

A Torrent of Questions

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 22—It was raining torrents in Washington tonight, and there were torrents of questions about the personal safety of the President of the United States and about people who want to be President.

News
Analysis

The central question was whether the President, chosen for his job or fallen heir to it, can move among the people, talk to them, shake their hands, commune with them and come out alive.

In a democracy, that would seem to be a crucial issue, and it was an issue that was opened again by what happened today in San Francisco.

It was an issue that was opened not only for President Ford, the incumbent in the White House, but also for all those who might want to contend for the White House in 1976. All of them have to consider what happened to the President today.

Here was Gerald Ford, a well-meaning man trying to do his job, and suddenly, for the second time in less than three weeks, he was exposed to the threat of assassination.

Just 17 days ago in Sacramento, Calif., a young woman named Lynette Alice Fromme, a follower of Charles M. Man-

Continued on Page 26, Column 6

Continued From Page 1, Col. 6
son, aimed a gun at him as he was shaking hands with a crowd of citizens in the square outside the Capitol.

Today, a woman identified as Sara Jane Moore was arrested in San Francisco after a shot was fired as the President moved through a crowd near the St. Francis Hotel.

Kennedy Shooting Recalled

In a scene that recalled the one that followed the shooting of President Kennedy in Dallas, President Ford was hustled away from the St. Francis Hotel to the airport and put on his private plane to Washington.

President Kennedy returned to Washington dead. President Ford went home tonight alive and unharmed.

But the question remained: Can political leaders move safely among the people? They do in other countries—the advanced democracies. Can they do so in this one?

The record of the last few

years would seem to say no: John F. Kennedy, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Robert F. Kennedy and George C. Wallace. They were all gunned down—all dead but one—not as the result of some organized political conspiracy, but as a result of the determination of a single—and single-minded—killer.

There was a time—Lyndon B. Johnson's time—when the President of the United States did not dare to venture out of the White House unless he was going to a well-protected military base. That was in the days of the increasingly unpopular war in Vietnam. President Johnson became a virtual prisoner in his own palace, the White House.

Relaxed and Unafraid

But it seemed to be different with Gerald Ford. He was—and tonight may still be—relaxed and unafraid. He was the sort of man—he may still be that sort of man—who finds it hard

to believe that anyone would want to harm him.

After the menace of Lynette Fromme, he boldly declared that he did not intend to give up his efforts to make and keep contact with the American people.

He stressed the importance of meeting people, shaking their hand, listening to their comments, responding to their questions. His wife, who has had her share of anxieties about life in the White House, philosophically observed that the risk of getting shot was one of the hazards that went with the job.

Brave words, spoken by gallant people.

One wonders how they feel tonight, when bullets seem to speak louder than words. And one wonders when this society is going to mature enough not only to choose leaders democratically, but also to remove them the same way.

The rain fell in torrents on Washington tonight as the President made his way home, and so did the questions about his safety, security and well-being.