

Agent Deflects A Loaded Gun Aimed at Ford

The speed of a Secret Service agent's reaction may have saved President Ford from assassination last week, and the nation from yet another traumatic loss of leadership. A gun was pointed at the President at close range as he walked through a friendly crowd; the agent saw the weapon and disarmed the woman aiming it.

The gun was loaded. The woman turned out to be one of the original members of the murderous Charles Manson "family." Whether she tried to pull the trigger, or even intended to, may never be known. But that she could have killed the President is certain.

The incident occurred in Sacramento Friday as the President was walking the 150 yards from a hotel to the California state capitol, where he was to address the legislature — on the subject of violent crime. A crowd of spectators lined the walkway to see him and the President, in standard fashion, passed along the crowd, smiling, saying hello and shaking hands. Suddenly, between the outstretched arms of the spectators appeared a woman's hand holding a pistol aimed directly at the President, a few feet away.

The President said later: "I saw a hand coming up behind several others in the front row, and obviously there was a gun in that hand." Mr. Ford instinctively flinched back, raising his arm self-protectively.

Larry M. Buendorf, a member of the Secret Service detail protecting the President, saw the weapon at the same time Mr. Ford did and grabbed both the gun and the arm of the woman holding it, forcing her arm behind her and knocking the weapon to the ground. The woman was then subdued. She is Lynette Alice Fromme, 26 years old.

Other agents, apparently responding to the code phrase "Get down, let's go," grabbed Mr. Ford's suit jacket and forced him to bend over—reducing his size as a target. Agents then surrounded the ashen-faced President and stayed around him as all walked rapidly to the safety of the capitol building nearby.

The gun was a .45-caliber semi-automatic. It had four bullets in it but none was in the firing chamber.

The incident took place despite the increased and elaborate precautions that have been taken in recent years by the Secret Service to improve the President's security. The intelligence division of the service maintains a computerized list containing the names

of 47,000 persons who are thought to pose a potential danger to the life of the President.

Any locality where the President intends to appear is visited first by an advance party of Secret Service men, who question persons on the list, put them under surveillance or have them detained while the President is there.

By the usual criteria, Miss Fromme should have been on the list, but apparently she was not. She was an "apostle" of Manson, who was convicted in 1971, along with three other cultists, for bizarre, brutal murders. Miss Fromme has a long record of previous arrests, including one for attempted murder. As spokesman for the Manson "family," Miss Fromme gave a press interview only two months ago in which she said that Manson blamed his fate on former President Nixon and believed that Mr. Ford was continuing the Nixon policies.

Presumably, that statement and her background of instability and association with extreme violence should have made the Secret Service concerned about her. Presumably there will be an internal inquiry to learn what went wrong.

Mr. Ford and others had praise for the quick action that may have saved his life. The public normally never hears of most of what the Secret Service and other agencies do to protect the lives of public officials. Despite that protection, and the extensive efforts to identify potential assailants in advance, it is a physical impossibility to totally protect public officials from murder.

President John F. Kennedy, riding in a campaign motorcade through the streets of Dallas, was shot by a sniper from a building window in 1963. Dr. Martin Luther King, standing on a motel balcony, was shot by a sniper from a building window in 1968. A few months later, Robert Kennedy was murdered as he walked through a crowd in a California hotel.

After Robert Kennedy's death, the Secret Service extended protection to candidates for the Presidency as well as the President himself. But, in circumstances not dissimilar to those involved in Mr. Ford's case, George Wallace was paralyzed for life while

campaigning, with Secret Service protection, in Maryland in 1972. Mr. Wallace was walking through a crowd when a gunman shot him at close range.

In all of the recent assassinations and attempts, the persons apprehended have had clear histories of emotional instability. So far as is known, doctrinaire political motives were not in-

involved—in the sense that they are involved during coups in other parts of the world—in any of the American cases.

Compared with most major nations, the United States has suffered an appalling amount of political assassination. No prime minister of Great Britain, for example, has ever been assassinated, even though they are quite lightly protected. Attempts at assassination are rare in most of Europe.

The American political style makes Presidents extremely hard to protect. Politicians are expected to wade into crowds to shake hands, a custom that exposes them to potential assailants on all sides.

One possible repercussion of last week's incident may be a new flurry in support of stricter gun control legislation. After each assassination there has been a wave of sentiment for gun control, but the only significant legislation so far has been that restricting the mail order sale of some guns. Several dozen gun control bills are now pending in Congress, among them President Ford's proposal to ban the cheap "Saturday night specials." But the President has said that he is opposed to registration of all handguns, a more far-reaching proposal. The weapon taken from Miss Fromme was a standard Colt, not a cheap weapon that Mr. Ford's legislation would ban.

Probably even the President does not yet know if he will now reconsider his position on gun controls, but he has already made it explicit that



Lynette Fromme after her arrest.

he, just as his predecessors in office, will not substantially change his style in public. Lyndon Johnson, assuming the Presidency after John Kennedy's murder, was said to be often fearful that he too would be assassinated,

yet he continued public appearances.

Last week Mr. Ford said after the incident: "In my judgment it is vitally important for a President to see the American people, and I am going to continue to have that personal contact with the American people."