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Protecting The President

While the Warren Commission's report on President John F. Kennedy's assassination carried no surprises, it nevertheless stirred up new discussion about what Congress ought to do to provide more protection for presidents appearing in public.

The proposal to make murder of a president or vice president a federal crime (most murders now fall within state jurisdiction) is a worthwhile one, and calls for action by Congress, but it can hardly be called a protective device. It looks toward punishment rather than prevention. The big problem is how to ward off evil.

What can Congress do in that regard? Very little that has not already been done. It could, of course, certify some other agency than the Secret Service to guard the president. It might single out the Federal Bureau of Investigation for the task, but the FBI has been criticized, too, in the Warren report. The Central Intelligence Agency? Objections to that agency

as a presidential protector would be legion.

At first glance there is some attractiveness to the proposal to set up an entirely new corps of security officers whose sole job would be protecting the president. The bloom disappears quickly when it is considered that such a special corps would be subject to double jeopardy in the matter of interagency rivalry. It would not have the resources available to either Secret Service or FBI. If these agencies had difficulties coordinating their security precautions in relation to the president, how would the introduction of still another independent unit do more than further hamper proper coordination of effort?

The truth is that most of the reforms which were needed probably have been effected in both Secret Service and FBI procedure. Any additional corrections certainly can be accomplished by executive order. The best role Congress can play would seem to be that of a watchful conscience, rather than a maker of new laws.

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PAGE 6

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