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# Deranged Loners and Demented Outsiders? Therapeutic News Frames of Presidential Assassination Attempts, 1973–2001

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## Abstract

There were 7 assassination attempts on U.S. presidents between 1973 and 2001. In this article, we critically examine coverage of each attack in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, describing how the coverage employs therapeutic discourse frames that position the president as vulnerable and portray the attackers as lonely and demented outsiders. Noticing contradictions in this pattern, we also identify counter-frames, including those acknowledging the political motivations of the assassins, the diminished public sphere that is a context for those actions, and the contradictions in a legal system that denies the insanity pleas of those framed so extensively as mentally ill. Political science, psychology, and law enforcement researchers have recognized that assassination attempts are often driven by rational political and economic concerns. Our analysis thus points to the need for further research exploring therapeutic framing techniques of other instances of political violence that may discourage publics from thinking critically about protest, violence, and tragedy in the United States.

On March 30, 1981, John W. Hinckley, Jr. shot President Ronald Reagan in the chest and then–White House Press Secretary James Brady in the head. In response, *New York Times* columnist Jane Brody commented: “In this country nearly all assassins have been personally, not politically, motivated.” Her column assessing the Hinckley attempt held increased civil liberties for the mentally ill accountable. In her column, she described all assassins –

not just Hinckley—as deranged loners, mentally unstable, alienated persons—drifters “with a history of psychiatric problems” (Brody, 1981, p. A26). While that description might fit John Hinckley rather closely,<sup>1</sup> it does not do so equally for other American would-be assassins since 1973, who sometimes have articulated a mixture of political and psychological motives and expressed despair over having few viable outlets for their grievances. Their political and social critiques have appeared as closing paragraphs in news coverage that has framed their discontent largely in terms of personal psychological disturbance. The tendency of journalists to foreground the personal psychopathology of would-be assassins has located these attacks in the private, deluded worlds of the attackers rather than as public moments of opposition or as markers of broader social anxiety.

Cloud (1998) has labeled this dislocation of social problems into a private, familial, or psychological frame *therapeutic discourse* (see also Cloud, 2003a, 2003b; Rockler, 2003). Such discourse emphasizes individual responsibility for and the necessity of private rather than societal response to social problems. Cloud writes:

The *therapeutic* refers to a set of political and cultural discourses that have adopted psychotherapy’s lexicon—the conservative language of healing, coping, adaptation, and restoration of a previously existing order—but in contexts of sociopolitical conflict. The rhetorical function of therapeutic discourses in such contexts is to encourage audiences to focus on themselves and the elaboration of their private lives rather than to address and attempt to reform systems of social power in which they are embedded. (1988, p. xvi)

As a news frame, the therapeutic can discredit and depoliticize the motivations behind protest in a way that contributes to a national consolation and healing. Cloud (1998) writes: “The framing of responses to the war [as to assassination attempts] represented a therapeutic displacement of political energy, effectively cordoning off and muting the voices of opposition . . . protecting the fragile social space from the anger of protesters” (p. 86). In the case of assassination attempts, media frames similarly discouraged a rounded discussion of these actors as well as their desperate and self-destructive public acts.

This study presents an analysis of the framing choices in newspaper coverage of seven political assassination attempts in the United States between 1973 and 2001 (Table 1). These cases share in common the fact that none was successful and all targeted sitting presidents or the White House. In addition, all occurred after 1973, a year that marked the beginning of a period in U.S. history of economic downturn (Harvey, 1989). The state of the U.S. economy is important for the current analysis because economic concerns were considered to be connected to some of these attacks (Clarke, 1982) and because Feierabend, Feierabend, Nesvold, and Jaggar (1971) have observed correlations between economic and systemic grievances and acts of political violence.<sup>2</sup>

**Table 1.** Assassins and Assassination Attempts under Examination

Name	Date	Target	Location	Outcome	Punishment
Samuel Byck	February 22, 1974	Richard Nixon	Baltimore/ Washington Airport	Byck kills self during unsuccessful hijack attempt	
Lynette Fromme	September 5, 1975	Gerald Ford	Sacramento, CA	Pointed .45 caliber semiautomatic pistol at Ford; Secret Service grabs gun from Fromme	Indicted federal charges—life in prison, Carswell, TX
Sara J. Moore	September 22, 1975	Gerald Ford	San Francisco, CA	Pointed .38 caliber Smith & Wesson at Ford; bystander grabs her arm, bullet deflected	Pled guilty to attempted murder; life in federal prison, Dublin, CA
John Hinckley	March 30, 1981	Ronald Reagan	Washington, DC	Fired six shots from a DC Rohm RG14 .22 caliber revolver; bullets struck Reagan, James Brady, Thomas Delahanty, and Tim- othy McCarthy	Found not guilty by reason of insanity in 1981; confined to St. Elizabeth's Mental Hospital, Washington, DC
Frank Corder	September 11, 1994	Bill Clinton	Washington, DC (White House)	Flew small Cessna airplane into White House compound; plane crashes into Magnolia tree planted by Andrew Jackson; Corder killed in crash	
Francisco Duran	October 29, 1994	Bill Clinton	Washington, DC (White House)	Sprayed White House with a score of bullets from a semiautomatic rifle	Sentenced to 40 years in federal prison
Robert Pickett	February 7, 2001	George W. Bush	Washington, DC (White House)	Held a five-shot revolver; was shot in the knee after a stand-off with Secret Service near the White House	Charged with assault on a federal officer; pled to a 3-year prison term

Furthermore, these assassination attempts all took place in years marked by growing political alienation and frustration. Although collective protest was recognized as a powerful and legitimate form of political engagement during the 1960s, U.S. cultural life increasingly emphasized private, individualized concerns during the decades thereafter (Gitlin, 1987, p. 424). Thus, the assassins' attacks occurred in a climate in which political appetites had been whetted, but outlets for dissent were less accessible than in the recent past. While corporate media tend to assume as common sense the legitimacy of the existing social order (Hall, 1988), the political climate at the time of news coverage affects the political tone of news coverage (Kumar, 2007). Thus, coverage of attempts on the president's

life highlights how the depoliticized climate of the United States after the 1960s informed media coverage of spectacular political events.

### **Media Framing and Public Opinion Formation: A Critical Perspective on the News**

We approach the study of mass media from a perspective critical of the ways in which the media industry cultivates and circulates partial ways of seeing the world (Gans, 1979, 2004; Gerbner, Mowlana, & Schiller, 1996; Glasser & Salmon, 1995; Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978; Sparrow, 1999). Our primary interest is in the text rather than its producers or receivers; as previous research suggests, the agenda-setting (McCombs, 2004) and framing function (Gitlin, 1980) of news media is less a matter of the individual intentions or strategies of particular reporters or editors than of how they are part of a much broader process on a national scale of constructing a hegemonic worldview (Hall et al., 1978, pp. 53–80). Following Herman and Chomsky ([1988]/2002), we view news content as the outcome of the complex interaction among mechanisms of ideological filtration by pressure from editors, owners, and advertisers; standard newsgathering routines privileging political and economic elites; news values, including conventions of balance and a preference for drama; and the assumption of the primacy of the individual in society. In a famous study of news coverage of mugging, Hall et al. argue that because crime violates and thus marks the boundaries of national consensus, crime coverage “evokes threats to, but also reaffirms, the consensual morality of the society” (p. 66). “Action to stigmatize and punish those who break the law, taken by the agents formally appointed as the guardians of public morality and order, stands as a *dramatized symbolic reassertion* of the values of society and of its limits of tolerance” (p. 66).

On the whole, our analysis confirms the tendency of major news media to stigmatize the violent and reassure the nation by dramatically affirming “the consensual morality of society.” At the same time, however, we recognize that media hegemony is never a total accomplishment; news coverage sometimes reflects broader social struggle over particular issues in the presentation of contradictory frames within and across news articles (Kumar, 2007). Below we describe both routine, individualistic frames and more complex and politicized counter-frames that appear in recent news coverage of presidential assassination attempts.

We identify media frames that appear within news articles about these events. The identification of media frames as a method has been engaged frequently by news media scholars (Reese, Gandy, & Grant, 2001). A number of scholars have demonstrated how media frames can have important implications for public attitudes and perceptions of troubling events (Bateson, 1972; Entman, 1993; Gitlin, 1980; Goffman, 1974; Reese et al., 2001; Tuchman, 1978). While diverse scholars have studied framing from a variety of perspectives (Reese et al., 2001), this article follows an interpretive and critical approach to the study of framing processes that attends to the ideological character of news practices. Although we consider the impact of some of the photographs contained in the coverage, our primary emphasis is on the ways in which propositional story content frames the assassination attempts. Gitlin argues that news frames employ particular principles of selection, emphasis, and exclusion to construct “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation”

for news audiences (p. 7). Consequently, the ways in which journalists frame current events may encourage audiences to consider certain aspects of a problem as more salient than others (Entman, 1993), suggest that some spokespeople have more legitimacy than others do (Watkins, 2001), and defuse challenges to prevailing political authority by naturalizing elite frames of social events as common sense (Gitlin, 1980). With few exceptions, in the case of assassination attempts, the idea of national vulnerability and the automatic resort to individualist explanations for violence urged individual blame rather than political analysis of the attacks.

### **News Coverage of Presidential Assassination Attempts**

In support of this argument, we conducted a critical reading of newspaper coverage during the week following the assassination attempts as featured in two major newspapers: the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. These papers are especially influential in the U.S. system because they set the national public's agenda; there is considerable evidence that the issues identified in polls by citizens as the most salient correspond closely with coverage from national newspapers (McCombs, 2004; McCombs, Danielian, & Wanta, 1995). The two national newspapers also feature stories and frames frequently picked up by television news and regional papers (Gans, 1979). The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, specifically, have been found to be particularly significant for news on politics and the presidency (Gans, 1979), surpassing the influence on opinion leaders of other newspapers, international sources, and news magazines during the time periods under study; furthermore, newspapers of national scope serve as supplements to television news for highly motivated and influential citizens (Shah & Scheufele, 2006, p. 5). Through our critical interpretive analysis of each article in these two newspapers, we identify patterns of messages that structured the meaning of presidential assassination attempts between 1973 and 2001 in ways that lent legitimacy to the presidency and depoliticized the acts of would-be assassins.

The *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* covered attempts on the president's life in 220 articles and editorials; 95 articles and 24 editorials appeared in the *Washington Post* and 93 articles and 8 editorials appeared in the *New York Times*. (These articles were gathered through Boolean searches for the names of each assassin in the *WashingtonPost.com* Historical Archives online database, and the ProQuest Historical Newspaper Database covering the *New York Times* 1877–present.) Similarities in coverage between these newspapers suggest that both of these newspapers framed failed attempts on the president's life in similar ways. We attend both to the specificities of the coverage of each individual case and to the broader consistent patterns in the characterization of would-be assassins. The number of articles about each attempt are identified in Table 2, and are distributed according to the day of the week in which a particular number of articles appeared in each newspaper.

**Table 2.** Number of Articles Covering Assassination Attempts in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*

Assassin	Date of attack	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Total
Samuel Byck	Feb. 22, 1974	Feb. 23	Feb. 24	Feb. 25	Feb. 26	Feb. 27	Feb. 28	Feb. 29	
<i>WP</i>		2	2	0	0	2	1	0	7
<i>NYT</i>		1	2	0	0	1	0	0	4
Lynnette Fromme <sup>a</sup>	Sep. 5, 1975	Sep. 6	Sep. 7	Sep. 8	Sep. 9	Sep. 10	Sep. 11	Sep. 12	
<i>WP</i>		8	6	2	2	1	2	1	22
<i>NYT</i>		5	3	3	1	3	1	2	18
Sara J. Moore	Sep. 22, 1975	Sep. 23	Sep. 24	Sep. 25	Sep. 26	Sep. 27	Sep. 28	Sep. 29	
<i>WP</i>		4	4	6	4	1	3	1	23
<i>NYT</i>		6	6	4	3	1	3	0	23
John Hinckley	Mar. 30, 1981	Mar. 31	Apr. 1	Apr. 2	Apr. 3	Apr. 4	Apr. 5	Apr. 6	
<i>WP</i>		7	13	9	5	3	5	2	44
<i>NYT</i>		5	8	7	7	4	8	0	39
Frank Corder	Sep. 11, 1994	Sep. 12	Sep. 13	Sep. 14	Sep. 15	Sep. 16	Sep. 17	Sep. 18	
<i>WP</i>		0	4	2	1	0	0	0	7
<i>NYT</i>		0	3	2	1	0	0	0	6
Francisco Duran	Oct. 29, 1994	Oct. 30	Oct. 31	Nov. 1	Nov. 2	Nov. 3	Nov. 4	Nov. 5	
<i>WP</i>		1	3	2	1	1	1	1	10
<i>NYT</i>		2	3	0	1	1	0	1	8
Robert Pickett	Feb. 7, 2001	Feb. 8	Feb. 9	Feb. 10	Feb. 11	Feb. 12	Feb. 13	Feb. 14	
<i>WP</i>		3	1	2	0	0	0	0	6
<i>NYT</i>		2	1	1	0	0	0	0	4

**Note:** Total number of articles: 220. *WP* = *Washington Post*; *NYT*, *New York Times*.

- a. The fact that the women get significantly more coverage than the men (with the exception of Hinckley, whose obsession with Jodie Foster and partial success in his attack make it noteworthy) suggests that there is a gender dimension to this coverage. Because gender prescriptions for women do not sanction violence or rage in the way that masculinity does, it is more noteworthy when a woman attempts to assassinate the president than when a man does.

Both newspapers featured assassination attempts prominently in the first 2 days following each incident. In general, a greater number of articles about the assassination attempts appeared in the 2 days immediately preceding the events; more space was allotted to issues surrounding the assassination attempts during the first 2 days than on subsequent days; and more articles about the attacks began on the front pages of these newspapers 2 days after the incidents than in the 5 days thereafter.<sup>3</sup> Table 3 presents specific data regarding the frequency, length, and front page placement of these articles. Coverage of the assassination attempts continued into the week after the attacks; however, coverage in both papers tended to taper off as the week progressed.

**Table 3.** Frequency, Length, and Placement of Articles Covering Assassins

	Paper	Byck	Fromme	Moore	Hinkley	Corder	Duran	Pickett	Total
Number of articles and editorials	<i>WP</i>	7	228	23	44	7	10	6	119
	<i>NYT</i>	4	18	23	39	6	8	4	102
Within the first 2 days	<i>WP</i>	4	14	8	20	4	4	4	58
	<i>NYT</i>	3	8	12	13	3	5	3	46
Start on front page	<i>WP</i>	4	8	9	22	2	5	3	53
	<i>NYT</i>	1	7	12	12	2	3	1	38
Start on front page first or second day after attempt	<i>WP</i>	2	7	4	12	2	3	3	33
	<i>NYT</i>	1	5	9	5	2	3	1	26
Over 1,200 words long	<i>WP</i>	2	4	7	15	2	2	3	35
	<i>NYT</i>	0	4	8	9	2	0	1	24
Over 1,200 words long on first or second day after attempt	<i>WP</i>	1	4	4	8	2	2	2	23
	<i>NYT</i>	0	3	3	4	2	1	1	14

*WP* = *Washington Post*; *NYT*, *New York Times*

In addition to sharing similarities in terms of the frequency of coverage, quantity of articles, and space allotted to coverage of presidential assassination attempts, articles within these premier newspapers framed the coverage around similar subjects that contributed the framing of attempts on the president's life and of the motives of the would-be assassins. Most often, articles focused on issues surrounding the security of the president and/or the White House. The security theme was especially prominent in the *Washington Post*, which can be explained by the location of several attacks at the site of the White House (in the cases of Corder, Duran, and Pickett) or in Washington, DC (in the case of Hinkley). When articles attended to the backgrounds of would-be assassins (the second most prominent theme in newspaper coverage), articles featured their psychological states or past histories of delinquent or criminal behavior. Newspaper headlines, as indicators of an article's or editorial's subject focus, frequently highlighted these themes; however, these themes appeared in other articles as well. Likewise, photographs depicted these subjects most frequently as well. Of the 201 photographs that appeared alongside newspaper coverage featuring these themes, 35 photographs depicted the president or the White House and 60 portrayed the attempted assassin. As federal cases against would-be assassins who survived their attacks built toward the middle and end of the week following the attacks, newspaper coverage also reported on events and outcomes of their trial hearings. Table 4 identifies the number of headlines featuring each of these subjects. Only two articles were introduced with headlines indicating a politically based motive for attacking the president ("Hijacker had," 1974; "Miss Moore," 1975). As we argue, it is notable that only two articles featured political problems and public concerns as reasons for presidential assassination attempts.



**Table 4.** Subjects Featured in Headlines of Articles Covering Assassination Attempts

Headline theme	Byck	Moore	Fromme	Hinkley	Corder	Duran	Pickett	Total (% of total number of articles)
President's security; White House security. Examples: "Ford escapes harm as shot is deflected" (Shabecoff, 1975, p. A1); "Sharper scrutiny of White House safety" (Pear, 1994b, p. A14)	WP: 0 NYT: 0	WP: 11 NYT: 9	WP: 9 NYT: 8	WP: 19 NYT: 12	WP: 4 NYT: 2	WP: 3 NYT: 1	WP: 1 NYT: 2	47 (36%) 34
Background of attempted assassin. Example: "In Colorado town, gunman was just another quiet guy" (Claiborne, 1994, p. A6)	WP: 2 NYT: 0	WP: 6 NYT: 5	WP: 6 NYT: 6	WP: 9 NYT: 14	WP: 2 NYT: 3	WP: 4 NYT: 2	WP: 2 NYT: 0	31 (28%) 30
Mental state of assassin (sorted from the category above). Examples: "Desperate sense of isolation" (Flume, 1975, p. A14); "John Hinkley's obsession" (Williams, 1981, B1)	WP: 2 NYT: 0	WP: 5 NYT: 3	WP: 3 NYT: 5	WP: 9 NYT: 9	WP: 2 NYT: 3	WP: 3 NYT: 1	WP: 2 NYT: 0	26 (21%) 21
Federal case developments. Example: "Grand jury indicts Fromme" (Grand jury, 1975, p. A10)	WP: n/a NYT: n/a	WP: 0 NYT: 2	WP: 2 NYT: 5	WP: 1 NYT: 3	WP: n/a NYT: n/a	WP: 2 NYT: 3	WP: 1 NYT: 1	6 (9%) 14

WP = *Washington Post*; NYT, *New York Times*

### Media Frames of Assassination Attempts as Psychopathology

Our analysis of the dominant media frames reveals several ways in which newspaper coverage depoliticizes assassination attempts, priming the public to make sense of these attacks in terms of a presidency and nation vulnerable to the deranged acts of lonely and deluded attackers. These findings correspond with Bennett's (2002) observations that narrative patterns in national newspaper coverage frequently personalize news stories, framing political controversies in terms of conflict between individuals. Bennett suggests that this narrative pattern distracts attention from structural conditions that contribute to political problems. Our analysis extends Bennett's scholarship; newspapers decontextualized assassination attempts from the political and social contexts in which they occurred by depicting would-be attackers as politically isolated and mentally unstable. Intriguingly, therapeutic news frames disappear when it comes time to hold the attackers accountable in the court system. While coverage highlights the personalized and therapeutic frame to understand assassination attempts, the coverage also allows clues in a subordinate and contradictory frame as to the assassins' motives, which includes an oblique recognition of the assassins' desire for agency in a diminished public sphere. This frame, while secondary in the news coverage, resonates with the preponderance of political science, criminal justice, and psychology research regarding assassination as political violence. In this light, we conclude this article with a discussion of the implications of such narrow media frames of other violent acts, including school shootings and terrorism.

***The (Vulnerable) National Body and Home***

An initial theme in coverage of assassination attempts can be spotted in all seven of these cases: the construction of the president and White House—standing in metonymically for the nation—as vulnerable and in need of defense. Although hardly surprising, this pattern becomes critical to the future framing techniques appearing in the news. Table 5 presents examples of the heightened susceptibility that followed Samuel Byck’s attempt to hijack a plane and fly it into the White House, Lynnette Fromme’s attempt to shoot President Gerald Ford in Sacramento, Sara J. Moore’s attempt to shoot Ford in San Francisco, John Hinckley’s shooting of President Ronald Reagan in Washington, DC, Frank Corder’s flying a small plane into the White House, and Francisco Duran’s and Robert Pickett’s attempts to shoot at the White House. In each of these cases, the linguistic choices in Table 5 highlight the ways that these attacks portray the difficulties of protecting the presidential body and home.

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**Table 5.** Examples of Articles Featuring Heightened Vulnerability after All Seven Attempts

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Attacker	Coverage
Samuel Byck	“The Secret Service had ‘no foolproof system for safeguarding’ the White House from an air attack.” (Landers, 1974a, p. A1)
Lynette Fromme	“Despite its computers, and despite the manifold increase in manpower and money since the assassination of President Kennedy, the Secret Service was unable today to prevent Miss Fromme from approaching within arm’s length of the President with a pistol.” (Shabecoff, 1975, p. A1)
Sarah J. Moore	“Moore and Fromme’s attacks raised questions about the personal safety of the President. . . . Questions about the President’s safety, security, and well-being . . . fell in torrents like rain.” (Daniel, 1975, p. A1)
John Hinckley	“Treasury Secretary Donald T. Regan today announced a formal inquiry into the question of how John W. Hinckley Jr., the man charged with the assassination attempt, got to within 10 feet of the President. ‘I feel a formal review should be conducted regarding the events surrounding the assassination attempt in order to assure the continued effectiveness of our security systems,’ said Mr. Regan, whose department includes the Secret Service.” (Raines, 1981a, p. A1)
Frank Corder	“Mr. Corder . . . showed that if a confused, intoxicated man with limited flying skills could almost manage to hit the President’s bedroom with no resistance, then a determined, skilled assassin could inflict far greater damage with such an approach.” (Labaton, 1994b, p. A30)
Roberto Duran	“It was the second uncontested attack on the executive mansion in less than 6 weeks, and it immediately raised anew questions about the safety of a President living not just in the midst of a major city, but barely 50 yards from its six-lane main street.” (Schmitt, 1994, p. A1)
Robert Pickett	“This was the kind of incident that confirms not only the need for strict security measures around the president but the value of constant rehearsal. The White House and the president are always potential targets, of course, and the Secret Service is always trying to balance the value of unobtrusive security and security that is plainly visible. (“The White House Shooting,” 2001, p. A30)

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After the president and or his home have been depicted as exposed, the articles in our sample commented on his safety in two ways, depending upon the nature of the assassination attempt. When the attack targeted the chief executive, descriptions of his recovery served as a metonym for the resilience and recovery of the nation; when the attack targeted the White House, discussions of a threatened 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue served as a metonym for the need to protect a vulnerable country. These symbolic connections provided the groundwork for the therapeutic frame as they emphasized the healing and security of treasured American icons and eschewed a discussion of political, economic, or systemic conditions related to the attacks.

First, consider newspaper coverage of direct threats to Presidents Ford and Reagan. Ford was not wounded in either of the attempts on his life, and newspapers largely described his recovery in terms of his ability to get back to work. Following the attack by Fromme, for instance, the *New York Times* quoted Ford as saying that the Secret Service had done a “superb job” to enable him to “get on with the rest of the day’s schedule” (Naughton, 1975b, p. A3). A photograph of Ford in a subsequent article reinforced this message by portraying Ford smiling and shaking hands with spectators (Naughton, 1975c, p. 1). Coverage of Ford as resilient continued in news portrayals of Moore’s attack later that month. For instance, Naughton (1975d) quoted Ford as saying that he would continue to greet “spectators face to face” because he wanted to maintain “personal contact and (a) relationship with the American people” (p. A21). In these cases, Ford’s threatened body and schedule were described as returning to normal. So, too, was his relationship with the citizenry. As Cloud (1998) has noted, the language of recovering and getting on with things in spite of trauma is a common characteristic of a therapeutic discourse that can discourage publics from dwelling on the causes and solutions of the crisis or trauma. In this case, President Ford was depicted as moving on from the attack; the language and imagery of these articles encouraged the reading public to do so as well.

Because of the critical nature of his attack, Reagan’s recovery garnered more extensive news coverage than did the attempts on other presidents. While he was recuperating in the hospital, the *New York Times* reported that Reagan experienced “soreness in his rib cage,” caused by the “six-inch incision in the left side of his chest,” and had difficulty breathing in the days following his surgery (Raines, 1981b, p. A1). Despite serious wounds, he was described to evince “superhuman strength” (Raines, 1981b, p. A1). *New York Times* journalist Raines reported on conversations with Reagan’s doctors: “Asked if it was ‘medically extraordinary’ for Reagan to have walked into the hospital, Dr. O’Leary said, ‘Maybe not medically extraordinary, but just short of that’” (Raines, 1981b, p. A1). Coverage of Reagan, like that of Ford, attempted to reassure of the enduring stability of the government by focusing on quotidian details of the president’s activities that signified a return to normalcy. Raines (1981b) also reported that Reagan “met with senior aides . . . and signed a bill while sitting up in his bed at the George Washington University Hospital” (p. A1). In this article, Reagan’s ability to carry on his presidential obligations was not thwarted by Hinckley’s attack. Photographs of Reagan also emphasized his recovery. Unlike coverage of Ford, photographic images of Reagan were largely excluded from newspaper coverage until the fifth day after the attack, when Reagan was well enough to stand upright and walk outside of his hospital room (Lyons, 1981, p. E2; Okie & Lescazie, 1981, p. A1). That

he was able to recover so quickly offered reassurance on literal and metaphorical levels that the political body, though vulnerable, was resilient. Perhaps because Reagan was the only president in this sample to be physically injured, his attack and recuperation stood out in coverage as a symbol of national health. News narratives that focused on the vulnerability, recovery, and symbolism of the president's targeted body encouraged a connection with the recuperating chief executive and a consideration of the nation's relationship to him rather than the contemplation of the political, economic, or systemic motivations behind these attacks.

Complementing coverage of attempts on the president's life, newspaper coverage of the four threats to the White House in this study emphasized the importance of protecting the national home. For example, after Byck's effort to hijack a plane to fly into the White House, *Washington Post* journalist Landers and Robinson (1974, p. A10) quoted Secret Service spokesman Jack Warner as saying, "[W]e are constantly evaluating our security procedures at the White House" and noted that Warner "refused to comment on what, if any, precautions existed against an air attack such as the one planned by Byck." Twenty years later, following Corder's attack on the White House, *New York Times* reporter Labaton cited Marlin Fitzwater's (former press secretary to Presidents Reagan and George H. W. Bush) concern that "there's no predicting or preventing aerial attacks. It's the ultimate fear for security people." Labaton also quoted Bill Gulley (former director of the White House Military Office) who noted that: "You wouldn't believe—nobody could possibly believe—how vulnerable the White House is" (Labaton, 1994a, p. A1). Columnist Dowd (1994) asserted that the scene of the Corder plane crash provided "frightening proof . . . that the White House is more vulnerable than anyone admits" (p. A1). Likewise, a *New York Times* editorial column depicted Corder's attempt as a rupture of widespread belief in the ability of the United States to protect its citizens: "The woebegone citizen Frank Eugene Corder hit something bigger and more fragile than the White House with his stolen Cessna. He crashed into and damaged American faith in the protective capabilities of technology and security forces" ("Mad Flight," 1994, p. A18). These articles invited readers to focus on the defenselessness of the(ir) White House and the importance of protecting it rather than on the causes for these attacks.

News coverage credited the Secret Service and individual citizens for restoring order to the nation's home and, in a sense, credited them with symbolically resuscitating the nation's health. Following Duran's attack on the White House, President Clinton was quoted as praising "the courage of those who had subdued Mr. Duran, saying the gunman was captured 'because ordinary citizens who were standing there did their duty'" (Schmitt, 1994, p. A30). After Pickett's similar type of attack on the White House, one *New York Times* column suggested that "only confidence in the Secret Service and in the fundamentally peaceable nature of the vast majority of people could guarantee such a quick return to business as usual" ("The White House Shooting," 2001, p. A30). News narratives like these called attention to privatized responses to social problems—a key characteristic of the therapeutic frame. The threat of harm to the national body directly invokes a therapeutic response, rather than an explanatory or critical way of regarding traumatic events. In applauding a "quick return to business as usual," these texts leave unexamined the potential political, economic, or systemic motivations of protestors in news coverage. The theme

of mental illness and maladjustment in the news coverage of assassination attempts, the other predominant framework in the articles we examined, put the political issues surrounding assassination attempts into further obscurity.

### *The Lonely and Demented Outsider*

At the same time that journalistic frames called attention to the recovery and protection of vulnerable American icons, they also identified those who would threaten the president as outside of the mainstream; indeed, as outside the citizenry itself. For example, President Ford was quoted as saying that he “would not blame Californians for actions of ‘1’ individual” after he learned of Fromme’s attempt to shoot him (Naughton, 1975a, p. A1). Another *New York Times* article featured the same framing of the event, and included a statement by House Republican Leader John T. Rhodes of Arizona who suggested that Fromme’s attempt to assassinate Ford represented “one crackpot[’s]” effort to “produce chaos” (“Mrs. Ford,” 1975, p. 26). These characterizations of assassination attempts as the work of lone, psychologically disturbed outsiders may have provoked newspaper readers to feel as if they had more in common with the chief executive (whose body and home they were invited to share) than their fellow citizen (who had been depicted as an “other”).

Would-be assassins were also frequently labeled as social isolates via the words of neighbors, co-workers, and relatives. One named citizen, Renee Goldstein, who was familiar with Byck, told reporters he “was a loner” (Richards, 1974, p. M1). One of Hinckley’s neighbors, Thomas J. Murphy, was quoted as describing Hinckley as “a rather impersonal guy,” and another neighbor, Dr. Craig Van Buskirk, added that Hinckley “wasn’t the type of guy who made friends. . . . He’s the type of guy you’d say ‘hi’ to and he wouldn’t say ‘hi’ back” (Crewdson, 1981, p. A2). News articles included assessments by John Corder, who described his brother as a “loner who would not talk about his problems” (Labaton, 1994a, p. A1); Duran’s neighbor, who shared with the press that (Duran) “never liked to talk much” (Johnson, 1994, p. A14); and hospital officials, who referred to Pickett as “subdued and silent” (Sanger, 2001, p. A 26). In a sense, the inclusion of these statements in news coverage marginalized the voice of the attackers by suggesting that in social interactions they had “nothing to say” and “could not fit in.” Making sense of these attacks in terms of interpersonal failings departs from the aforementioned research in political science and criminal justice. This editorial move also put into the foreground an understanding of these individuals as isolated, a pattern that may discourage readers from thinking critically about the attacks.

News coverage also highlighted specifics on the attackers’ personal and professional struggles. Reporters described how several would-be assassins had broken marriages or came from broken homes. For example, *Washington Post* reporter Landers (1974a) detailed how Byck’s wife divorced him 6 months prior to his assassination attempt (p. A1), and *New York Times* columnist Dowd (1994) described how Corder’s third marriage ended in the weeks prior to his attack (p. A1). Likewise, newspaper reports indicated that Moore was married and divorced twice. Moore’s brother, Sydney Kahn, told a reporter that Moore “had been adopted by her grandmother, now Mrs. C. E. Bailey, as a child and never knew her mother” (Malcolm, 1975, p. A1).

Referring to assassins' economic problems, Byck was described as "unemployed" (Richards, 1974, p. M3), Moore as having "infrequent jobs" (Malcolm, 1975, p. A1), and Hinckley as "a follower, not a leader, and . . . basically fairly lazy" (Treatser, 1981, p. A19). These references to the intended assassins' occupational struggles were further traced back to their academic failures. The *New York Times* reported that Fromme had dropped out of El Camino Junior College in Torrance, California (McFadden, 1975, p. A 26); that Hinckley never graduated from college (although he studied "off and on" at Texas Tech University); and that Pickett dropped out of school after being dismissed in the 1980s from a job at the IRS (Sanger, 2001, p. A26).

Significantly, in these instances, journalists acknowledged economic and professional hardships as affecting the lives of these would-be assassins. The coverage stopped short, however, of connecting the personal hardship of the attackers to the broader social context of economic recession and generalized economic anxiety. Instead, the press coverage of the attempts followed a pattern identified by Cloud (1998), who has argued that therapeutic discourse encourages audiences to "think of crisis, resolution, change, and stability as personal issues rather than as structural ones" (p. 160); and that in the contemporary system: "We are asked to shoulder the responsibility for change as individuals, no matter the extent of our suffering or the structural causes of our despair" (p. 165). The dislocation of attention to social issues like economic recession and social inequality into the realm of personal suffering and responsibility is the hallmark of the therapeutic frame.

Other news coverage highlighted the attempted assassins' history of deviant social behavior. For instance, one article in the *New York Times* called attention to Moore's interest "in the fringes of radical groups, drugs, and easy sex" (Malcolm, 1975, p. A1). Another story suggested that Ford's other would-be assassin, Fromme, had belonged to a violent fringe group tied to Charles Manson and had been arrested "more than a dozen times on various charges ranging from drug possession and petty theft to robbery and murder" (McFadden, 1975, p. A1). Stories of Corder's attempt to assassinate President Clinton similarly described his history of drug use and attempts to sell crack cocaine the day prior to his assassination attempt (Pear, 1994a, p. A20).

The explicit soliciting of psychiatric opinion further enforces the therapeutic frame. One journalist reported that Byck had been committed to a mental hospital for manic depression and wanted help very badly. The same article stressed Byck's admission of having psychotic fantasies, and cited FBI investigator Thomas Farrow's assessment that Byck "must have had tremendous weight on his mind if not mentally disturbed" (Witkin, 1974, p. A1). The *Washington Post* also discussed Byck's psychological problems, quoting psychiatrist John Lyon, who explained that Byck "cannot live with the limitations of his own personality, and prefers to build a high wall around himself where he can entertain his fantasies" (Landers, 1974b, p. A3). Reporters similarly focused on the mental delusions of Moore and Corder. Moore "lived in a fantasy world," had "violent fits of temper," made "wild threats," and was described as "confused" and "disturbed" (Malcolm, 1975, p. A1). Corder was depicted as suffering from hopelessness and depression and, in one particularly literary description, "vertiginous moods" (Dowd, 1994a, p. A1). Another journalist noted that Corder told a friend that he felt so hopeless that he considered flying a plane on a suicide mission to the White House (Pear, 1994, p. A20).

Following Hinckley's assassination attempt, one *New York Times* article cited multiple psychiatrists and psychologists, all of whom attested to the pathological mental states of assassins throughout U.S. history. Notably, Dr. Zigmond Lebensohn, a Washington psychiatrist, was quoted as saying that assassinations in the United States are often "the product of a single mentally disturbed person who is alienated from society, who feels like a zero, is wanted by no one and can't get a job" (Brody, 1981, p. A26). Twenty-three years later, a citizen was cited by the press as identifying an assassin as a crazy loner: Following Corder's attempt, columnist Dowd (1994) quoted the words of Patrick Porter as he looked at the yellow police tapes on the South Lawn of the White House: "It just proves you can make all the plans in the world and there's nothing you can do to plan against a lunatic who doesn't think rationally" (p. A1). The attribution of unreason to anti-establishment violence encourages readers to disregard other motivations, which in several cases were explicitly political in character. Acknowledging the experience of the assassin possibly could open up consideration of the political analysis and grievances they put forward.

### **A Counter-frame and a Contradiction**

Although news coverage featured therapeutic news frames that narrowed political analysis to the experience of individuals, the articles that we examined did not enact a complete retreat into the therapeutic. One counter-frame and one pronounced contradiction emerged from our analysis: The counter-frame attended to how the would-be assassins sought public, political outlets for their anger and criticism before they resorted to violence; the contradiction appeared in the legal discourse surrounding these cases that focuses on the culpability of the assassins for attacks on the presidency. This aforementioned counter-frame emerged in instances in which the newspapers let readers "hear" the assassin's voice.

#### ***Counter-frame 1: Desperation and Diminished Publics***

The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* allocated space to quotations and descriptions of artifacts from the would-be assassins. These mentions occurred most often in the second day following each assassination attempt, and in the bottom paragraphs of the articles. In this way, reporters attended to quotations of assassins well after the news frames of the "Chief Executive as vulnerable" and attackers as "lonely, demented outsiders" had been established; that is, well after the assassins were isolated, neutralized, and pathologized in the news.

Intriguingly, when they were present, the assassins' voices provided a stark contrast to reporters' dominant frames as the statements from the attackers often alluded to political, economic, and systemic frustrations. For instance, in an interview with the *New York Times*, Moore (previously active in "radical" groups) described her attempt on Ford's life as an "ultimate protest against the system." As she explained her actions, she told reporters that she wanted the government to "face the realities of some of the things they put in motion" (1975, p. 30). While Fromme was not quoted directly, her roommate Sandra Goode told reporters that Fromme was concerned that "no one [was] doing anything to help the country." According to Goode, Fromme complained that prevailing political institutions failed

to address problems such as “air and water pollution” and dishonesty in the Nixon and Ford administrations. As Fromme’s surrogate affirmed, Fromme’s assassination attempt represented the culmination of “many, many problems” (Turner, 1975, p. A1). Schmitt’s (1994) article in the *New York Times* on the Duran attack also indicated that Duran may have been motivated by political considerations. Schmitt’s article noted that prior to the attack, “Duran grilled a fellow bystander on the man’s views about the nation’s immigration policies” (A30) and described how bumper stickers on Duran’s car denounced Attorney General Janet Reno and the gun control movement. One sticker read: “Those who beat their guns into plows will plow for those who don’t” (A30). By including these details toward the bottom of the article, Schmitt acknowledged that political issues may have played a part in the motive for Duran’s attempt to shoot President Clinton from the White House lawn.

Other articles closed by mentioning the economic and broader systemic concerns of the attackers. One story detailed how Pickett had sent a letter to his employer, the Internal Revenue Service, in which he claimed that the organization failed to provide adequate treatment for his mental health problems when he worked for the IRS (“Authorities Plan,” 2001, p. A14). Another addressed how Sara Jane Moore called her attempt on Ford “kind of an ultimate protest against the system.” Because she had served the FBI as an informant about Left organizations, Moore was extremely isolated from movements and collectives that might have channeled her motivation to protest in a useful direction. Because of that sense of isolation, she explains, “I did not want to kill somebody, but there comes a point when the only way you can make a statement is to pick up a gun. . . . I knew I was rapidly reaching a point that all the avenues of taking action were being closed, one at a time. . . . I wanted them to face the realities of some of the things they put in motion” (“Miss Moore,” 1975, p. 30).

Coverage of Byck put this sentiment most poignantly in a 1974 article that featured his question: “How can I, by myself, possibly be a public gathering?” (“Hijacker,” 1974, p. 34). Alone, he had been picketing the White House in demand of Nixon’s impeachment. Although he was introduced in coverage as a longtime manic-depressive, his description of his motivations for protest seemed to have little to do with his mental health. In one article, he was quoted as saying: “If I had the power to give everyone something, I’d get them to give a damn” (“Hijacker,” 1974, p. 34). In another column, which drew from a tape he had sent to columnist Jack Anderson, Byck is quoted as saying:

I call myself a grain of sand on the beach called the U.S. of A. There are over 211 million grains of sand, and on the beach that we call Earth there are over 3 billion grains of sand. But can one individual, one grain of sand, strike fear into the ruling classes so that they will become more compassionate and more understanding and cognizant of the needs of the populace, the many, many people? (quoted in Landers & Robinson, 1974, A1)

In these remarks, one can hear the desire on the part of Byck and Moore to represent people other than themselves and to involve others in questioning and protest. Both felt that other



avenues of being heard were either nonexistent or inadequate to their needs. In some consonance with this counter-frame, a Hollywood film called *The Assassination of Richard Nixon*, starring Sean Penn as Byck, appeared in 2004 (Mueller, 2004). The film establishes a point of view sympathetic with Byck, who is portrayed as a righteously angry but ineffective businessman trying to find an outlet for his outrage. The fictionalized events of the film include Byck's attempt to join the Black Panthers, apparently to emphasize Byck's desire for a political outlet and underscore political motivations of his actions. A review called the film "a discomfiting look at a man determined to leave his mark on the world, only to become a footnote" (Fennessey, 2007).

Such remarks indicate how Byck and Moore, lacking channels and fora in which they might persuade others to become part of a campaign of critique and social transformation, expressed their sense of limited personal agency. This more critical frame was subordinate to the primary therapeutic one. While the assassins' desperate attempts to have a public impact did garner attention, the sort of attention provided by journalists in almost every case reduced assassins' often complex political motivations to personal derangement, deflecting the open moment of political crisis away from deliberation about inflation, gas prices, welfare, workplace exploitation, sexism, environmental destruction, poverty, or racism—all present in the assassins' discourse—and toward an interpretation that framed disaffection as pathology.

#### ***A Troubling Contradiction: Guilty by Reason of Insanity***

Although the discourse of psychopathology infused newspaper interpretations of assassination attempts in the United States, Hinckley was the only would-be assassin whose lawyer successfully defended him with an insanity plea. As illustrated in Table 1, the other assassins either died in their attempts (Byck and Corder), were indicted (Fromme), were convicted (Duran), or pled to charges (Moore and Pickett). The contradiction between newspaper treatments of would-be assassins as pathologically ill and the legal outcomes of these attempts that held these individuals accountable was especially clear in the coverage of Duran and Pickett.

In Duran's case, his lawyers tried to enter an insanity plea for their client, one that mirrored the news' construction of him as pathological and lonely. First, the legal team tried to convince a federal judge to conduct his trial in two phases to allow him to use an insanity defense if necessary. They were unsuccessful in doing so ("Insanity Defense Ruling," 1995, p. B02). Then, Duran's lawyers attempted an insanity defense, which was rejected by a federal jury after the prosecution "called more than 60 witnesses to show that Duran had talked often of anarchy and that he hated government in general and Clinton in particular" (Locy, 1995, D01).<sup>4</sup> Although news coverage immediately following the event emphasized Duran's isolation, the *Washington Post* ran a different assessment of Duran 6 months later when it was time to sentence him. At that time, journalist Locy quoted U.S. Attorney Eric H. Holder as saying: "The jury's rejection of Duran's insanity defense also was important. . . . Very often in society, people try to use excuses to deflect responsibility. . . . This jury has sent a message to people like this that bogus excuses will not be tolerated" (Locy, 1995, D01).

At first, news coverage dismissed Pickett as a crazy person. However, Pickett's trial disavowed attempts to recognize him as insane. In the discussion of charges being filed against him, one reporter commented: "While officials said there was no rush to file charges against Mr. Pickett, they also said they were not being hindered by accounts that he is mentally ill" ("Authorities Plan," 2001, p. A14). The authorities and the reporter indicated that mediated constructions of Pickett's mental illness did not provide conclusive knowledge that he was psychologically disturbed. In both the Duran and Pickett cases, then, newspaper accounts retreated from pathological characterizations of these attempted assassins when it came time for them to appear in court.

There is a troubling irony in coverage that frames assassins as mentally ill and a legal system that rejects such classifications. Perhaps, the case of assassination attempts reflects a broader pattern with regard to the diminution of the public sphere in terms of both therapy and individual culpability. Criticism that exposes this kind of fracture or contradiction in news coverage may open up space for contextual thinking about extreme, as well as more moderate, forms of protest in the United States.

### **Considering Assassination Attempts as Protest**

We are not alone in recognizing the political and economic motivations of actual and would-be assassins. A considerable body of literature has emphasized that they are only sometimes mentally ill and are often motivated by goals or problems that may be shared by other individuals. To date, researchers have explored what motivates an assassin or would-be assassin (Freedman, 1971; Greening, 1971), how assassinations in other countries are regarded as political and economic (Crotty, 1971; Feierabend et al., 1971), and how public sympathy for the president increases, and support for public protest decreases, after an assassination attempt (Appelton, 2000; Yuchtman-Yaar, 1999). Scholars have also illustrated how the meaning of an assassination is negotiated in the discourse following the event (Edelman & Simon, 1971; Nachman, 1997), how faith is restored in political institutions (Goldzweig & Sullivan, 1995; Vande Berg, 1995), how bonds to national unity are reestablished (Schwartz, 1991), and how national cohesion is promoted to provide consolation after an attack (Zelizer, 1992).

National security officials, too, have acknowledged the significance of political and economic contexts of assassination attempts. Notably, Robert Fein (a psychologist for the U.S. Secret Service) and Brian Vossekuil (a Deputy Special Agent Charge for the Intelligence Division of the U.S. Secret Service) produced a guidebook for law enforcement officials that summarized extensive research on assassination attempts of highly visible U.S. individuals (including the president). There they advanced several key arguments, including that law enforcement professionals: (a) can be taught to begin to "identify and neutralize people" who pose a threat to public officials (Fein & Vossekuil 2000, p. v), and (b) must not believe the myths that assassinations are solely a product of mental illness or derangement. On this latter point, Fein and Vossekuil explained that "mental illness only rarely plays a key role in assassination behaviors" (p. 13), and that "assassinations and attacks on public officials and figures are the products of understandable and often discernable processes of thinking and behavior" (p. 15). Moreover, in their minds, "most people who attack others

perceive the attack as the means to a goal or a way to solve a problem" and "an individual's motives and selection of a target are directly connected" (p. 15).

Freedman (1971) argued similarly, noting how it is much easier for attackers to commit acts of violence against someone they know or someone who is geographically close to them. For this reason, Freedman encourages scholars to distinguish between "violent acts" (the most common types of violence, most often committed against spouses and neighbors) and "violent political acts" (far less common and far more public). For Freedman, the personal murderer "violates his conscience," whereas the political murderer "kills a stranger after careful, secretive planning" and "does so for an ideal" (p. 151).

Clarke (1982) offered parallel findings. Of the 15 American assassins he studied, only three were identified as psychopaths. According to Clarke, politically motivated assassins

represent the primary notion official explanations have sought to deny; that is, some assassins are rational extremists who have acted for political rather than personal reasons. . . . Moreover, the strong, ethnic, class, and sectional grievances associated with the motives of these subjects were shared by millions of others, either in this country or elsewhere. It is from such reservoirs of resentment that these assassins spring—not the broken homes, unresolved oedipal crises, delusions, paranoia, desire for recognition, and so forth that form the basis for most previous explanations of their acts. (pp. 262–263)

Other scholars have underscored the connection between an attacker's motivations, the public nature of the presidency, and broader societal concerns. Edelman and Simon (1971) maintained: "In his political opinions, the political assassin always reflects a point of view held with greater or less intensity by many other people as well. . . . It is this widespread support and opposition to his political views that endows his dramatic action with more than personal meaning" (p. 456). Crotty (1971) put it very directly: "One thing is clear: The (Presidential) assassins struck at the office, not the man. They had no personal relationships with their victims, no animosity directed against them as individuals, and frequently even no knowledge of their personalities or actions when in office" (p. 39). The contradiction posed by differences political science research about assassination attempts and national newspaper coverage of them highlights the implications of a therapeutic frame of would-be assassins as mentally ill; whereas political science research recommends heeding the political implications of assassination attempts and the prevailing political contexts in which s/he operates, national media reduce the political problems situating such acts to instances caused by individual mental illness that require little public scrutiny.

We understand these violent acts to constitute what feminist scholar Susan Bordo calls a "pathology of protest." About anorexia, Bordo (1993) has observed that it is important to recognize an element of protest in the act of self-starvation against ideals of female domesticity (p. 159), just as we might regard assassination attempts as containing such an element of protest against reigning economic and social conditions. Even so, Bordo has cautioned critics against celebrating such forms of resistance, recognizing that there is neither conscious politics nor "any social political understanding at all. . . . The symptoms themselves function to preclude the emergence of such an understanding" (p. 159). The present study

shows how news media amplified “the symptoms” to preclude the emergence of a social and political understanding on the part of the reading public.

### **Conclusion: Reconsidering Pathological Explanations for National Disease**

In summary, this article has described how news coverage of assassination attempts has portrayed the president and nation as vulnerable (and therefore in need of reassurance) and introduced the attackers as lonely, sick, and demented (and therefore in need of treatment or incarceration). Even though the attackers’ desperate attempts to have a public impact received some attention, this attention appeared after journalistic coverage largely reduced assassins’ often-complex political motivations to personal derangement. This therapeutic framing may have deflected attention from public issues such as inequality toward interpretations that framed disaffection as pathology. This trope is both producer and product of an impoverished public life (Habermas, 1989; see also Asen & Brouwer, 2001; Calhoun, 1993; Crossley & Roberts, 2004). Political assassination attempts represent just one instance in which media frames may discourage publics from thinking politically about violence and tragedy.

The implications of our study bear upon news coverage of other violent ruptures. For example, coverage of the University of Texas Tower shootings by Charles Whitman in 1966 neglected to mention his status as a Vietnam veteran facing what we would now call post-traumatic stress (Eberly, 2003). Hoerl’s (2002) analysis of newspaper coverage of the Columbine High School shootings contends that the framing of the shooters as monstrous and pathological youth derailed public discussion of the hierarchy, bullying, and social and economic anxiety afflicting suburban schools. In each case, public issues were reduced to personal madness in the therapeutic news frame. In each case, shooters’ resorting to violence could be interpreted as attempts at publicity in the absence of public fora in which their grievances could have been heard. Future research could explore media coverage of other school shootings, including the 2007 massacre at Virginia Tech. In addition, future research could provide analysis of televisual and computer-mediated coverage to determine whether the therapeutic pattern prevails there, and to what extent. In addition, the insights of our analysis of presidential assassination attempts might be explored in future research with regard to the coverage of other instances and forms of violence, including terrorism (see Zinn, 2002).

This analysis suggests that print journalism practices require additional framing techniques that cultivate a political information environment in which American citizens might think about such tragic and dramatic events beyond psychological and individualistic terms. Rubenstein (1971) has argued that assassination attempts are manifestations of “mal-distributed power” (p. 430). As political scholar Greening (1971) writes:

The label “insane” has ceased to be an adequate explanation of such complex personal and social acts. By understanding the forces that made him and seeing how they rise out of the basic nature of our imperfect community of man [*sic*],

we can grasp more clearly the fact that each assassin is but a symptom of mankind's [sic] violence, pain and loneliness. Our civilization produces the assassin and he will tell us how far we still have to go. (pp. 265–266)

Further critical analysis of media texts may interrupt the therapeutic framing of public violence as we have attempted to do. In the context of massive social inequality and ongoing war, critical scholarship might draw attention to the ways in which seemingly irrational violence is a symptom of both inequality and anomie. This project requires that we interpret assassination attempts and other forms of public violence as products of the routine violence and hardship experienced by ordinary people. Such political and critical frames lend nuanced understanding to the role of spectacular forms of violence in public life. Likewise, such scholarship might expose the limits of commercial mass media for understanding how the structural environments in which people are embedded constrain opportunities for citizenship and contribute to moments of political violence.

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## Notes

1. On June 21, 1982, Hinckley was found not guilty by reason of insanity (the only individual in this study to be so regarded). Hinckley's sentence set off a debate about the insanity defense and, after this verdict, many states and the U.S. Congress enacted changes in the insanity defense.
2. Specifically, they found that: A high rate of assassination is positively related to systemic frustration, external conflict, minority tensions, and homicide rates, as well as to political instability and violence. The higher the levels of systemic frustration, external conflict, minority tension, homicide rates, and general political violence within a society, the higher the assassination rates.
3. The *New York Times* coverage of Hinckley's shooting of President Reagan provides a stark exception to this trend. The spectacular nature of Hinckley's infatuation with the then adolescent film star Jodie Foster as well as the injuries to President Reagan during the attack explains why the newspaper continued to contribute several articles to the subject toward the end of that week. Despite the continued number of articles assigned to Hinckley's attempt on President Reagan's life, the length of newspaper articles in the *New York Times* declined as the week ended, thus reinforcing the pattern created by coverage of other assassination attempts.
4. Locy (1995, D01) quotes U.S. Attorney Eric H. Holder: "'Very often in society, people try to use excuses to deflect responsibility,' he said. 'This jury has sent a message to people like this that bogus excuses will not be tolerated.'"

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