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Guns and Leaders

After a decade in which three public men—John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy—were gunned down in open view and less than four years after a bullet maimed Gov. George C. Wallace for life, the news that a young woman came close to murdering President Ford looms as almost too awful for intelligible comment. The impulse is to despair for the country or to frame condemnations or to draw conclusions that are too large to withstand rational scrutiny.

Such responses are basically attempts to evade the unpalatable fact that a plague is upon us before which we seem virtually helpless. It does little good to rail futilely at our violent heritage. Because of it, violence has come to be viewed by too many as a neat resolution of the world's untidiness. Though more than half the people in the nation desire effective gun control, a powerful and vocal minority demands easy access to firearms as some solution to problems of crime and violent societal divisions. Loose gun laws do nothing to solve those problems or to provide effective protection for the law-abiding; but they do make it easier for deranged people to acquire the firearms that threaten the lives of this nation's leaders.

Without the requisite will to control our raging and simplistic impulses, Americans are left to eerie and ineffectual musings. One would hope, for example, that those tempted to seek the instant celebrity given to a successful assassin could see Sirhan Sirhan in his isolation cell in the wing for the mentally disturbed in California's Vacaville Prison and contemplate his life there.

One might also speculate upon how different this nation might now be if the scourge of assassination had not descended upon it. And finally, one is left with the shuddering sense of how much the automatic edge of apprehension adds to the burdens of the people who seek to lead this nation.

Two concrete considerations do need attention. No process of advance screening can be absolutely foolproof; yet it is startling, after the Secret Services tightening of its procedures in the wake of the assassinations of the nineteen-sixties, that a vociferous member of the Manson family would wander so easily into the path of a strolling President.

And, Mr. Ford's stroll itself raises the irresolvable conflict between a President's natural and healthy desire to retain easy contact with the people he leads and, conversely, his obligation to himself and to the nation to keep out of harm's way. There are no pat answers to either of these questions, but the attempt on Mr. Ford's life clearly demonstrates that, despite the exceptional reactions of Secret Service Agent Larry Buendorf, there are still correctable flaws in the Presidential protection system.

At the end of a series of thoughts on a subject so fraught with irrationality the only useful refuge is a rational response. The President was about to speak about his gun-control proposals when he was attacked. Those proposals and others now being considered by Congress would not fully insure the safety of public men if enacted. They would simply make the country safer for them and for the rest of us, as well.