

...Not Immunization

Presidential Protection

Revulsion and anger united Americans of all political persuasions yesterday in the wake of this month's second murder attempt on the President. More insistently than ever before, the question now becomes one of how better to protect the President and more broadly—as the 1976 Presidential campaign approaches—of how to protect all who will be contending for that high post these next fourteen months.

The problem would be relatively simple if the President and other public figures similarly threatened were to view personal safety as the only objective. In that case the President would communicate with the people only through the media, and personally stay isolated from all except security personnel, his close associates and family, and others specially cleared. In effect, the President would have to agree to live a prison-like existence.

Understandably, Mr. Ford has rejected this alternative, vowing that he will not "capitulate" to would-be assassins. But, admirable as is the desire of the leader of this democracy to go among his citizens and "press the flesh," that practice is also the source of danger.

To cope with that danger, some have proposed that the agencies charged with protecting the President be given extraordinary powers. When he is due to visit an area, it has been argued, all known to be potential assailants should be jailed, deported from the area temporarily or otherwise sterilized from participation in an attack on the Chief Executive.

Support for such a view will undoubtedly be found in the fact that Sara Jane Moore, the President's attacker, was interviewed by both the police and the Secret Service the day before she shot at him. A gun and ammunition were taken from her. Yet, she was allowed to remain free, to obtain another weapon and to make her assassination attempt. This school of Presidential protection will also take support from newly disclosed evidence that, shortly before Lee Harvey Oswald killed President Kennedy, the F.B.I. received evidence that he was a potential troublemaker, evidence reportedly destroyed by the agency after Mr. Kennedy's death.

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The difficulty with the immunization approach is that an attempt, before the President's arrival in San Francisco, to have imprisoned or deported everyone in the Bay Area who, in the estimation of some law-enforcement or psychiatric agency, "might" want to harm Mr. Ford would require action against thousands, even tens of thousands of people. The way would be open for egregious abuses in the worst tradition of a police state. Beyond that, such a tactic might well be counter-productive, rousing tensions and resentments that would move some who escaped such "preventive detention" to an attempt on the President's life.

The hard fact must be accepted that, without gross trespass on constitutional liberties, Presidents and Presidential candidates cannot have both close contact with citizens in the mass and total safety. Nevertheless, some things certainly can and should be done to give the President greater security. Aside from desperately needed gun-control measures, at least three major steps would help:

- The element of predictability needs to be removed from the President's public movements. Monday's would-be assailant knew that at a certain time the President would be leaving the Saint Francis Hotel through a side entrance, and she stationed herself to take advantage of that opportunity. The President could still mingle with citizens at times and places of his own choosing, for example by stopping at shopping centers or dropping in without pre-announcement at sports events, concerts and other public assemblies, though recklessness in such exposures is never a good idea.

- A basic reorganization of the Secret Service arrangements for protecting the President seems badly needed. In San Francisco, only the alertness of a civilian bystander deflected the gun aimed at the President. Proper coordination between local and Federal officials would have kept Mrs. Moore from being there at all. In safeguarding the Chief Executive, as in every branch of police activity and criminal justice, a decent respect for the rights of individuals does not contravene the rights of the law-abiding to be protected.

- Finally, a systematic effort is required to reduce the political temperature of the country, to moderate the tone of political debate. The impact on unstable, disturbed personalities of the tensions born of Vietnam and Watergate needs cooling; not inflammation. Political differences can be argued vigorously without incivility or personal hatred. Amiability is a personal characteristic of the President. It is a good one to emulate.