

Plunging Into Crowds

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, Sept. 10—One day in 1970, President Nixon was telling Vice President Agnew how to campaign. "Don't let the Secret Service get in the way of the photo car," he warned. "If anybody is going to shoot you, he'll shoot you."

That fatalistic attitude toward possible assassination imbues most of our public leaders. They are convinced that once they admit, even to themselves, that every crowd contains a potential killer, they would cease to be effective campaigners.

After President Ford's exposure to a loaded gun last week, we saw two standard reactions from politicians and press. The tried-and-true political reaction was: "I'm not afraid; no nut is going to keep me from mingling with the people."

The standard press reaction was: (a) this proves that it's time for more effective gun control (as if that would deter an assassin) and (b) we must recognize, sadly, that with so many nuts in the land, candidates are foolish to expose themselves to crowds.

After the standard reactions, nothing happens. The President or candidate shows that he is fearless, and the press shows that he would not be criticized if he were more cautious. As long as the issue centers on the public man's courage, or foolhardiness, nothing can change: Politicians will see assassination as a risk that's part of the game.

Let's come at it a different way, and maybe a nonstandard reaction can effect some slight change.

What is a politician's purpose in plunging into a crowd? The avowed purpose—meeting the people, getting grassroots opinions, not losing the common touch—is nonsense, an illusion never taken seriously but never attacked, like Santa Claus or the tooth fairy.

There are two real purposes for crowd-plunging. The less important is psychological: After hearing and seeing nothing but criticism, and talking to aides and colleagues who react to that criticism, most leaders need some personal display of affection from "the people." They get a genuine lift out of having cufflinks torn off, even when they know a friendly crowd does not represent public opinion. This emotional uplift is derogated by one and all but is one reason why many leaders want to "press the flesh."

The main purpose of plunging into crowds is to make pictures for television and newspapers. This is a vital part of campaigning, which will become even more important because of the new campaign spending limitations.

When a national candidate comes to a city, ostensibly for an evening rally, why does he "work the fence" at the airport or greet a crowd from a motorcade in the afternoon? Because that appearance will be shown on film during the local early-evening television news. Nothing else he does in that city is as important.

Such film shows him being welcomed, loved, adulated, as he smiles and makes a carefully prepared ad lib in case some of the newsmen carry sound-on-film equipment. That is how to generate bandwagon feeling on television; today's crowd-plunge footage is far more likely to be used, and to have a boosting effect, than any night-before clips from set speeches to sitting audiences.

Cluck-cluck all you want, but recognize the daytime crowd plunge as an increasingly important part of media politics. Presidents may say bravely that they will not be denied access to the people, but what they mean is that they will not be denied access to the "free" six o'clock news as Election Day draws near.

What can be done about it? How can we let a leader get his needed lift—and let the campaign manager grab his free television time—while reducing the danger of assassination? How can we insure both film coverage and live candidates?

The answer is in the element of surprise. A gunman shows up at a place where he knows his target will be. But if a target is not scheduled to be any public place in particular, the assassin's chances are drastically reduced.

When a President suddenly stops a motorcade to visit and be photographed with a bunch of people, that's a relatively safe thing to do. Secret Service agents are far less worried about the unscheduled stop than the planned appearance, for the obvious reason: Even if there is a would-be gunman at a surprise plunge-in, he would probably have to run home to get his gun, and by that time the public figure would be far gone.

A sitting President does not need to be a sitting duck. The unexpected visit, the quick-assembling crowd offer ways to satisfy the requirements of media campaigning at little personal danger. Why must press and politician routinely react by insisting on the extremes—a craven candidate untouchable by crowds, or a target standing bravely in the crosshairs—when campaigning could adapt to the exciting, mobile needs of the unscheduled schedule?

The political advance man of 1976 should learn to operate not in advance, but on the scene. Practical; worth a try; beats fatalism.