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VIOLENCE: THE GIRL WHO ALMOST KILLED FORD

There was about the incident a sense of chilling déjà vu; only this time the President was not riding in a limousine. Instead, Gerald Ford was walking through a group of several hundred admirers in a pleasant, sunlit park in front of the California state capitol at Sacramento, shaking hands with people in his amiable, relaxed way. He was as pleased with his reception as John F. Kennedy had been with the crowds that had come out to meet him that day in Dallas in 1963. Once again, precisely at 9:57 a.m. on Friday, the threat suddenly materialized out of nowhere. A movement in the crowd, a raising of a hand, and to his astonishment, Ford found himself looking down the barrel of a loaded .45 Colt automatic pistol scarcely 2 ft. away. There was a brief flurry, and then the Secret Service subdued a social misfit, a psychological cripple, who might have easily assassinated the President of the U.S.

Her name was Lynette Alice Fromme, and she was the first woman ever to attempt to kill a President of the U.S. Her manner was gentle, and while she was pretty in a freckle-faced, redhaired, little-girl sort of way, she would turn few heads on the street. But the 27-year-old woman behind this innocent facade was anything but normal. In her way, Lynette Fromme was as much a social aberration—an amoral freak—as Lee Harvey Oswald, the killer of John F. Kennedy, or Sirhan Sirhan, who shot to death Robert F. Kennedy, or Arthur Bremer, who crippled Alabama Governor George Wallace. She had been—and still was—an ardent follower of Charles Manson, the psychopathic killer who is now serving a sentence of life imprisonment for committing seven murders, including the vicious slaughters in 1969 of Film Actress Sharon Tate and Leno LaBianca, wealthy owner of a grocery chain. Because her voice was so tiny and high-pitched, Manson had nicknamed her "Squeaky" (see box page 10).

Disturbing Paradox. Squeaky Fromme's mad act in a Sacramento park with a .45 in her small hand had an immediate, sobering effect on the 1976 presidential election campaign. All too clearly, every candidate

could visualize a similar attack being a similar attack being launched against himself. The incident was also a vivid and sickening reminder of one of the most disturbing paradoxes of America: the fact that such a liberal and free society should somehow generate a sprinkling of warped souls who for dark reasons of their own seek to work out their frustrations by destroying political leaders. The free society has discovered no effective way of identifying and controlling its demons.

Despite the vigilance of the Secret Service, American Presidents traditionally make themselves easy targets for would-be assassins. They love to get out among the people—"to press the flesh," in Lyndon Johnson's homey phrase—to show that they are just plain Americans after all (see *The Presidency*, page 18). No one could reach the White House while campaigning from behind a bulletproof glass. Just hours after his near escape, Gerald Ford was emphatically and calmly telling newsmen that "this incident under no circumstances will prevent me or preclude me from contacting the American people as I travel from one state to another and from one community to another."

What made the flare of violence in Sacramento especially baffling and frightening for leading American politicians was the fact that Jerry Ford seemed to be as free of the danger of assassination as any man could be—a friendly father figure who excited neither envy nor hatred. But Squeaky Fromme had discovered her own reasons to dislike the man. With Sandra Good, her roommate and another member of the Manson "family," Fromme issued a statement to the press two months ago equating Ford with Richard Nixon, the man whom the clan has always blamed as the source of its troubles with the law. Declared the release: "If Nixon's [sic] reality wearing a new face [i.e., Ford] continues to run this country against the law, your homes will be bloodier than the Tate-LaBianca houses and My Lai put together."

Watching Hands. Fromme was ready when Ford flew into town from Portland, Ore., at 10:42 p.m. Thursday. He was accompanied by the standard number of agents in his personal entourage (the exact number is a secret), and there was a relaxed air about the trip. A Secret Service official points out that if there had been any indication of trouble, Ford would not have been allowed to walk anywhere—"He would have been in a car."

Ford spent Thursday night in a suite on the sixth floor of the Senator Hotel, a nine-story Moroccan-style building in downtown Sacramento. On Friday morning he addressed a breakfast gathering of 1,000 prominent citizens, winning solid applause by attacking excessive Government regulation for causing "cost, contradiction and confusion." He was obviously untroubled by a plea from liberal Republicans earlier in the week that he moderate his conservative line. After the breakfast meeting, Ford went back to the hotel and, right on schedule, left at 9:55 to walk a block to the California state capitol, where he had a 10 o'clock appointment with Governor Jerry Brown. At about that time, a small, slim woman wearing a bright red, full-length gown and a matching turban asked a policeman on the street between the hotel and the capitol

if the President was coming. He made a noncommittal reply—and Squeaky Fromme waited.

As Ford started across a small park in front of the capitol, he was greeted by bursts of applause from the crowd that had been waiting patiently to see him or perhaps even shake his hand. Head up and smiling, surrounded by aides and Secret Service agents, Ford moved quickly through the park, an athletic, vigorous man obviously enjoying his reception. As the party moved along, the agents carefully watched the hands of the people they were approaching. Says one veteran agent: "You've got to keep an eye on their hands. Sure, you notice kooks and faces and a lot of other things. But hands are the most important. If somebody is going to try to hurt the President, they'll have to use their hands."

Waiting, the woman in the red dress began to raise her automatic. Near a magnolia tree, Ford paused to shake some hands. He was actually stretching his hand out to the woman in red, according to some witnesses, when he froze for an instant. "I saw a hand coming up between several others in the front row," Ford would later recall, "and obviously there was a gun in that hand." She was no more than 2 ft. away from the big man who made such an easy target. She cried out: "The country is in a mess! This man is not your President!"

Let's Go! White-faced, Ford flinched from the gun. At the same instant, Secret Service Agent Larry Buendorf, 37, lunged forward. A husky athlete, Buendorf easily wrested the gun from her grasp and threw her to the ground. With the help of agents and a policeman, he quickly handcuffed her.

Meanwhile, another Secret Service agent shouted: "Let's go!" The command was a signal to tell other agents in the area that Ford was in danger. Swiftly, a cordon of men formed around the shaken President. Two agents pulled down on his suit jacket, forcing the tall (6 ft. 2 in.) Ford to bend so that he was partially concealed by the group. Then, moving at a brisk walk, the party swept through the park past the startled spectators and into the safety of the capitol.

As the President disappeared, Squeaky Fromme was shouting in her little-girl voice: "He's not a public servant! He's not a public servant!" She also cried out: "It didn't go off. Can you believe it? It didn't go off."

Why the gun could not go off quickly became clear when the Secret Service examined the 3-lb. Colt automatic. It was loaded with four bullets, but there was no bullet in the chamber ready to be fired (see diagram). To shoot the gun, Fromme would first have had to pull back the slide on top of the pistol, thus forcing a bullet from the clip up into the chamber. After the first shot was fired, the next bullet would have been automatically fed into the chamber.

There is evidence that Fromme was doing her best to shoot the weapon that, at such close range, would

almost certainly have killed the President. Some witnesses reported hearing a distinct clicking sound, which could have been made by the hammer snapping forward as she futilely pulled the trigger. In addition, there is the record of what happened to Agent Buendorf when he leaped into action. Instinctively, as he had been trained, Buendorf grabbed for the hammer of the gun, trying to interpose the web of skin between his right thumb and his right forefinger between the hammer and the firing pin. In the confusion, just what happened is not clear, but Buendorf came away with a cut between thumb and finger, as though he had been caught by the striking hammer.

Once inside the capitol, Ford recovered his aplomb so quickly that he went right on to his meeting with Governor Brown without making any mention of the incident. In fact, Brown did not learn what had happened right outside his office until a Ford aide brought up the matter after half an hour. Later, Ford insisted upon addressing the California legislature as planned, without mentioning what had occurred earlier. He looked wan and was unusually serious. Ironically, his topic was crime. Ford told the lawmakers that he was especially concerned about "the truly alarming increase in violent crime throughout this country" and advocated mandatory sentences "for persons found guilty of crimes involving the use of a dangerous weapon."

Bear Hug. Back in Washington, Betty Ford got the news of the assassination attempt while sitting at the desk in her study, a small, cozy room with a sweeping view of the monuments to Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln. Mrs. Ford had just begun a phone conversation when the call was interrupted: on the line was Richard Keiser, the head of the President's Secret Service detail. Right off, knowing how she would react to his abrupt intrusion, Keiser assured Betty Ford that her husband was all right. Then he told her what had happened. Since moving into the White House, she had accepted almost fatalistically the danger to her husband—the price that goes with a place in history. But this was the first time that she had had to face the stark reality. Outwardly at least, she was calm. "It is something you have to live with," she said. "I'm very grateful to the Secret Service and the great job they do."

Later in the day, Betty and the Fords' sons, Jack, 23, and Steve, 19—tall blond boys in blue jeans and T shirts—walked out on the White House lawn to greet the big helicopter carrying the President home on the last hop of his trip from Sacramento. Betty greeted her husband with a bear hug, and his sons affectionately draped their arms around his shoulders. The President's reaction to his day was casual and characteristic: "Gee, it's nice to be home." Then he said: "We had a great trip—just a fraction of a second or two kind of distorted things. Everything else was superb." Indeed, Ford went out of his way to reassure Californians that he did not hold the Fromme episode against them. "I wouldn't under any circumstances let one individual's effort undercut the warmth of what we felt in California."

On the West Coast and in Washington, the Secret Service, the FBI and other law-enforcement agencies

worked frantically to learn what motivated the attempted assassination and whether or not Squeaky Fromme had acted alone. Arraigned in Sacramento on a federal charge of attempting to murder the President, which carries a maximum penalty of life in prison, she sat listlessly through the proceedings, making no statement and showing no reaction when her bail was set at \$1 million.

Hunting for clues, Sacramento police went to her attic apartment above a boarding house and took her two roommates, Sandra Good and Susan Murphy, into custody for questioning. Like Good, Murphy was a member of the Manson family. After two hours of interrogation, the two were released without being charged.

Sandra Good later told TIME: "I don't know what state of mind Lyn was in, but I do know that she was concerned that nobody is doing anything for the country. This act was a combination of many problems. She apparently was moved by the disaster facing the country from air and water pollution. Nixon lied to the people, and Ford is continuing to lie to the people. He is not doing anything."

Stop Polluting. Good claimed that she and Fromme were members of an "international people's court" consisting of several thousand members throughout the world, who were prepared to "kill" the polluters of the air and water. Said she: "We're going to start assassinating Presidents, Vice Presidents and major executives of companies. I'm warning these people they better stop polluting or they're going to die."

Squeaky Fromme was also accustomed to using the language of violence. Good was with her in late July when she told a journalist—who insists upon anonymity—that Ford, the creation of Nixon, "would have to pay for what he's doing. Ford is picking up in Nixon's footsteps and he is just as bad." Part of the interview took place in a local cemetery because the girls said they "identified" with the dead. When the newsman asked for more time to talk, Fromme said darkly, "This is nothing to the interview you will get. Something very big is going to happen."

It seemed inconceivable to some California law-enforcement officials who had worked on the Manson cases that Squeaky Fromme could have acted independently. Says one officer: "For Lynette just to go out on her own and do this doesn't make sense. The clan is just what its name implies—a family. And like a family, they don't operate alone."

In Sacramento, U.S. Attorney Dwayne Keyes said there was an "assumption" that Fromme had been part of a conspiracy because of the "close connection of the [Manson] group." In Los Angeles, Deputy District Attorney Stephen Kay said flatly: "I think Charles Manson had a hand in it. It's very easy to slip messages in and out of prison." Indeed, officials at San Quentin prison near San Francisco, where Manson is locked up, acknowledged that the mass murderer had frequently corresponded with Fromme by regular mail. A prison

spokesman said that Manson had learned of the act through the prison grapevine shortly after it happened. Reportedly, Manson reacted with surprise to the news, declaring, "Oh, my God!"

Squeaky Fromme, daughter of a well-to-do aeronautical engineer in Redondo Beach, Calif., was one of the first people to join Manson's demonic tribe in 1967, after she dropped out of El Camino College in Torrance, Calif. Her life in the self-styled family revolved around drugs, depraved sex and devotion to Manson, who made her his "main lady." As she testified at his murder trial in 1971: "We were riding on the wind. You could say that it's a nonsense world of Alice in Wonderland, but it makes a lot of sense. Everybody makes their own [rules], and you get what you put out."

Blood Testing. She turned out to be one of Manson's shrewdest, toughest and most slavishly obedient followers. When the clan lived on a Death Valley ranch, Manson assigned Squeaky to take care of the ranch's 81-year-old blind owner, George Spahn, in the hope—futile, in the end—that she would inherit the property. Said Manson Follower Danny DeCarlo: "She had George in the palm of her hand. She cleaned for him, cooked for him, balanced his checkbook, made love with him." She was also in charge of selling the autos, dune buggies and other assorted loot stolen by Manson's disciples.

After Manson's arrest in 1969, Squeaky took command of the clan and its hand-to-mouth living arrangements. With a handful of other followers, mostly women, she perched on the steps of the Los Angeles courthouse during the trial, shaved her head to protest his conviction and gouged an X into her forehead as a sign of loyalty. She later explained: "We have Xed ourselves out of this world." Prosecutor Vincent Bugliosi wrote in his book *Helter Skelter* that the mutilations became a ritual for new members, "complete to tasting the blood as it ran down their faces."

Although Squeaky was not implicated in the Tate or LaBianca slaughters, she was arrested more than a dozen times on various charges, ranging from drug possession to murder. In 1972 Squeaky and four other Manson followers were charged with killing an associate, Lauren Willett, 19, after a falling out. Her body was buried under a house in which the family members had been living. But charges against Squeaky were eventually dropped because of insufficient evidence. Her only convictions have been for relatively minor offenses. In 1971, for example, she and three other clan members were sentenced to 90 days in jail for trying to prevent a former fellow disciple from testifying at Manson's trial by allegedly feeding her an LSD-laced hamburger.

Since Manson's conviction and life sentence, Squeaky has lived in various parts of California, including the San Fernando Valley, Monterey, San Francisco and Sacramento, where she rented an apartment to be near Manson after he was transferred to Folsom prison. With at least three other Manson women, she shared a dilapidated apartment on P Street, only a few blocks from the capitol grounds, where last week's attempt

on President Ford's life took place. Prison authorities refused their dozen requests to visit Manson. Bugliosi has called her the "chief cheerleader of the Manson cause." Indeed, she has continued trying to recruit new members, but without apparent success. She has also attempted—usually in vain—to keep members from deserting the group.

In recent months she and her roommates have donned long red robes and red turbans, the outlandish habit of their newly proclaimed religious order, which prays for Manson's miraculous return to freedom. As Squeaky told an interviewer: "We're nuns now, and we wear red robes. We're waiting for our Lord, and there's only one thing to do before he comes off the cross, and that's clean up the earth. Our red robes are an example of new morality. We must clean up the air, the water and the land. They're red with sacrifice, the blood of the sacrifice."

Former Los Angeles Detective Robert Haider, who led the investigation of the Tate murder case, says of Fromme: "The girl must've been on at least 1,000 acid trips in her life. It just was not possible to hold a rational conversation with her." Still other people note her recent talk in praise of violence and killing and regard her as capable of almost anything. Last July she threatened Rodney Angove, a reporter for the Associated Press in Sacramento, when he refused to write a story about a press release from Manson attacking Nixon. "It's your life that's on the line," she told him. "That message has got to go out."

Law officials who knew the Manson family were not at all surprised that Fromme found the courage to confront the President with a .45 in her hand. Bugliosi, now in private practice, ticked off four reasons she might have done it. "First, the entire Manson family religion is based on killing. They enjoy it. Second, their purpose has always been to draw attention to themselves and to shock the world. Third, as recently as a month ago, Manson was accusing Nixon of the responsibility for his conviction, and Ford was appointed by Nixon. Fourth, there is a lot of competition between the girls, and Squeaky was trying to impress Charlie. They all want to be Charlie's girl."

Bugliosi describes Fromme as "intelligent and articulate, except when it comes to Manson, who she believes is the Second Coming of Christ." Several years ago, she spoke frankly about her views in a film documentary titled Manson, which will soon be rereleased. At one point, Fromme says, "Every girl should have a daddy just like Charlie." She adds: "Whatever we need to do, we do. We respond. We respond with our knives. It feels good to be ready to face death and love..."

Trying to explain Fromme's fascination with violence, Dr. Louis Jolyon West, head of the psychiatry department at U.C.L.A., points out that she was part of a group whose members all were paranoid to varying degrees. "They all suffered from a group syndrome," he says. "There was a pattern of holding to false beliefs with even greater conviction and emotional commitment than a normal person's beliefs that

are subject to the laws of evidence. They were being victimized by conspiracies and plots coming from very high levels of Government. This affirms the grandiosity of their self-image, and it justifies the violence with which they strike back."

Class Hatred. Psychiatrist Harry L. Kozol, director of the Massachusetts Research Program on the Study of Dangerous Persons, thinks that Fromme may really have been striking at Nixon when she took aim at Ford. Broadly speaking, adds Kozol, assassinations are eruptions of bitter class hatred. "By killing a member of a more powerful group," he says, "the assassin not only exercises class hatred but builds up egotism and self-confidence."

However well he conceals it, every leading American politician is acutely aware that some day he may be the target of the wild frustrations of a psychopath—"the kind of sullen person who broods in rooming houses," in the striking phrase of Democratic Presidential Candidate Morris Udall. The news of Ford's near escape from death made the current presidential candidates, avowed or coy, even more apprehensive, but they were saying little about their concerns in public.

One of the few to speak out was Udall. Said he: "I do really regret that of all the advanced industrial societies, we seem to be the one that is most inclined toward this sort of thing, but this will not change my plans in the slightest." Nor, friends were saying, would the incident alter the activities of the two men who have the most reason to fear the Squeaky Frommes of the world. When, as expected, Alabama's George Wallace announces for the presidency, he will still campaign as vigorously as possible, fighting the paralysis caused by the bullets fired by Arthur Bremer. Would the Governor keep out of crowds? a newsman asked one of Wallace's aides. "Of course not," he replied. "You can't campaign away from crowds."

Senator Edward Kennedy, who is still resolutely declaring that he will not seek the Democratic nomination, will continue to travel the country as before. Kennedy has put the problem this way: "If someone in my position doesn't realize the danger, he'd be a fool. But anybody who lets that danger paralyze him is useless." On the day that Ford was in Sacramento, Kennedy was in Seattle to dedicate a cancer center.

Death Threats. One result of last week's scare was a prompt move to give Secret Service protection to all major presidential candidates, declared or otherwise, a service that is now provided only to Ford and Vice President Nelson Rockefeller. "The protection will begin as soon as possible—right now," said Senator Mike Mansfield, a member of the special congressional committee that is empowered to work out who is eligible to be guarded.

The grim reality, however, is that even the skill and dedication of agents like Larry Buendorf cannot guarantee the safety of a political leader against the cunning of a psychopath who is determined to kill—and

who knows, far better than Squeaky Fromme, how to operate a gun. There are 47,000 potentially dangerous persons in the Secret Service files, and no one knows how many tens of thousands of others have still not surfaced. With a staff of only 1,300 agents, the Secret Service is hard pressed to fulfill its present duties and to check out every one of the 100 death threats Ford receives on the average every month.

The Secret Service was informed that Fromme was in the Sacramento area, but decided that there was no need to put a special watch on her. From what it knew of Fromme's statements, the agency did not feel that she posed a dangerous threat to the President. Ideally, the Secret Service should be able to keep tab on every suspect. But Douglas V. Duncan, head of the Secret Service unit in Sacramento, points out, "We don't have enough agents for that kind of thing."

There will never be enough agents, nor can all the danger be eliminated by passing strict gun-control laws. Such legislation would certainly help counter the rising rate of street crime, but psychiatrists point out that a person who is crazed enough to want to kill a national political figure would somehow find a way to get his hands on a weapon. Ford's proposed gun legislation, now lying fallow in Congress, is aimed mainly at curbing the spread of "Saturday night specials"—cheap, small-caliber pistols. The .45 Colt automatic operated by Squeaky Fromme is not covered by the proposal.

Harrowing Warning. Faced with these harsh facts of political life, Jerry Ford still plans to carry on his work—and his election campaign for 1976—just as before. "You can't shut down the presidency," notes one White House aide. This week Ford will visit New Hampshire to campaign on behalf of Republican Senatorial Candidate Louis Wyman, and on Friday and Saturday he will fly off on another trip blending politics and presidential affairs, touring St. Louis and Kansas City, Mo., and then ending in Dallas. His aides expect that, as always, Ford will be making his handshaking forays into crowds of Americans. "It's a dreadful thing to contemplate," says one top White House assistant, "but every time the President steps off a plane, he risks his life. Yet he can't just put himself behind barriers. That would indicate a complete lack of confidence."

Ford will be going on the trip with more on his mind than Squeaky Fromme and the sight of her .45 coming up through the crowd. Last week, almost unnoticed in the flurry about the incident in Sacramento, federal authorities in Santa Barbara, Calif., jailed two drifters on charges of threatening to kill the President. When police arrested Gary S. DeSur, 31, and Preston M. Mayo, 24, for stealing a television set, they discovered notes outlining a plot to assassinate Ford during his visit to Sacramento. Santa Barbara Detective Robert A. Zapata reported that the notes told how the two men had planned to break into an armory in San Francisco "and get guns, a sniper scope and dynamite."

As the presidential campaign begins to quicken, and the candidates become more prominent, the threat

can come from anywhere at any time. Some of the worst products of American society can suddenly lash out at some of the best. The most harrowing warning came from Squeaky Fromme herself. In the documentary Manson, she coolly pointed out: "Anybody can kill anybody."

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