

ABROAD AT HOME

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, Sept. 24—When President Ford came out of the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco, he did not plunge into the crowd to shake hands; he just waved and headed for his car a few feet away. Large numbers of uniformed policemen kept people back with the help of barriers. There were plainclothesmen in and watching the crowd, and Secret Service agents surrounded the President.

Yet in that relatively controlled situation, in the moment available, an apparently would-be assassin got off a shot at Mr. Ford. The conclusion must be, as a security expert put it to *The Boston Globe*, that there is no way to guarantee the President's safety now in an open public setting.

The conclusion is an unhappy one but should not be the occasion for breast-beating about what a sick country this is. It is a very large and diverse country, historically less disciplined than most by either external constraint or internal tradition. Among 220 million people, there are bound to be many thousands who are frustrated, angry, deranged.

Public reaction to the two apparent attempts on Mr. Ford's life within a few weeks has on the whole been sensible. It has been widely recognized, for one thing, that assassination attempts are likely to be psychologically contagious.

From that it follows, as many have said, that for a time at least Mr. Ford should avoid open crowd situations. That does not mean holing up in the White House. He can, for example, speak in halls where the audience has gone through metal detectors—the sort of precaution now taken at political conventions. There is no reason to think that a President makes less effective contact with the public in a hall than in street encounters, whether he is sensing opinion or playing politics.

It is evident that press coverage of those charged with attempted assassination and other highly publicized crimes has begun to trouble a lot of people. Our Constitution leaves the decisions to editors, and competition does not usually lead to restraint. But it may well be true—and editors ought to think about it—that dramatization of the psychological rejects who almost always are our assassins encourages others.

The Ford episodes have also, rightly, renewed calls for more effective gun control. One thought here is that attention should not be directed entirely at new Federal legislation, desirable as that is. If parts of this country resist what others think urgently necessary, the American Federal system allows for diverse regulation. Many states and cities have gun laws now that are feebly enforced; cases are

dropped, and judges do not impose serious sentences. There is room for action where the gun problem is most acute.

Those are some of the areas where affirmative steps might be taken to improve Presidential security. It may be just as important to consider what not to do.

There is some loose talk, for instance, to the effect that the Secret Service and local police forces should take special measures against "known risks" in any locality visited by the President. What does that mean?

In a country this size there are millions of potentially dangerous persons—those with records of threatening mental disturbance, say, or of violent crime. If there were ways of listing them and accurately weighing their risk to the President, there might be thousands in any large city. Are the police supposed to memorize their pictures, or visit everyone?

To raise such questions is to realize the larger danger. Putting increased pressure on the Presidential security forces is to court serious consequences to liberty. The next step would be to talk about preventive detention of "risks." The blunt fact is that a President cannot walk through the streets

with absolute safety unless we adopt authoritarian methods.

There have been stories lately about the fact that Lee Harvey Oswald wrote a letter threatening the Dallas police or the F.B.I. before President Kennedy visited Dallas in 1963. But the letter did not refer to the President. If the F.B.I. later destroyed it, as reported, that does raise questions. But it would be something else to suggest that anyone who ever quarreled with the police should be targeted as a risk in connection with a Presidential visit. The net would be too large.

That leads to another thought, a personal one, deeply felt. It is that the Ford episodes show the futility—worse, the damage—of the endless effort to show that the assassination of President Kennedy and of Robert Kennedy were the work of conspiracies.

From what we know now of Lynette Alice Fromme and Sara Jane Moore, they are the classic alienated figures of our society—troubled individuals working out their resentments or fears. But if Gerald Ford had been murdered, very likely Mark Lane would be talking about a grassy knoll or Al-lard Lowenstein about multiple guns.

The search for conspiracy only increases the elements of morbidity and paranoia and fantasy in this country. It romanticizes crimes that are terrible because of their lack of purpose. It obscures our necessary understanding, all of us, that in this life there is often tragedy without reason.