

Commentary: Approaching and Stalking Public Figures—A Prerequisite to Attack

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The concept of studying approaches to public figures (i.e., physical pursuit or stalking) arose as a proxy measure to aid in the development of tools to prevent assassination, a low base rate event. In this commentary, we review the origins of this concept and the historical record of public figure attacks in the United States that formed the empirical basis of the concept, we describe case examples of approaches toward public figures in the United States that did not result in injurious attacks, and we provide a synopsis of our findings on the ways in which communications predict approach.

J Am Acad Psychiatry Law 38:341–8, 2010

Public figures are besieged by a constant onslaught of unwanted attention from mentally disordered persons in search of identity, love, power, relief, and contact. Within this population of mentally disordered persons in pursuit of public figures are those who would and do assassinate heads of state, government leaders, the leaders of social movements and businesses, and celebrities from the worlds of entertainment, news, and sports. The public learns of all of the killings, some of the attacks, and hardly any of the voluminous letters, telephone calls, e-mails, and visits that warn of impending attacks or, to be more precise, would warn if they were made known to the appropriate parties and if those parties could discern which features of the many communications and visits are predictive of attacks.

Those who pursue public figures—and from whose ranks most assassins in Western cultures are drawn—were all but neglected by the research community until the 1980s, despite the gravity of the problem and the considerable interest scholars, jour-

nalists, and the public have taken in assassination. Before the 1980s, the only empirical studies of these populations focused on psychotic visitors to the White House¹ and other government offices,² but the 1980s saw additional studies of psychotic visitors to the White House^{3,4} and the first study of the relationship between communications and physical approach.⁵ In the two subsequent decades, a handful of studies (cited by James *et al.*⁶) has continued to contribute to our knowledge base.

The central finding of James *et al.*⁶ in their study of abnormal attentions to the British Royal Family is that those who engage in abnormal communications toward the Royal Family are significantly more likely to approach physically if they evidence mental illness and grandiosity, use multiple communications, employ multiple means of communication, and are considered to be driven by motivations that concern a personal entitlement to the prominent individual. These findings beautifully replicate the earliest empirical studies of the relationship between abnormal communications to Hollywood celebrities and members of the U.S. Congress and physical approaches toward those public figures.^{5,7,8} This replication is the virtue of the scientific method: it produces reproducible results.

Significant portions of those early studies were never made readily available to the public, but rather were provided to only a handful of investigative agencies (the U.S. Secret Service, the U.S. Capitol

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Disclosures of financial or other potential conflicts of interest: None.

Police, and the FBI) and to the National Institute of Justice, primarily to avoid their misuse by those seeking to mislead investigators, frighten public figures, or carry out a successful assassination. In the intervening years, concern over the publication of investigative methods has all but evaporated, perhaps one of the effects of the Information Age.

Because it is now more widely recognized, as stated by James *et al.*, that “Approach is a behavior of particular concern in the protection of public figures . . .” (Ref. 6, p 329), we thought it might be of interest to readers and for the historical record to delineate how the study of approach behavior and its predictors was first conceived.

The concept of studying approach behavior arose as a solution to a methodological problem encountered in designing a research proposal submitted to the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) in September 1983. NIJ had solicited proposals that would help illuminate the problem of attacks on public figures, and one of the central problems in devising a means of doing so was the low base rate of such attacks. Although the prediction of very low base rate events is beyond the reach of the methods of the behavioral sciences, an event as important as assassination compels efforts to overcome this mathematical barrier. Criminologist Frank Zimring⁹ suggested that investigators explore proxy measures to compensate for the inability to study rare events, such as assassinations. We did not explore the particular proxies Zimring suggested, but another came to mind in reading about past assassinations. In 1989, our logic was this:

- (1) Most if not all attacks to date on American public figures by the mentally disordered were preceded by pre-attack signals in the form of threats, inappropriate communications, or inappropriate visits concerning some public figure, but these signals were not necessarily detected, reported to the relevant parties, or correctly interpreted.
- (2) Each instance in which a public figure has been injured or killed by a mentally disordered person has occurred when the subject and public figure were in close physical proximity.
- (3) Mentally disordered persons approach public figures at rates much higher than the rates of attacks.

- (4) Mentally disordered persons communicate with public figures at rates much higher than the rates of physical approach.
- (5) A behavioral science capacity to predict from their communications who among the mentally disordered will approach a public figure would assist in the prevention of attacks on public figures by making subject-specific interventions possible.⁵

We therefore conducted empirical investigations of two populations: those who pursued celebrities in the entertainment industry and those who pursued members of the Congress of the United States. We reduced the number of descriptive and predictor variables from over 3,000 in the pilot study to a few hundred and were able to provide descriptive statistics for representative samples of these persons and their behavior. Most important, we determined which features of letters indicate greater or lesser risk that the subject would attempt to gain physical proximity to the public figure, making an attack possible, and constructed predictive scales that could be applied to letters by trained clinician raters.⁵

The historical study of attacks on public figures played an important part in our conceptualization of these events, and a condensed version of our observations on these attacks from the public record and some examples of the approaches we studied are given in the following section, taken nearly verbatim from our 1989 report to NIJ.⁵

Attacks

Table 1 gives examples of attacks on public figures in the United States that fulfill the following criteria:

The assailant was mentally disordered.

The attack would have been foreseeable if pre-attack signals had been reported and interpreted without error.

A public figure was injured in the attack.

The pre-attack signals emitted by these offenders were chiefly inappropriate communications to a public figure, inappropriate visits to a public figure, or statements to third parties of their intention to harm a public figure. Note that in many instances, the public figure who was contacted, visited, or threatened was not the one who was later attacked and injured. Moreover, the communications to third

Table 1 Examples of Attacks in the United States in Which a Mentally Disordered Offender Injured a Public Figure After Giving a Pre-attack Signal

Victim	Offender	Year
Abraham Lincoln, President	John Wilkes Booth	1865
James A. Garfield, President	Charles J. Guiteau	1881
William McKinley, President	Leon Czolgosz	1901
Theodore Roosevelt, former President and presidential candidate	John Schrank	1912
Huey Long, Governor of Louisiana	Carl Austin Weiss	1935
Eddie Waitkus, baseball player	Ruth Ann Steinhagen	1949
John F. Kennedy, President	Lee Harvey Oswald	1963
Robert F. Kennedy, U.S. Senator and presidential candidate	Sirhan Sirhan	1968
William Lennon, Lennon sisters' father	Chet W. H. Young	1969
Jim Hicklin, radio personality	Edward Taylor	1973
John Lennon, singer	Mark David Chapman	1980
Ronald Reagan, President	John W. Hinckley, Jr.	1981
Theresa Saldana, actress	Arthur Jackson	1982
Rebecca Schaeffer, actress	Robert John Bardo	1989

parties were not always made known to the future victims or to those who protected them. Finally, even when pre-attack signals were reported to those who most needed the information, the reports did not necessarily lead to a valid interpretation of the signal.

The predictive portion of our research was intended to improve the interpretation of signals: in the first instance by providing tools for the assessment of written communications and in the second instance by redefining a physical approach as an important signal in itself. The latter point reflects the observation that every instance in which a public figure has been injured by a mentally disordered offender occurred when the assailant managed to maneuver into close physical proximity to the public figure. The greatest distance of any of the attacks in Table 1 is Oswald's 88-yard rifle shot in the assassination of President Kennedy.

Inspection of Table 1 reveals an increasing rate of such attacks. There were as many injurious attacks on public figures by the mentally disordered in the 25 years before our data collection as there were in the preceding 175 years.

In addition to the cases listed in Table 1, there are armed attacks in which the public figure was not injured but which are otherwise similar, inasmuch as the assailants were mentally disordered and issued pre-attack signals. Five examples known to the public are the attempts on the life of President Jackson by

Richard Lawrence in 1835; on President Nixon by Samuel Byck in 1974; on President Ford by Lynette Fromme and again on President Ford by Sara Jane Moore in 1975; and on actor Michael Landon by Nathan Trupp in 1989 (during which two guards were shot and killed at Universal Studios). Neither Byck nor Trupp achieved proximity to their intended victims during the crimes. Other examples have never been released to the public.

We know that several of the assailants who eventually succeeded in injuring a public figure had stalked them previously while armed, but had not acted because of circumstances they saw as unfavorable. It is likely that there have been many such instances that were never detected.

Other attacks on public figures by mentally disordered offenders have not been included in Table 1 because information is not available on whether the attacks were preceded by the types of signals that our research suggests are important (as opposed to the threats to the eventual victim that tend to be recorded by journalists and historians). (We asked the Intelligence Division of the U.S. Secret Service for the missing data on these cases, but rather than respond to us, they initiated their own study.) These include the attacks on President McKinley by Leon Czolgosz; on President-Elect Franklin D. Roosevelt by Giuseppe Zangara; on President Truman by Oscar Collazo and Griselio Torresola; on The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., first by Izola Curry and then by James Earl Ray; on President-Elect John F. Kennedy by Richard Pavlick; and on Governor of Alabama and presidential candidate George Wallace by Arthur Bremer.

Finally, we note that there are certain unsolved attacks on public figures that might have been the work of mentally disordered offenders, including the 1968 Molotov cocktail attack on the home of Presidential candidate Ronald Reagan and the murders of actress Thelma Todd and actor Bob Crane. The murders of Virginia Rappe, Carl Switzer, Ramon Novarro, and Marvin Gaye are not included in this analysis because each was allegedly killed by an intimate. Actor Sal Mineo and Director Pier Paolo Pasolini were each killed by more typical criminals, with whom they appear to have had illicit dealings; civil rights leader Malcolm X and radio talk-show host Alan Berg were each killed by groups as opposed to individual assailants.

Although there are cases for which these details remain to be determined, every instance of an attack on a public figure by a lone stranger in the United States for which adequate information has been made publicly available has been the work of a mentally disordered person who issued one or more pre-attack signals in the form of inappropriate letters, visits, or statements that concerned some public figure. This is not to say that those signals were either received, or, if received, were correctly assessed, by those with the greatest need for the information. Jodie Foster could not have known to notify the Secret Service of the letters and calls she was receiving from John Hinckley, any more than the Secret Service could have known to notify the Lennon Sisters about Chet Young's threats to the President.

The behaviors that we are referring to as pre-attack signals—threats, other inappropriate communications concerning public figures, and inappropriate visits to public figures—are far more common than attacks. The challenge is to make use of these signals in a manner allowing for the early recognition of subjects at particularly high risk of making attacks, and it is this challenge that our research addressed.

Approaches: The Prerequisite to Attacks

The late NBC anchorwoman Jessica Savitch once reported that her mail often came from people “who make up whole lives built around me that have no bearing on reality.” Once, she says, a man wrote to her stating that he would attack Vice-President Bush or Secretary of State Haig to get her attention. He followed that letter with a visit to NBC's studios in New York where he sneaked past the guards and entered Savitch's office. Though Savitch was startled, she feigned gladness at seeing him, casually made her way to the door, shut him in, and ran for help.¹⁰

With rare exceptions, a physical approach is a prerequisite to a public figure attack. Such approaches occur at much higher rates than attacks, in part because of the security precautions taken by many of the public figures at highest risk of attack. The occasional approach becomes known to the public when the press learns of a public incident or court proceedings, but most remain outside the public eye.

A few of the approaches without attacks that have had public notice are Arthur Bremer's stalking of President Nixon; John Hinckley's multiple visits to Yale in pursuit of Jodie Foster, to Dayton and Nash-

ville in pursuit of President Carter, and to Blair House in pursuit of President-Elect Reagan; an approach to actress Farah Fawcett during a stage performance; and a variety of approaches to singer Ann Murray, talk show host David Letterman, actor Michael J. Fox, singer Michael Jackson, and actress Justine Bateman.

A substantial part of our research was directed toward the prediction of approaches such as these from the subjects' letters and other written communications. We studied representative samples of 150 approaches to public figures by mentally disordered persons who also communicated in writing, as illustrated by these 10 examples.

Example 1

A man staked out a female entertainer's home and observed her in her yard with her cats. He shot a mountain lion, skinned it, and made it into a rug, which he personally delivered to the celebrity's residence with a note stating: “I shot this because it was beautiful like you.”

Example 2

A man with previous arrests for threatening the president and for communicating threats through the mail visited the office of a member of Congress on three consecutive days. On the third occasion, he was loud and belligerent in his demand to see the member about “protection from the C.I.A. spies.” He delivered a letter containing many references to assassination, such as: “JOHN WILKES BOOTH REAGAN THE BLOOD'S ON HIS HAND AS HE SETS UP A FOURTH REICH IN A ONCE NOBLE LAND. . . .”

Example 3

A subject made several visits to a female performer's residence, where he was arrested by security personnel. He claimed to be concerned about the performer's health and wanted to give her a health-promoting device. Despite his arrest, he returned five days later, leaving rosary beads at her door. He returned again later that day, and when police attempted to arrest him, he resisted and had to be physically subdued. He was charged with trespassing and assault. Three months later, he returned to her residence, in hopes of having breakfast with her, and again was arrested.

Example 4

A subject loitering outside the office of a member of Congress would not leave when asked to do so by police. He claimed to have been sexually assaulted in the Hart Senate Building by a man he named. He stated that if that man “or Andropov or any of their homosexual friends” touched him, he would “destroy them completely.” The subject stated he had met the member of Congress while both were sleeping on the street. On another occasion, he left a letter at the same member’s office complaining about sexual harassment: “. . . Keep him away—your associates are intimidated by him your female staff seduced and your policies have been altered behind your back. If he makes a pass at me again, I’ll probably be writing from jail.” A month later he was again loitering in the hallway, entering twice to seek assistance in returning to his home state. The next month he delivered another letter to security personnel stating that he did not intend to harm anyone and did not carry weapons, adding, “P.S. Perhaps, if staffing allows, it would be good to post security guards on each floor.”

Example 5

A man traveled from another country in pursuit of a film star and broke into her unoccupied home, believing that God had ordered him to take her to heaven. Soon after his release from jail, he broke into a second home owned by the star and later trespassed at her manager’s home. He sent drawings depicting a knife entering a heart, and he violated a court order by trespassing at the house the star was occupying. He said he was there “to serenade you and me to Kingdom Come.” Arrested by security personnel, he was eventually deported.

Example 6

A woman called the U.S. Secret Service upon her arrival at Dulles Airport, complaining that her boyfriend, a member of Congress, was not there to meet her. She took a taxi to his home, but found no one there. Four days later, she again took a taxi to his home, pried open a window, and entered, setting off an alarm. She had brought her luggage. When the police arrived, she told them she had permission to use the home because the member was her boyfriend: “We’re engaged to be married.” She was arrested and charged with unlawful entry. Two years later, she returned to Washington by plane and told her taxi

driver that she had come to assassinate both the member of Congress whom she had earlier planned to marry and a state governor. The next day she left a note for the member in which she stated, “I’ve come home to stay with my children! Thank you for sending one of your aids out to see me, hope to meet you and the children soon. Love, Mom.” Ten years later she was still writing, telephoning, and visiting on a regular basis.

Example 7

A man who believed God had directed him to be with a television star traveled several hundred miles to be near her. He telephoned and visited her management agency, where he was arrested by security staff. Later, he located the celebrity’s home and set up camp in the surrounding woods. Security personnel tracked him to his campsite, where they found the subject wearing a crown and in possession of a crude weapon fashioned from two rocks connected by a length of rope. He was arrested and hospitalized, but the hospital released him in a matter of days. He immediately returned to the star’s home with a pocket full of ammunition, which he threw at a security person. He was again arrested for trespassing.

Example 8

A man who had caused a disturbance at the campaign office of a member of Congress was later questioned by police in connection with trespassing at the film set of an actress he believed was to become his “First Lady.” He had traveled 3,000 miles in pursuit of her. Two years later, he began to pursue a young male film star, with whom he sought a sexual relationship. He had to be asked to leave the offices of the star’s manager.

Example 9

A man tried to buy property overlooking the beach house of a male celebrity. He had a history of multiple arrests, was known to possess guns and knives, and was discovered to have drawn diagrams of the angles of fire for a sniper attack on the celebrity’s home.

Example 10

A former professional man who had written to two members of Congress in the past visited a third member’s office and left a letter alleging that he had been

double-crossed by a local prosecutor in a plea bargain arrangement. He had sent copies of the letter to other members of Congress and major news media. The next morning, the Capitol Police were informed by the police department in the city where the plea bargain had been arranged that an informant had learned of the subject's intention to arrive at the member's office early that day and, if he did not get satisfaction concerning his state legal problems, to "pull a gun." The subject had told the informant he would shoot it out rather than go to jail. There was an outstanding warrant for the subject. Later that day, the subject attempted to gain entry through the visitor's entrance, where he was arrested for possession of an unregistered firearm.

Obviously, not all approaches are equally dangerous, but it is impossible to know how often violence would have erupted in the absence of security precautions. On many occasions, preventive intervention and fortuitous circumstances have interrupted these tragedies in progress. One case about which we are free to speak because of criminal prosecution and prior media disclosures illustrates this point most poignantly.

An obviously psychotic man from Louisiana wrote two letters to an entertainment celebrity. A year later, he eloped from a mental hospital and traveled 1,500 miles to the celebrity's home. His nocturnal efforts to enter the property were detected by security personnel, and his continuing efforts to pursue the celebrity were stymied. In July of 1983, he composed a "hit list" naming members of his family, a U.S. Supreme Court Justice, and the celebrity. He murdered his mother, father, and three other relatives. A survivalist who was familiar with weapons, he had told relatives the celebrity was evil and should be killed. Through the cooperation of Gavin de Becker, Inc., the homicide investigators, and law enforcement officers in Washington, D.C., the killer was arrested two weeks later, a few miles from the Supreme Court Building.

Approaches are a prerequisite to attacks; therefore, the prediction of approaches can assist in the prediction of attacks. Both the population of mentally disordered persons who attack public figures and the much larger population of mentally disordered persons who approach public figures are characterized by high proportions of persons who write inappropriate letters to public figures. Those letters

contain important signals that can help predict an approach.

Predicting an Approach

Although details of our analysis of the features of communications that predict an approach are beyond the scope of this commentary, we identified 30 significant differences between those subjects writing to Hollywood celebrities who did and did not approach the celebrity and 36 significant differences between subjects who wrote to members of Congress who did and did not approach the member. These significant differences included both risk-enhancing variables (risk factors) and risk-reducing variables (protective factors). Using these variables, we developed and tested seven different scales for the prediction of approaches to public figures.

Four variables were significant in the same direction in each sample. Subjects who sent "hate mail" (expressing angry, hateful emotions, making a threat, or attempting to frighten or shame the recipient) were significantly less likely to approach. Subjects who sent obscene mail (i.e., who were vulgar, obscene, or lewd in their first communication) were significantly less likely to approach. Those who telephoned in addition to writing (multiple means of communication) and those who expressed a desire for face-to-face contact were significantly more likely to approach.

The scales included those based solely on the findings in the celebrity cases, those based solely on the findings in the political cases, and those based on the findings of both studies. Each of the scales was tested on 214 celebrity cases, 86 political cases, and 14 political test cases that were not used in the earlier study. These tests included comparisons of the mean scores of subjects who did and did not approach on each scale, tests of the association between scale scores and approach status, and calculations of the sensitivity, specificity, global hit rate, and other predictive attributes of each scale.

In general, the scales performed best when applied to the samples for which they were intended. The best scale for use with subjects writing to celebrities consisted of 24 variables and a constant and correctly classified 73 percent of the subjects ($p < .0001$). The best scale for use with subjects writing to political figures consisted of 18 variables and a constant. It correctly classified 83 percent of the subjects in the larger political sample ($p < .0001$) and 86 percent of

the subjects in the political test sample ($p < .01$). The best scale for use with subjects writing to public figures who cannot be readily classified as entertainment celebrities or politicians consisted of seven variables and a constant. When applied to celebrity cases, it correctly classified 64 percent of the subjects ($p = .0001$). When applied to the larger political sample, it correctly classified 78 percent of the subjects ($p < .0001$). When applied to the political test sample, it correctly classified 86 percent of the subjects ($p = .01$).

We explored whether the number of communications was itself predictive of an approach. We found that the probability of approach increased with each successive communication until the 10th, and decreased thereafter, a finding that can be used in conjunction with the predictive scales.

We also found that prior approaches predict future approaches. For example, of 107 subjects who approached a celebrity once, at least 36 (34%) approached a second time, and of 36 subjects who approached twice, at least 20 (56%) approached a third time. Likewise, 19 of the 43 subjects (56%) who made one approach toward a member of Congress were known to have approached again. Thus, a subject who has approached once is at much higher risk of making another approach.

Among persons who wrote to celebrities, those who physically approached the celebrity were more often those with an excessive sense of self-importance or uniqueness (grandiosity or narcissism) who were excessively interested in entertainment products. They tended to write often and for a long period, to telephone, to mention having a vehicle and traveling to see the celebrity, to express a desire for a meeting, and to announce a specific time and place for something to happen. They tended to travel often and to mail letters from various locations.

Subjects who did not pursue an encounter, in contrast, more often were those who were thought disordered, mentally retarded, or reported receiving psychiatric treatment and who wrote on tablet paper, giving a complete return address. Subgroups included those who sent hate mail and expressed intense anger; those who wrote obscene letters, described explicit sexual activities, and attempted to shame the celebrity; those who wrote more naive letters describing their sexual interest in the celebrity and a desire to marry, have sex with, or have children with the celebrity; and those

who wrote to describe their concern with another public figure.

The pattern observed among subjects who wrote to members of Congress was that those who physically approached the member were more often those who were socially isolated, psychotic individuals who reported a history of psychiatric treatment, had paranoid delusions that included the belief that others were talking about them. They tended to identify themselves in their letters, which were polite, to telephone in addition to writing, to mention traveling to see the member, and to express a desire for a meeting. There were two subgroups: those who viewed themselves as constituents with special problems, often a delusion of persecution by someone other than the member and who saw the member as a benefactor from whom they hoped for rescue and assistance, and a smaller subgroup of those who were primarily concerned with love, marriage, and romance and harbored delusions of being lovers or spouses of the member.

Subjects who did not pursue an encounter, in contrast, more often were those who perceived the member of Congress as an enemy. These subjects made every imaginable type of threat, sent hate mail, wrote obscene letters, and attempted to frighten the recipients of their letters.

Conclusions

In this commentary, we reviewed the origins of the study of approach behavior, gave historic examples of attacks against public figures, offered examples of approaches to public figures, and provided a synopsis of the results of our efforts to predict approach behavior toward public figures in the United States. The study of approach behavior in other cultures and settings is an important component of any empirical effort to understand the significance and predictive value of inappropriate and abnormal communications directed toward public figures.

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