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ASSASSINATIONS AND THEIR INFLUENCE

"Assassination has never changed the history of the world," proclaimed Benjamin Disraeli in 1865 on the occasion of the murder of President Abraham Lincoln. Whether his statement was fatuous or disingenuous (England backed the South during the Civil War) will never be known, but subsequent events proved his lack of foresight. The assassination of Lincoln did, indeed, change history in profound ways.

It brought to an abrupt end the interest-free money that Lincoln had the courage to issue. His death also ushered in the harsh Reconstruction regime which treated the defeated South many times worse than we treated the defeated Germans and Japanese after World War II.

As we look back on the major news events of the past year, one might conclude that 1981 launched a new era in which terrorism, more than war or international power plays, has become the biggest threat. The most dramatic events of 1981 were the attempted assassinations of Ronald Reagan and John Paul VI and the successful assassination of Anwar Sadat.

Foreign correspondent Claire Sterling provides impressive documentation in her book "The Terror Network," that there is a deliberate and unified network of terrorism extending from Havana to Moscow to Palestine whose ultimate beneficiary and undercover patron is the Soviet Union. Regardless of the specifics about the identified criminals who assaulted Sadat and the Pope, the beneficiary would have been the Soviet Union.

Sadat was an amazing leader of such courage and character that he was the principal stabilizing element in the unstable Middle East. The Pope, a religious leader of unique personality, prestige, nationality, and media skill, is the principal deterrent to the Soviet aggression in Poland.

The American nation has survived the assassination of several Presidents, and no doubt could again, but it is clear that the changes in our government's policies would

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be massive if President Reagan were to fall to a killer's bullet. There is no evidence that the man who tried to kill Reagan earlier this year was part of the international terror network, but there is evidence that the terrorists will make a future attempt.

The U.S. intelligence community has reported that an assassination squad under orders from Libyan strongman Khadafy is believed to have entered the United States for the purpose of attacking top American government officials. The President's plane, Air Force One, is a special target. It's time that the American people wake up to the threat from terrorists within our own country.

According to intelligence experts, this threat from a Kadafy goon squad is "not a lone gunman-style assault. We're talking about an all-out attack by people who don't even care if they get away." (The criminals who attacked Sadat and the Pope apparently didn't care whether they got away. They appeared to think they were on a good mission.)

Speculation about why would-be assassins behave as they do, and what they might hope to gain by murdering our President, and who might have hired them to pull the trigger, is not a fruitful endeavor. But the taking of every precaution to protect the lives of American leaders is a fundamental duty of the republic.

A year's end evaluation of why the personal, living leadership of Ronald Reagan is so important to America -- and so different from his precedessors and probably from his successors -- is useful. The Reagan Administration has made a clearcut turn from the past in three vital areas.

In the economic field, Reaganomics has given us three innovative changes: incentive tax cuts, reduction of regulations, and the "block-granting" of funds to state control. In national defense, Reagan has commenced a rebuilding of our strength and challenged the Soviets to real arms reduction. The Reagan Administration has even called for judicial reform to curtail the abuse of power wielded by lifetime-tenured Federal judges.

Yes, indeed, assassination can change the history of the world. So much is at stake in the personal leadership of both Pope Paul VI and President Reagan that we like to think that the hand of God intervened to shield them from the assassins' bullets fired at such very close range.

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