

# The Quote Circuit

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by Tom Bethell

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With the assassination attempt by Sara Jane Moore, it was high time to crank up the Quote Circuit. Two assassination attempts in three weeks, sandwiching the Patty Hearst capture—that's enough to make a nervous editor reach for his Rolodex containing a list of professors and pundits who can be relied upon to provide a quote, to discern the deeper meaning, to tie these apparently random events together with an explanation.

And so it was that a day after the San Francisco shooting *The New York Times* published a piece by Peter Kihss entitled "VIOLENCE FEARED BY PSYCHIATRISTS, They Voice Concern Over Alienated People's Views." Kihss quoted half a dozen psychiatrists. On the same day *The Washington Post* ran a piece by Stuart Auerbach entitled "COOL OFF PERIOD" quoting several more, two of them overlapping with the *Times* list.

The *Times* also ran quotes by eight other figures, half of them professors (three at Harvard), and Douglas Knee-

land wrote a "Mood of San Francisco" piece, quoting liberally from Rev. Cecil Williams, pastor of Glide Memorial Church.

The Quote Circuit was humming along nicely. Then came *Time* and *Newsweek*, adding the comments of eight more psychiatrists, some of them overlapping with those quoted by the *Times* and the *Post*. In addition, *Newsweek* ran a separate Quote Circuit article, as had the *Times* several days earlier, publishing the views of "a wide range of Americans who have studied or had close personal experience with campaigns," addressing the question: "Should techniques of Presidential campaigning be changed?" Among those quoted were such familiar Quote Circuit riders as Kevin Phillips, Frank Mankiewicz and Richard M. Scammon—and only one psychiatrist this time, Lawrence Freedman of the University of Chicago.

The Quote Circuit was busy, all right, but several questions came into my mind. How does the Quote Circuit work exactly? How does one get onto it? Is this just a devious form of editorializing? Why are psychiatrists

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called so often on these occasions? And especially, how does a psychiatrist get onto the Quote Circuit—not necessarily an easy feat considering that there are about 26,000 psychiatrists in America, most of them dispensing a similar brand of wisdom. How, then, to rise above the common herd?

An inspection of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Time* and *Newsweek* for a three-week period shows that in the related and sometimes indistinguishable fields of social psychology, psychiatry and sociology a fairly tightly knit group of doctors and professors currently dominate the Quote Circuit. For instance, on a list I drew up, Lawrence Freedman appears four times (in the *Post*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U. S. News*), Dr. Judd Marmor, president of the American Psychiatric Association, three times (*Times*, *Post*, *U. S. News*), Dr. Marvin Wolfgang, sociologist at the University of Pennsylvania, three times, Dr. Perry Ottenberg, psychiatrist at the University of Pennsylvania, twice, while another favorite was Philip Zimbardo, social psychologist at Stanford University, who seems to have a good rating at *The Washington Post*.

Nice for them, I was thinking darkly to myself. I mentioned the Quote Circuit to someone I know on *The Washington Post*.

"That's 'React,'" he said, explaining the newsroom mechanics. "Say it's an assassination attempt, the main story is 'Shoot.' One person does 'Shoot,' another does 'React,' another does 'Girl,' if it was a woman who did it, another might do 'Parents,' another would do 'Protect,' about the Secret Service protection. That's the way it works. 'React' is the story you're interested in. Broder keeps lists of names." David Broder is an associate editor at *The Washington Post*.

I called a man I know at *The New York Times*. "Do you keep lists?" I asked, imagining myself on the trail of a conspiracy.

"No, we don't keep lists," he

replied. "There are no lists. The wrap-up is done by a generalist, and he'll go to the paper's specialists—reporters who have a special knowledge in a field. They'll give him names from their field. Or they might have names of their own. I used to kid Lesley Oelsner when she did criminal stories for us. A guy named Yale Kamisar at the University of Michigan cropped up in virtually every legal story she did. But he did have the ability to pull a complicated issue together succinctly.

"To see the way the *Times* does it," my man went on, "take a look at the latest major airplane crash in the U. S., for example. There will be the 'Overall' story, a 'Medical' story, 'On Scene' story, one by the Aviation expert, and a 'Reaction' story. It's marvelous."

"How do you mean, marvelous?" I asked.

"Marvelous in the sense that it's done very swiftly. Like a small book on the subject being put out overnight. It's done according to a formula."

"What about when Nixon resigned?" I asked. Nixon's resignation was a big moment for the Quote Circuit. At that moment an ambitious professor with his eye on the Circuit stayed close to the telephone; those already wired in merely had to put out press releases. Julian Bond, the Georgia state legislator who is known principally for appearing in print on these occasions, appeared in print.

"When Nixon resigned?" said my man, thinking back an aeon. "They had everybody around here calling up senators and press secretaries—anyone you could think of. It's kind of stupid."

"But I guess there was a need for copy," I said encouragingly. "You couldn't just print Nixon's speech by itself."

"With a major event like that, you have to have a lot of space devoted to it," he said; and a little light went on in my head. "So you hear the editors saying, 'Let's have a reaction sidebar.'"

"Do you think there's a tendency for the reporter to arrange to get quotes that conform to his own opinion?" I asked.

"Well, let's be honest about this," he chided. "Of course it's possible to do that. If you've been a reporter you know that that happens all the time. You've done it yourself, right?"



I came to the conclusion that I was in fact fishing for a quote from him that would confirm my suspicions about a Quote Circuit conspiracy, and so I decided to call one or two English journalists I know. The British approach to news is not always the same as the American approach.

Paul Lewis of the London *Financial Times* was on the line, referring to the Quote Circuit as "a perverse offshoot of the doctrine of the separation of powers. A strict distinction between comment and news must be maintained. The reporter is not allowed to say so and so, but if he can get someone else to say it for him, then that's all right, you see. My feeling is a) this leads to bad writing, b) it's completely unconvincing—it would be better if the writer himself said the significance is this and the reasons are one, two, three. In the economic field it's really terribly bad. And of course there's a tendency towards political bias. Arthur Okun at Brookings, a dyed-in-the-wool liberal, is forever turning up with comments. Brookings is a Washington Quote Shop, you might say—the Treasury in Exile.

"But that's not the main point—the use of quotes to bias a story," Lewis continued. "Journalism is supposed to be more than a tape recorder business. There is no such thing as undisputed truth lying like a stone on the pavement waiting to be picked up. The correspondent has to provide his explanation of what happened, and if his bosses don't like his explanations, then they can get someone else. If the government announces a budget deficit, for example, then that's an immensely emotional and complicated issue. It can't be presented in a totally neutral fashion."

"There is that," said Stephen Barber, who for 13 years has covered American news for the London *Daily Telegraph*, "but there is something else—this is especially true of wire service reporting—and that is the passion for getting opposing points of view." Here he yielded up a tiny laugh, somehow suggesting that with all his years in Washington's National Press Building, Barber knew finally that the world and its ways were beyond redeeming. "If the Gospels had been written according to the rules of American journalism," he went on, "they would have had to give equal time to the devil."

Next I called Stuart Auerbach at *The Washington Post*. He wrote the Sara Jane Moore reaction story and had done a parallel story when Nixon resigned. He was one of the *Post*'s Quote Circuit experts, clearly.

"How did you get the names of all those psychiatrists you quoted?" I asked him.

"I specialize in medicine," he told me, thus deflating my fantasies about sinister directives coming down from the top. "You begin to know who to call. If you meet someone interesting in the course of doing a story you write down his phone number. You call up the American Psychiatric Association, in the case of the story you are referring to. You call up the psychiatric department at Stanford; you know they are strong. It's standard journalistic practice. Sometimes

it's just a rewrite job, say when Nixon resigned."

"They put out press releases?"

"Sometimes they were written even before the resignation speech was made. I mean if you're going to stay in the union . . ."

"Does the *Post* keep lists?" I asked.

"At the time of the impeachment Broder would draw up lists, say of Republican state chairmen, that sort of thing, and everything was happening so quickly at that time that the lists were kept up. So if you want to say there's an official *Washington Post* list you can say that, but basically the reporter doing the story makes his own contacts."

"Why are psychiatrists quoted so much?" I asked.

"It's a perfectly legitimate question, when you have a second assassination attempt so soon after the first, to ask 'Why?' Well, who are you going to ask why? Some people say we bow too much to credentials. But you know, we're reporters, we're not here to give our own opinions."

"How about Dr. Ottenberg?" I asked.

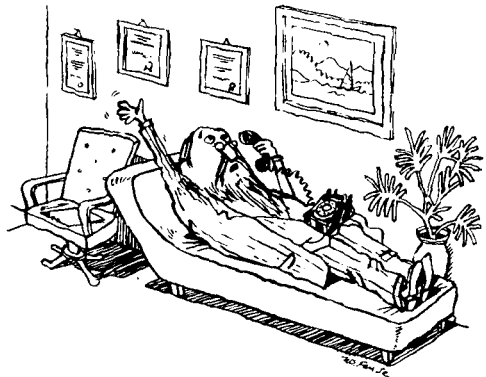
"I was very surprised," Auerbach told me. "But that's what he said."

Dr. Perry Ottenberg, a psychiatrist at the University of Pennsylvania, was quoted both by Auerbach and by Peter Kihss of the *Times*. In the *Post* he was quoted as saying that attempts are being made on Ford's life "because he is the symbol of a government that has alienated large numbers of Americans." Ottenberg went on to say that "it reflects the unresolved tensions of the Vietnam war, the lying and cheating of major agencies of government and the unresponsiveness of government to people's needs."

The *Times* provided Ottenberg with a platform to opine that government leaders' "lack of candor, their hypocrisy, their inaccessibility, manipulation of media, prolongation of a nasty, dirty war, lack of follow-through on many social and health programs" had "created a situation

where desperate individuals may feel a certain legitimacy" to invoking violence.

Clearly the professor had strayed rather far from Freud. His comment about the "inaccessibility" of government leaders appeared grotesquely at odds with the circumstances under which Ford was shot at, and not really consistent with the advice of another psychiatrist, Dr. Judd Marmor, president of the American Psychiatric Association, that "it would be wise" for Ford "to be extremely careful in the immediate future."



The conflicting explanations provided by psychiatrists on these occasions certainly provide food for thought. Chicago psychiatrist David Rothstein, for instance, was given space in *Time* to speculate why likable Presidents (e.g. Kennedy, Jackson, Lincoln) attracted assassins, while disliked ones (Johnson, Nixon) did not. Rothstein concluded "that perhaps likable Presidents may be more vulnerable to attack, since they stir up the greatest hopes and thus the greatest potential for disillusionment in the minds of the deranged."

But this ingenious theory had already been knocked on the head a couple of weeks earlier, in the same magazine, by a different psychiatrist, Harry L. Kozol, who is director of the Massachusetts Research Program on the Study of Dangerous Persons. Kozol was reported as thinking "that Fromme may really have been striking at Nixon when she took aim at Ford." Another possibility, of course, was that Presidents Johnson and Nixon

had kept prudently under cover during their presidencies.

"I would not initiate any of this on my own," Professor Ottenberg told me when I called him in Philadelphia. He had answered the phone himself, and told me that he had very little time to talk because he was between patients. "It would not be ethical to do so. What happened was the reporters called the American Psychiatric Association, and then headquarters gave out the names of half a dozen individuals, mine among them, thereby offering a selection process as well as a legitimization of the views of the Association. I regarded myself as a spokesman for the group."

"Which group was that again?"

"The American Psychiatric Association. I helped form a task force on social issues for the Association," Professor Ottenberg went on, "I've also worked with the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, was very briefly a consultant to the President's Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. I am a psychoanalyst as well as a psychiatrist, and a professor at the university, so I have lots of credentials."

"How many reporters called you?" I asked.

"*The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, a reporter for the Scripps-Howard group and a columnist in Washington," Ottenberg said. "And they all quoted me accurately. But it was amazing how the predilections of the writers determined what they quoted from what I said. They only quoted about one per cent."

The professor was speaking clearly, articulately, distinctly.

"I must go now because I'm keeping someone waiting. But call me back if you want to discuss it further."

Instead I decided to get a few quotes from someone who had been described to me as a Quote Circuit expert, Dr. Rae Goodell at MIT, whose Ph.D. dissertation, "The Visible Scientists," will be published next year by Little, Brown.

"My study was limited to scien-

tists, so I can't tell you all you want to know," she said when I called. But, she told me, the most visible scientists, in the sense of being known to the general public, include Barry Commoner, Paul Ehrlich, Margaret Mead, Linus Pauling and B.F. Skinner.

"Robert Coles?" I hinted.

"No, his name did not surface as being that well known."

"Any psychiatrists?"

"I think Karl Menninger was the only one."

"Do these people you have been studying put out press releases?"

"Some do. Barry Commoner has been fairly aggressive. He was pretty pushy on the theme of the environment. It started out being fallout and then moved into other areas of pollution."

Rae Goodell told me that the "visible scientists" share certain characteristics: first, they are all highly articulate; secondly, they tend to be colorful in various ways, thus giving them "identity" in the media—Margaret Mead with her long forked staff, Ehrlich talking about his vasectomy, Dixie Lee Ray talking about her trailer and two dogs.

Another characteristic is that they all discuss issues that are perceived as being both relevant and controversial—I. Q., vitamin C and so on. And when discussing these issues they take sides, avoiding scientific neutrality. They tend to have solidly established scientific reputations, and they tend also (for that reason) to be above the average age for scientists.

"Do you know about Arthur Herzog, author of *The B. S. Factor*?" Rae Goodell inquired after telling me all this. "Perhaps you should talk to him. He wrote about what he called 'anything authorities,' people who appear on TV talk shows and so on. They would be Quote Circuit people."

I got quotes from one or two others, including PBS-TV talk show host Martin Agronsky, who said, "I have a rather low regard, by and large, for psychiatrists who extrapolate to



the state of the national mind, sort of in a vacuum, without any personal knowledge of the individual concerned"; and Peter Kihss of *The New York Times*, who said that although the *Times* tried on these occasions to get a "cross section" of comments, they didn't necessarily have to "balance" each other. "My recollection is that there wasn't any great difference of opinion," he said. "That one assassination attempt might trigger others was essentially what they said. The effort was to get fellows who had some authority on the thing."

And that seemed like enough quotes for one article. The one point out of the many raised that seemed worth concentrating on, by way of a grand finale, is Auerbach's remark that "people want to know 'why.'" With certain big events, or events that fill a great deal of media space/time, the bare event does not seem to contain within itself an adequate explanation of its existence.

Thus when Saigon falls, at the end of more than ten years of American presence, there is a feeling that in addition to giving a bare description of the arrival of the North Vietnamese army, something else needs to be explained—a justifiable feeling in this instance. And so, by analogy, when the President is shot at (another big headline event), people feel that this needs to be explained, too.

This time, however, the demand for extra explanation is not necessarily rational. The "explanation" is sought because the potential consequences of the act—a new President, a new Administration, a new foreign policy—are out of all proportion to its cause, namely a disgruntled or deranged person squeezing a trigger. This, more than anything, accounts for the currently widespread search for a new "explanation" of the Kennedy assassination: We are expected to believe, according to the official explanation, that the Johnson Administration and all that it entailed, possibly including the debacle of Vietnam, was set in motion by one man

who had quarreled with his wife; who had, as it were, gotten out of bed on the wrong side that morning, and found a gun lying there.

The cause doesn't fit the effect. But the fact is, when great power is vested in one man, as in the President of the United States, it is always possible that a small cause (a microbe in his blood, for example, leading to a fatal disease, leading to a new President, leading to a "Vietnam") can trigger a large effect.

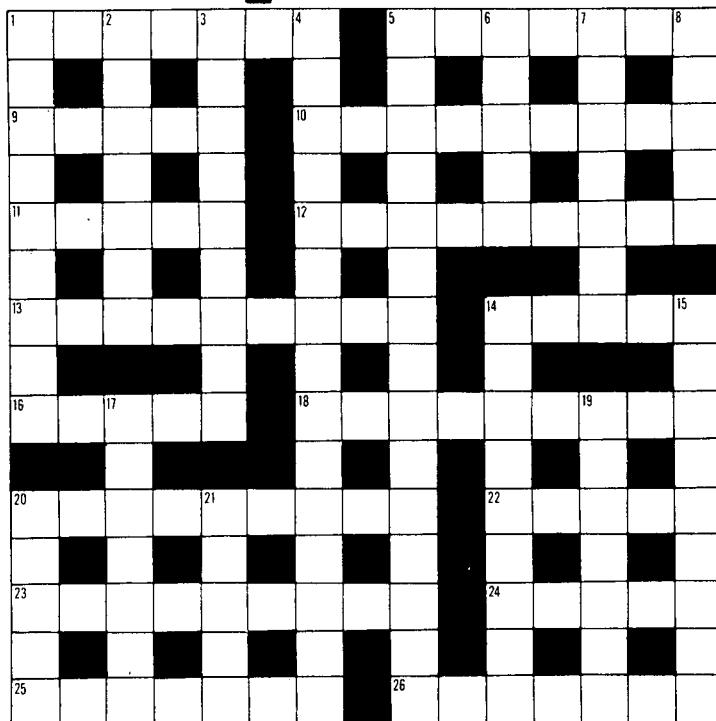
In such cases many people will seek a new cause that is commensurate with the effect—seek, in other words, large and global explanations that thereby imbue the event with appropriate meaning. In the case of the Kennedy assassination, of course, this means looking for a conspiracy—preferably a large one. In the case of the two recent attempts on Ford, again a "larger" explanation is sought. Not merely Sara Jane Moore, not Squeaky Fromme, but something like *alienation in America* must be the cause.

And so we turn to the Quote Circuit, there to find one group for whom explanation is its very life blood and *raison d'être*: psychiatrists. Peter Medawar, who won the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1960, has said that in psychoanalytic circles "a lava-flow of ad hoc explanations pours over and around all difficulties, leaving only a few smoothly rounded prominences to mark where they may have lain," and this is pretty much what I have in mind. In its instant explanation of just about everything, psychiatry ends up by seeming to explain nothing.

Ford's being the symbol of a government that alienates can be presented as the explanation of why someone shot at him, but it could equally serve as an explanation of why no one shot at him the day before or the day after. (Everyone was too alienated to bother.) Explanations, then, are not always in order. And when the Quote Circuit provides them—beware. ■

# the political puzzle

by John Barclay



## Across

1. & 5. Arrange flawed turkey on municipal disaster. (3,4,7)
9. South in need used not to be. (5)
10. Confused later name after Genghis Khan. (9)
11. Risk of about about in back talk back. (5)
12. Spasms upset chic hugs and nothing. (9)
13. Lo! Any plan pleases her. (9)
14. Reckon accounts with end of play in little, little dog. (3,2)
16. Backward physician surrounds simian and is forcibly connected... (5)
18. ... and toy simian displays no friendship. (9)
20. How he talked after lip

was hit. (4,1,4)

22. Sounds like Keatsian version of IOU. (3,2)
23. To reverse in a way is to go too far. (9)
24. He lacks intelligence to dot i's. (5)
25. Some geese are trapped in dangers. (7)
26. Little Kentucky snore becomes Manhattan neighbor. (7)

## Down

1. Unused resort through becomes Capitol reading matter. (9)
2. Idler found in Chipewewa's trellis corner. (7)
3. Beaten when Pat led you around. (9)
4. Wooden informal Presi-

dential advisory groups? (7,8)

5. Leaderless social gathering? (10,5)
6. Big trip in North Dakota? (5)
7. Gray nun upset is not. (7)
8. Non-winners in rows? (5)
14. Advertisement for fly pattern, for example? (9)
15. Car, rock and city. (9)
17. Sort of ten-part model. (7)
19. To list arrangement of time that is the last letter. (7)
20. Grown mixed-up, mixed-up. (5)
21. Congressional division could be emerald, we hear. (5)

The numbers indicate the number of letters and words, e.g., (2,3) means a two-letter word followed by a three-letter word. Groups of letters, e.g., USA, are treated as one word. Answers to last month's puzzle are on page 13.