

The Latest Assassination Attempt

Part 9/24/75

A LOT OF PEOPLE who live in this city share a special, haunting memory from the days right after President Kennedy was killed, the memory of an experience that could be suggested but not entirely conveyed to those who were not here. It was the experience of walking slowly past the murdered President's imposing, flag-draped coffin in the White House East Room. The crystal chandeliers were gleaming. The military honor-guard stood at attention, death-still. Protocol, authority had been restored. But the President was dead. Part of the poignancy of the moment proceeded from the setting. It forced an awareness that, for all its power and trappings of power, the state was utterly vulnerable to a single act of human depravity. Gerald Ford, the outlines of a bullet-proof vest sometimes showing when he bends into a crowd, presents another painful reminder of that essential, irreducible vulnerability, which can never be wholly guarded against. That is the central fact to keep in mind when one thinks about the two grisly gun play episodes of the past couple of weeks: It can happen—and not all the precautions in the world are sufficient to ensure that it will not.

From this proposition different people draw different conclusions. Our own is quite different from Mr. Ford's. We do not believe that the continuing existence of some measure of danger to a President means that the danger cannot be reduced—or should not be reduced. We assume that President Ford shares this view to the extent that he has countenanced tighter security and additional precautions for his travels. But he is even more adamant now than he was after the Lynette Fromme episode in insisting that his crowd-plunging, hand-shaking travels around the country will not be inhibited by what has gone on. We can understand some of the elements that must have gone into the President's calculation. Presidents feel a natural obligation to show themselves as tough, firm, in-charge, reassuring national leaders; they also are famous for betraying a human and appealing—though nonetheless dangerous—impatience with the isolation-booth security apparatus that envelops them in office; and in Mr. Ford's case, it should be noted that he has come to office at a time when there has been much complaint about the excessively regal aspects of the presidency, a complaint that may have seemed to encourage his moving about more openly and freely and even humbly among the populace.

But we think the President has got it all wrong. Hear him:

... the most important thing is that I don't think any person as President or any person in any other political office, ought to cower in the face of a limited number of people, out of 214 million Americans, who want to take the law into their own hands. The American people expect, and I approve of it, in

fact I think it is right, want a dialogue between them and their President and their other public officials. And if we can't have that opportunity of talking with one another, seeing one another, shaking hands with one another, something has gone wrong in our society.

Mr. Ford, who after all does submit to rigorous Secret Service protection, must know that the "opportunity" of which he speaks to mingle with people, though desirable is simply not fully available to a man who holds his office. Something has "gone wrong"; it always was wrong: There are people who will try to kill or hurt him. What is measurably different now is that these people have the weapons to do it—and the stimulus that comes from the overpowering capacity of modern communications to trigger a psychopathic impulse. What Mr. Ford can limit is their chance. And in doing that we do not think he will necessarily be curtailing, let alone forgoing, a "dialogue" with the American people. The avenues available to him that do not increase his personal vulnerability are numerous. Mr. Ford is an especially open and communicative President. He can receive people. He can make visits that do not involve his exposure to wholly uncontrollable circumstance. He has television, the press conference and innumerable other instruments for communication. And he has no shortage of ways to grant others access to him or to provide forums for hearing their ideas. Surely "dialogue"—communication—between a President and the public does not rest on a flurry of handshakes with people assembled at random on the way here or there.

Mr. Ford should cut back these dangerous forays. We believe that in pursuing them he will alarm as many people as he pleases and that no amount of "standing firm" can provide the reassurance that he could provide by removing this source of people's mounting anxiety. Mr. Ford says he will not "cower." He speaks of a "confrontation" with the sick individuals who mean him personal harm as if they were a band of conspirators who needed to be stood down. But he must understand that he is not in a fight with any group of political dissidents or opposition and that he is not in a fair fight in any event. There is no bravery or persuasion or show of determination that can either change the minds of those who wield the guns or permit him a "confrontation" in any normal sense of that word. The question is whether he will reduce the opportunities for deranged people to trap and harm him. We argue from the Kennedy case and from the lingering image of that day in the East Room: The President represents much more than is encompassed in his mortal human frame; but he is mortal, human and vulnerable; and in protecting himself as best he can, he is protecting the stability and continuity and order of the state.