

Why no president's 100% safe

By JOSEPH VOLZ

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WASHINGTON—On the last day of his life 14 years ago, John F. Kennedy turned to his wife, Jackie, in their Fort Worth hotel room and said: "If somebody wants to shoot me from a window with a rifle, nobody can stop it."

A few hours later, Kennedy's words proved prophetic.

And after reading 40,000 pages of "raw" FBI documents on the Nov. 22, 1963, assassination, a reporter comes away with the clear impression that Kennedy's observation is just as true today. Despite the best efforts of the Secret Service and the FBI and improved techniques since Dallas, there is no foolproof way to prevent a determined gunman from killing the President.

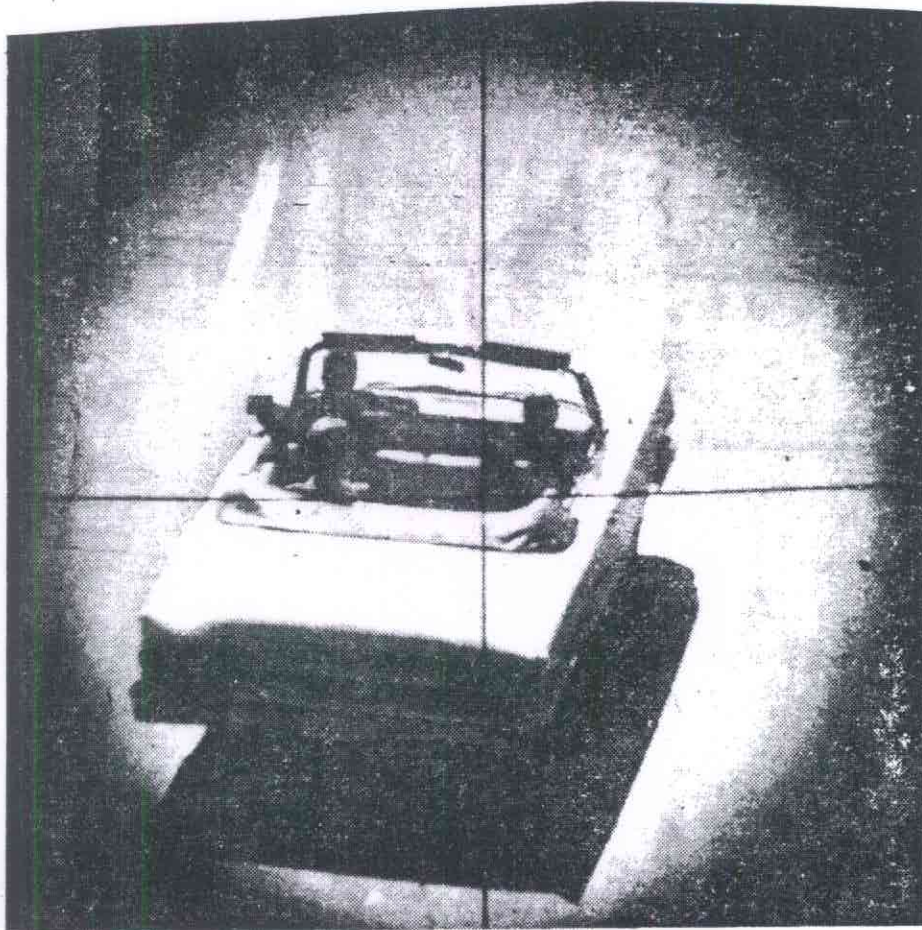
Most of the FBI files deal with correspondence from the mentally deranged, often hate-filled people who want to vent their anger against long-dead "enemies" by harming the President. The FBI has checked out each letter, interviewed friends, relatives, and the deranged themselves in the most exhaustive investigation in American history. Often, the bureau found that no government agency had any file at all on people who have threatened to kill the President.

There are just too many people in a nation of 200 million—which also prides itself on not being a police state—to find all those who march to a different, more deadly, drumbeat. Many, of course, just talk out their frustrations. But who is to know which of the "crackpots" out there are serious?

For example, on Sept. 5, 1975, Lynette (Squeaky) Fromme, 26, aimed a loaded pistol at President Ford as he was entering the State Capitol in Sacramento, Calif. A Secret Service agent grabbed the gun before any shots could be fired.

Although Miss Fromme was a devoted follower of murder cult leader Charles Manson, and had been a conspicuous figure around Sacramento, she was not on the Secret Service's list of potential assassins.

And neither was Sara Jane Moore,



"If somebody wants to shoot me from a window with a rifle, nobody can stop it."

who actually fired a shot at Ford in San Francisco two weeks later. The shot was deflected when a bystander grabbed her arm. Mrs. Moore, a 45-year-old political activist, had been questioned by the Secret Service the night before. She was carrying a .44-caliber pistol but was not held because San Francisco Police said that she was a police informer.

Lee Harvey Oswald, Kennedy's assassin, had been the subject of an FBI investigation. Special Agent James Hosty of the Dallas FBI office talked to Oswald about three weeks before the killing, but the FBI did not consider Oswald a threat. In fact, Oswald's wife, Marina, later said that Oswald thought Kennedy was a good President.

The reasons for trying to kill a President are usually so irrational that a rational investigation cannot predict them. No one knows to this day why Oswald fired at Kennedy—or whether it

was even Kennedy he was after. Marina Oswald thinks he was aiming at Texas Gov. John B. Connally, who was wounded. Others say he was so full of pent-up anger after years of frustration that he wanted to wipe out every one in the car. (Squeaky Fromme wanted to kill "polluters of air and water.")

What do you do with people who see demons, are convinced that 10-foot-tall FBI agents are tailing them, or who go on violent rampages when they get drunk? There are thousands of such cases in the files.

There is only one certain—or almost certain—way to protect a President. Keep him a virtual prisoner in the White House where only those who have been thoroughly checked out are allowed to see him.

Even then the President is a target. A man carrying a piece of plain pipe was shot and killed by a White House

guard in July 1976 when he jumped the fence one night and ran across the lawn toward the White House front door.

No President has been willing to give up the need to "press the flesh"—particularly in campaign years. Ford spoke for virtually every chief executive when he said after the second attempt against his life that if a President could not walk safely among the American people, "something has gone wrong in our society."

Something is wrong in our society—but that flaw is an old one going back to 1835 when President Andrew Jackson was shot at by a deranged man who thought he was the king of England.

There have been 114 attempts against federal officeholders since then. No one knows how to stop them.

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