

Who's to Blame?

ESSAY

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, Sept. 24—Consider who would have borne the brunt of blame had the second assassination attempt on President Ford been successful.

First would have been the men of the Secret Service, who have gone from heroes to bums in two weeks. Whoever was responsible for brushing aside the specific warning of San Francisco police would have received the same blame that history has allotted the man who failed to guard Lincoln's box at Ford's Theatre.

Next, blame would have been directed at the media. Time and Newsweek, which celebrated the earlier would-be assassin on their covers, would have received the condemnation of even those press and television commentators whose own outlets lavished upon the Manson groupie the attention she craved.

Third, blame would have been fixed on President Ford, for doing exactly what his press secretary later claimed he was not doing—flaunting himself before the trigger-crazies, providing "a dare or an egging-on" that amounted to playing politics with his own life.

Finally, the refrain would be played again that ours is a "sick society," its profound pathology given expression through assassination, its bloodlust evident in the unwillingness to embrace gun control, and each of us would be asked to bear a portion of the national guilt.

Each target of blame would have its defense.

The Secret Service would have said, quite rightly, that to take every kook into custody when a President goes visiting would require not only massive dossierization of our society, but adoption of a principle of mass preventive arrest abhorrent in a democracy.

The media would have said, quite

rightly, that news has its own free market, and if editors put their notions of the public interest ahead of their responsibility to satisfy the public's interest, a vital freedom would be lost.

The followers of the fallen President would have said, quite rightly, that there cannot be even the appearance of a surrender to terrorism; that public contact with the people is not just exhibiting machismo but reaffirming faith in an open society.

And a society whose majority rejects self-flagellation would say, quite rightly, that a small percentage of kamikaze nuts do not a sick society make.

But all that is in the conditional sense. Fate has given us a reprieve. What can the potential targets of future blame do to avert our appointment in Samarra?

First, the Secret Service can lean harder on the President, in that most secret of behind-the-scenes White House tensions. The last flare-up occurred when H. R. Haldeman forced chief of detail Robert Taylor from his job for being too zealous in holding back crowds and spoiling adulatory pictures. Within the official family, the service should assert itself aggressively in the coming year.

Next, the media can do with the second would-be assassin what it did with the second moon landing: Commensurately reduce the play. More important, the press can urge the President to adopt a strategy of surprise in his crowd-plunging, never letting a potential assassin know where he is going to appear. This means less press knowledge of the President's plans,

and more headaches and expense in covering him, but it's worth it.

The President himself, by his surprise visits and unannounced handshaking, can establish the principle (and make the pictures) of an open candidate in an open society—without forcing the public to take his life in their hands.

And American society—that's most of us—can do what we do best, which is to create the public opinion that demands that the President stop making a bull's eye of himself in this high stage of our assassination cycle. He cannot cave in to the crazies, but he must not flout public opinion, which requires him to accommodate his campaigning to our desire for his protection. Vests are in fashion this year.

We are not generally a superstitious people, but many of us have an uneasy feeling that these things come in threes, and the third attempt might not miss. Given that premonition, similar to the almost universal belief that a Kennedy candidacy will provoke attempted murder, we ought to adjust our campaign traditions to reduce our national traumas.

We routinely walk through electronic frisk machines on our way into airplanes; we can do the same into political rallies. We can see a candidate's smile and wave through a plastic bubble on the back of the car; that's our protection more than his.

Campaign fairness demands that no candidate have an edge. By editorial and column, by letters to the President and "sense of the Congress" resolutions, we can bring about a gentleman's agreement that will reduce the chances of candidicide without anyone seeming less heroic than his opponent. And—by exploiting the element of surprise in crowd-plunging—without kowtowing to killers.

Either that, or we wind up blaming each other.