tell a story. No matter how many loose ends he started with, he always tied them into nice little knots by the end. He was the master of cross-cutting and editing, and to this day, I believe his atomic bomb sequence in *The Sum of All Fears* is one of the most gripping, pulse-pounding scenes ever.

Hunter and Bainbridge should've studied Clancy. For all my nitpicking, the grand failure of this book is in its editing.

According to the authors, the shootout lasted 38.5 seconds (you finally learn near the end, after this number has been thrown out a dozen times, that the timing is based on a time-motion analysis that followed a worker

who heard the first shot, then ran towards them). This is a short, eye-blink even, and certainly not enough to fill out a 300 page book, no matter how many inanities you throw on the page.

That doesn't stop the authors from trying. They give a literal bullet-by-bullet account of the shooting, complete with rampant overuse of onomatopoeia (outside of the old Batman television series, I've never seen "BANG" or "BANGBANGBANG" appear so often). Now, I actually sort of enjoyed the description of the gunfight. Sure, it took a lot of novelistic indulgences, especially when it came to the thoughts of dead men, but the authors were very careful to separate the facts from the inferences they drew. Indeed, many of the authorial inferences make a lot of sense, and help explain the actions and reactions, the causes and effects, of a fierce, confusing, short-lived firefight.

The problem: the gunfight is interspersed with a half-dozen chapters of needless digression. For example, there is a chapter on the first ten seconds of the fight, when Oscar went up to Officer Donald Birdzell, pulled the trigger, then tried to figure out why his gun wasn't firing. Then the chapter ends and there is an entire chapter on Birdzell's life. Then you'll get back to the next ten seconds, and right when your heart starts to race, your pulse skips a beat, and even a Democrat has to admit to the seductively exhilarating alive-ness of a gunfight, the chapter ends, and you are treated to another chapter detailing the life of another member of the President's protection detail. (However honorable and brave these men were, they led ordinary, unexceptional lives, and these chapters were horribly dull). Then you get back to the gunfight, and just when you think the book is going to hit its stride - finally - the authors cut away again, to the biographies of Oscar and Grisolio (so essentially, we only learn about these men after they start dying).

Here's a question: How do you sap all the narrative power out of a gunfight, which by definition is exciting? Chop it up into little slices, and divide the slices with sluggish, over-detailed biographical chapters. The authors even shoe-horn in a ridiculous chapter about a Dr. Rhoades, who while serving in Puerto Rico, wrote a drunken letter in which he talked about giving Puerto Ricans cancer (he didn't do this, obviously). The authors state, baldly, that this was a motivating factor for Grisolio. What?

Then, after about 135 (!) pages of this gun-tease (to continue my strained, violence-as-sex theme), we finally get to the heart of the gunfight: Les Coffelt verses Grisolio Torresola (who, as the authors admiringly point out, did an amazing job shooting people: three hits, including one kill, which was better than the trained policemen and Secret Service). Then, instead of giving a lucid account of Coffelt's brave last stand, the authors turn this heavily-researched book into a novel (cue onomatopoeia). The last few seconds of the fight are told in a series of one sentence, stream-of-conscious, un-punctuated paragraphs, which is supposed to mimic the fevered mindset of the participants:

Oscar spins and shoots and spins and shoots BANGBANGBANG it's all a mess a blur he can't get up the steps now because bang bang bang shots come at it the whole world it is shooting at him and he shoots back crazily just putting the gun between him and them bang bang when will it stop it is so loud he cannot get up the stairs they are all shooting at him he sees them there he shoots again BANGBANG the gun jumps hot in his hand like it's alive then it's dead, it's broken the thing on top is stuck no it's empty reload RELOAD

It's not even worth mentioning the propriety of such passages in a work of history, because it's just so stupid. I mean, if you're going to do this, do it well. This didn't make me feel like I was inside the head of a man under great duress; I didn't feel like I was seeing the gunfight in all its adrenaline-fueled confusion, terror, and excitement. To the contrary, I felt like I was reading a fifteen year-old girl's text messages.

This was a greatly disappointing book. Of course, in fairness, my disappointment was exacerbated by Hunter's reflexive hero worship. The last, embarrassingly awkward pages of this book find him strutting and tutting about WARRIORS and how they aren't understood and how we need to appreciate them and blah blah blah. It takes nothing away from uniformed men and women to say that his view lacks all nuance.

Hunter is clearly of George Orwell's persuasion: "People sleep peaceably in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf." If you're of that persuasion, anyone who doesn't believe in that is naive. This always leads to a false dichotomy (if you're not with us, you're against us): you're either a patriot who picks up a gun and walks a post (even if you only do so with a ribbon magnet you put on your car) or you're a lily-livered head-in-the-sky dreamer (known colloquially as a "Frenchman").

Without denying the necessity of violence in certain situations, this either/or worldview never ceases to ignore causality - that certain things happen as a consequence of other things. In other words, that violence triggers more violence. Oddly, Hunter and Bainbridge go to great lengths to present Oscar and Grisilio as rational and motivated - if misguided - young men. That sensitivity, though, is lost amid the macho posturing.

This is a book to be enjoyed while sitting on a rocking chair on a porch in the woods with a jug of moonshine next to you and a shotgun leaning against the wall and maybe a notch in your belt from that time you shot a hippie.

Otherwise, it's not worth the read.

Phil Grant says

If the subject interests you, find another book. This one is 60% fluff with a back and forth storyline that makes it seem like a bad Tarantino script.

Owen says

This book is 384 pages about 34 seconds. As you might imagine, it's detailed. The level of attention to those details is impressive, and, just as impressive, the author manages to string out the suspense for almost the entire book.

The book covers an issue and period of time most Americans have either forgotten about or just never knew (I'm pretty sure I'm in the second camp). It's a plot by Puerto Rican nationalists to kill President Truman at the end of 1950. It's kind of blended/overshadowed by a later assault by the same group (different men, though) on the US Capitol, one that was better planned (it could hardly have been worse) and cost more lives. This plot erupted in a gunfight right in front of the White House, across the street at Blair House (there is even a plaque commemorating one of the men who died there, which I saw a few weeks ago). The plot is the end of a failed coup in Puerto Rico, led by one of those firebrand leaders (whom the author terms 'the Maximum Leader' in what has to be one of those phrases that just doesn't translate) that riles people up, sends them off to their deaths then surrenders meekly when it doesn't work out.

The author gets a little carried away with his fascination for what are, frankly, pedestrian weaponry- "deadly

steel-jacketed bullets, fired by powerful, German-manufactured automatics"- c'mon, dude, they had 9 mils. Which actually led to a pretty shocking fact- the Secret Service protection detail had 5 shot .38 revolvers! So, in a battle for the life of the leader of the Free World- as the Cold War heats up, with the Korean War happening- it's two guys with 9mm vs 4 guys with .38 revolvers!

Even more shocking to current residents of the DMV would be the access to public figures and buildings, ample parking ... and lack of traffic! Truly a simpler time. When Presidents could take naps during the day and go for walks in the morning.

Actually, that is where the complete lack of planning for this attempt showed. President Truman woke up at 6AM and went for a 30 minute walk, ever day, on the same path, his only protection being his walking stick and the two Secret Service agents huffing and puffing behind him. Had these assassins put in even a day of surveillance, they would have seen that killing the leader of the Free World would have been as easy as waking up at 5:30 and standing on his route with a gun. They wouldn't have just succeeded- they might have gotten away.

As it was, these two would-be assassins met on a bridge in New York, acquired guns that at least one of them had never shot (which showed, when he failed to load a round into the chamber before his first shot during the attempt), and took a train to DC. They spent the night in a hotel, then marched off with their terrible plan. By chance, at least they had learned that Truman was staying in Blair House, across the street from the White House, while renovations were being done on the White House, a fact told to them by a cab driver eager to help a few tourists. This was a political stunt, ordered by a man who would surrender meekly in Puerto Rico as his revolt failed, not a calculated attempt to kill the President of the US. Terrifyingly, it almost worked.

I won't spoil the actual shootout for you, since it's interesting and worth reading. I will say that the difference between a full load and quarter load of powder in a .38 probably prolonged the fight, and enough people survived to tell the story. For students of 20th Century American history, or people interested in what happens in a gunfight, this is worth reading.

Owen Gardner Finnegan

Zane Ecklund says

This book was...not good. Interesting subject matter but 8th graders have written book reports more concise and organized

Nicole says

Although laden with poor word choices and sometimes lame attempts at creating fictional scenarios that tried to give life to non-fictional characters in a story that centers around 38.5 seconds of action, I liked it. At time, the poor writing made me cringe, but I still got through it pretty fast. The authors did a good job at showing both sides of the story, making you feel for both the Secret Service Agents and for the Puerto Rican Nationalists. Their point was: They were all men. And they made that point well.

It was definitely interesting enough and a quick read. A good non-fiction read for those of us interested in American History, but find it hard to get past those text-booky passages. You have to separate fact from fiction in this book, but it isn't that hard.

The only thing I didn't understand was why the authors made Cressie a bad character. Perhaps I will raise this as a question.

Checkman says

Not a bad book, but the subject is too brief for a *book*. It's an event that many have never heard about and it should be written about so that people can know what happened, but this wasn't the best approach. As another reviewer has noted the attempted assassination would have been better as an in-depth historical journal article. In book form there isn't enough so the authors use padding - mainly the Puerto Rico liberation movement and the various personalities that were on both sides of the movement in the 1930's and 1940's.

The topic of the Puerto Rican liberation movement is a topic that does need a book, but with *American Gunfight* we get a book length subject (the liberation movement) used to pad a magazine article (the attempted assassination). It's not a terrible book, but it isn't a great marriage either.

The other problem with *American Gunfight* is it suffers from an identity crisis. Mr. Hunter is a well known novelist and his style shines through which can be a problem in a non-fiction historical/journalistic style book. To combine a novelistic approach with a straight forward journalistic approach makes for a jarring read. As a result the book became something of a chore to get through - which wasn't what I was expecting.

I'm going to hold onto my copy. There are parts that I have found myself referring to. And the chapters about the actual gunfight and the immediate aftermath make for some good reading. But I can't recommend this book unless you just want to know more about the assassination attempt.
